A NATION'S ODYSSEY

The Novels of Hugh MacLennan

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HUGH MACLENNAN'S FIRST NOVEL, *Barometer Rising,* appeared in 1941. During the two decades since then he has reached a position of uneasy prominence in Canadian letters. Other Canadian writers, like Stephen Leacock, Mazo de la Roche and Morley Callaghan, have established wider international reputations; others again, like Thomas B. Costain and the ineffable Ralph Connor, have gained more of the ambiguous popularity of the best seller. And during the past twenty years a number of novels have been written in Canada which are recognized as individually superior to the best of MacLennan; Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano,* Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House,* Brian Moore's *Judith Hearne* and Ethel Wilson's *Equations of Love* come at once to mind. Yet many Canadian critics, if they were asked what novelist—in terms of total achievement—seemed to them most significant in Canada today, would probably name MacLennan, and would agree with Professor Hugo McPherson's statement in a recent essay that "*Barometer Rising* marks a major advance in Canadian fiction."

The reason for MacLennan's reputation, and for his undoubted importance as a novelist, are to be found in the original way in which he has interpreted the Canadian scene to his fellow countrymen rather than in any originality of approach to the art of the novel itself. Indeed, if we are concerned with fictional technique, one of the most striking characteristics of *Barometer Rising* and MacLennan's four later novels is their relative conservatism. They are unashamedly didactic; they rely heavily on environmental atmosphere and local colour; their characterisation is over-simplified and moralistic in tone; their language is des-

criptive rather than evocative; and their action tends to be shaped externally by a Hardyesque use of circumstance and coincidence. What does distinguish them is MacLennan's combination of theme and symbol—his development of the problems of individuals in an emerging nation by means of action built on a simple but powerful foundation of universal myth.

The myth is that of Odysseus translated into terms of modern living; the *Odyssey* itself was the product of a people in the process of becoming aware of itself, and, appropriately, the theme which MacLennan uses it to illuminate is the growth of a Canadian national consciousness. Indeed, the most striking—and in some ways the most jarring—feature of MacLennan's books is the degree to which the national theme in its various aspects forms an imposed pattern within which the lives of the characters tend to be worked out rather than working themselves out. In *Barometer Rising* it is the leap into a sense of national identity which MacLennan sees emerging among Canadians during the first World War; in *Two Solitudes* (1945) it is the clash of English and French traditions; in *The Precipice* (1948) it is the impact of American social mores on the Canadian consciousness; in *Each Man's Son* (1951) it is the lingering power in Canada of the Calvinist conscience; in *The Watch that Ends the Night* (1959), MacLennan's most recent and massive novel, it is the dual influence—destructive and creative at once—of the social idealism of the Thirties. This predominance of the national theme is a factor that must be taken into account in any attempt to understand MacLennan's work, since it bears a close relationship to his most evident weaknesses as a novelist, and also since its progressive assimilation into a fictionally viable form runs parallel to his growth towards maturity as a writer.

The expression of the theme in terms of the constant mythical structure is evident already in MacLennan's first novel. The setting of *Barometer Rising* is Halifax during the first World War. The novel opens as a young man returns secretly to the Nova Scotian capital. As the action progresses, it is revealed that he is an officer, Neil MacRae, whom his uncle Geoffrey Wain, also the colonel of his battalion in France, had attempted to blame for the failure of an attack. By chance MacRae was bombed on the night before his court martial, given up for dead, but found by a relieving battalion and patched up without his real identity being discovered. Now he returns home, risking execution for cowardice, in the hope of collecting the evidence that will clear his name. Meanwhile, there still lives in Halifax the cousin, Penelope Wain, with whom he was in love before he went away to the wars; she, besides being a capable ship designer, is the daughter of Neil's enemy.

Wain and Penelope both learn of MacRae's presence in Halifax and, while the Colonel—who has been sent home in disgrace because of the unsuccessful attack—sets out to frustrate Neil's efforts and to get rid of him as quietly as possible, Penelope and a drunken but good-hearted M.O., Angus Murray, do their best to see that MacRae vindicates himself. But the situation reaches its climax, not through the efforts of the two parties, but through the great Halifax explosion of 1917, which overshadows the latter part of the novel. MacRae and Murray recover their self-respect by superhuman feats of endurance in relieving the victims, while Colonel Wain is providentially among the dead. Meanwhile, Alec MacKenzie, a primitive giant of a Cape Breton fisherman, gives on his death bed the evidence that will clear Neil MacRae and enable him to marry Penelope and assume parenthood of the child which, unknown to Neil, she had born him while he was away in France.

The deliberate adaptation of the *Odyssey,* if it were not otherwise evident, is admitted by MacLennan not only in the name of his heroine, but also in MacRae's remark in the final chapter: "Wise Penelope! That's what Odysseus said to his wife when he got home. I don't think he ever told her he loved her. He probably knew the words would sound too small." But MacLennan not merely establishes in *Barometer Rising* a Homeric plot of the wanderer returning to a mysteriously changed homeland. He also uses for the first time a group of symbolic characters which will recur in various permutations in his later novels; the returning wanderer, the waiting woman, the fatherless child, the wise doctor—sometimes transformed into the wise old man, and the primitive, violent, but essentially good giant. If we wish to seek a Homeric parallel, the quintet of Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, Mentor and Eumæus seems obvious, though MacLennan is too good a writer to follow the pattern slavishly, and we shall see the relationships of these five basic characters changing from novel to novel until, in *The Watch that Ends the Night,* the wanderer, the wise doctor and the primitive giant are finally united in that super-Odysseus, Jerome Martell.

There are some satisfying things in *Barometer Rising.* The atmosphere—the very physical feeling—of Halifax four decades ago is admirably recreated, and the action moves with the right momentum towards the grand climax of the explosion. And this event is celebrated in a passage of fine reconstructive reporting which establishes at the outset the power of describing action in which MacLennan has always excelled. The later chapters narrating the rescue work are maintained at a level of sustained vigour, and the diminuendo from catastrophe to the saddened realisation of human happiness when Neil and Penelope

are finally and fully reunited gives the appropriate last touch to the novel's balance.

But these virtues, which make *Barometer Rising* a constantly interesting book, are balanced by defects which are due partly to deficiencies in technique and partly to MacLennan's view of life and the world. For example, the relationship between the lovers is the least convincing of all the relationships in the novel because of a curiously embarrassed clumsiness which makes MacLennan incapable of dealing with any aspect of sex except in high-mindedly sentimental terms. It would be hard to find anything more self-conscious, in an otherwise naturally written book, than these paragraphs with which it draws to an end:

> Suddenly Penny required his tenderness so greatly that it was though all her life she had been starving for it. She wanted him to take her in his arms and hold her as he had done that unbelievable night in Montreal when nothing had existed but sounds in the darkness and the sense that each of them had been born for that moment. All this she wanted, but the habit of restraint, the cold control she had trained herself to acquire, was still unbreakable.
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> Neil made no effort to move up the road. He stood watching her, then came closer and his fingers touched her hair where it escaped over her temples. He gave a sudden smile, and all strain vanished from his face . . .
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> Tears welled up in her eyes and receded without overflowing. And her fingers closed over his. He looked over her head to the patch of moonlight that broke and shivered in the centre of the Basin, and heard in the branches of the forest behind him the slight tremor of a rising wind.

This does not strike one as felt emotion; it is too obviously cobbled in the mind of an embarrassed author out of the stock clichés of romanticist fiction—tears, moonlight, sudden smiles, fingers touching temples and wind rising in the forest. Here, at any rate, MacLennan learnt little from Homer.

More serious, because it seems to spring from a philosophic fatalism perennial in MacLennan's attitude, is the mechanical impetus that at times— and particularly during the explosion—takes the action wholly out of the hands of the characters. MacLennan was a Classical scholar before he became a novelist, and a Calvinist before he became a Classicist, and the inexorable pattern of Greek tragedy still broods over his writing. Beyond a certain point, Penelope and Neil and Angus can no longer shape their fates, and it is not so much through the actions of the characters that the plot is finally worked out as through the apparent accident of the explosion, which takes on life and power to such an extent that Neil is really released from danger, not by proving his innocence, but

because of the fortuitous justice of Geoffrey Wain, a man whose life was one extended *hubris,* being killed in a falling house.

The final flaw of *Barometer Rising* comes from the too articulate concern of the major characters with the destiny of Canada. There are times when this theme assumes a crude and abstract form which tears like a jagged spur into the unity of both feeling and style. When, for instance, Neil and Penelope are leaving the devastated city, at a time when we might expect the warmly personal thoughts of two young people united after so many vicissitudes, we are all at once faced with this passage in Neil's thoughts.

> Why was he glad to be back? It was so much more than a man could ever put into words. It was more than the idea that he was young enough to see a great country move into its destiny. It was what he felt inside himself, as a Canadian who had lived both in the United States and England. Canada at present was called a nation only because a few laws had been passed and a railway line sent from one coast to the other. In returning home he knew that he was doing more than coming back to familiar surroundings. For better or worse he was entering the future, he was identifying himself with the still-hidden forces that were doomed to shape humanity as certainly as the tiny states of Europe had shaped the past. Canada was still hesitant . . . But if there were enough Canadians like himself, half-American and half-English, then the day was inevitable when the halves would join and his country would become the central arch which united the new order.

Perhaps these are worthy sentiments of an awakening patriotism, but their expression at this particular point of fulfilment in Neil's emotional life makes him seem an inhumanly and improbably cold lover.

MACLENNAN'S SECOND AND THIRD NOVELS, *Two Solitudes* and *The Precipice,* are even more dominated than *Barometer Rising* by the effort to create the arch of Canadian unity, and, because everything else in them is eventually subordinated to the elaboration of the national theme, they are the least successful of MacLennan's novels, in human understanding and formal cohesion alike.

Two Solitudes begins in a little Quebec village dominated partly by the priest, Father Beaubien, and partly by the seigneur, Athanase Tallard. Tallard is a politician with anti-clerical leanings who would like to see the material progress of

western Canada spreading into Quebec. The latent conflict between him and the anti-English priest, a man of massive figure and obstinate mind, only becomes acute when Tallard is the means, first of bringing wise old Captain Yardley to one of the local farms, and then of interesting English Canadian financiers in the possibility of starting a mill in the village. The conflict is complicated by Tallard's relationship with his elder son, a French Canadian nationalist who is arrested as a deserter during the 1914-18 war and helps to arouse local hostility to his father. Finally, goaded by Father Beaubien's inflexible prejudices, Tallard renounces his Catholicism; he is boycotted by his neighbours, his old friends, even his employees, and his English industrial partners desert him when they see that his unpopularity will harm their financial interests. Bankrupt and worn out with grief, he dies in Montreal; on his deathbed he returns to the Church—and his neighbours accept him again when he returns, a failed Odysseus, to lie in their midst.

This first part of *Two Solitudes* has a close unity; it is bound together by the common anxieties of war and by the virtual identity of the larger problem of racial conflict with the actual lives and relationships of the characters. The problem seems to grow with the story rather than the story being fabricated to suit the problem, and the characters, Father Beaubien, Captain Yardley, the financier Huntly McQueen, Athanase himself, are up to this point well-knit and self-consistent. If *Two Solitudes* had ended with Tallard's death, it would have been a moving and cohesive book. But up to this point it merely presents the problem of racial relations; it does not have the logical completeness of presenting a solution, and this MacLennan seeks, at the expense of his novel, in its later chapters.

After Tallard's death the central character becomes his second son, Paul, a Telemachus fated to complete his father's unfinished Odyssey. Paul was sent to an English school when his father broke with the Church; as he points out, he can speak English without a French accent and French without an English accent, and so personifies racial reconciliation. Later, as a merchant seaman, Paul wanders far from Canada, but he returns, on the eve of the second World War, to marry his childhood friend, Captain Yardley's grand-daughter Heather. Finally, to show his hard-won sense of Canada as a united country, he defies his nationalist brother and volunteers.

MacLennan is so anxious to make his point that he is not content merely to show Paul as the obvious human symbol of two traditions united; at the end of the novel he actually steps out of the novelist's garment and assumes that of the social historian to deliver a final chapter of authorial reflection, not on the fate

of his characters, but on the destiny of the Canada they represent.

The conclusion of *Two Solitudes* is in fact contrived to fit a nationalist message, and this divides it so sharply from the earlier chapters that, while the story of Athanase seems written by a novelist acutely sensitive to concrete human predicaments, the story of Paul reads as if it were written by a man in whom this very kind of sensitiveness had been wholly submerged under the abstractions of a destiny-ridden view of history.

The same rather startling dichotomy is evident in *The Precipice,* MacLennan's worst novel. In *The Precipice* the life of a sleepy and narrow-minded Ontario town, intended to represent Canada between the wars, is shown in opposition to the "precipice" of New York, which attracts so many innocent Canadians to moral destruction. This is the only novel in which MacLennan's principal character is a woman, and his inability to penetrate the feminine with any profundity (an inability that may well be linked with Calvinist inhibitions he later analyses so well in *Each Man's Son*) is undoubtedly one of the principal reasons for its failure. The heroine, Lucy Cameron, is a mousy Jane Austenish young woman, caught in the narrow interests of her community and apparently destined to a perpetual spinsterhood in the company of her two sisters. But she meets a visiting American business man, Stephen Lassiter, and under his influence she blossoms astonishingly—for plainness changing under stimulation into breathtaking beauty is a predictable attribute of the MacLennan heroine. Eventually she runs away from her disapproving elder sister and marries Stephen in New York. They continue to live in that dangerous city, where Stephen becomes involved in the advertising world, until—despite Lucy's efforts to counter the baleful influence of urban life—the marriage breaks up. Lucy retires to Ontario with her children, while Stephen sets off on his miserable Odyssey, succumbing to over-educated sirens, running on to the rocks of business failure, until his nerve breaks and he is reunited with Lucy in a happy ending of excruciating banality.

Like *Two Solitudes, The Precipice* begins well; the early chapters on the small town life of the three sisters are alive, self-consistent and perceptive. But in New York, among the brassy glitter of familiar clichés on city life, the sense of an original world disappears, and the novel slumps into a stock romance in which Lucy, now a smug and irritating paragon, loyally supports Stephen, changed into a comic caricature of the ulcered adman, and finally, after many betrayals, nobly forgives all and consoles him in his downfall. As a tract it is doubtless admirable; as fiction it is extremely dull.

Again, the fault lies in the attempt to force a lesson, and one notices in *The*

Precipice, as in *Two Solitudes,* how far the effort to work out a social problem in logical terms tends to weaken the mythical structure that MacLennan brings forward from *Barometer Rising.* In each of these intermediate novels we encounter again the Odyssean pattern of journey and return, and also, at least in part, the Homeric group of characters. But both plot and characters lose strength when the author seeks to state explicitly what should be suggested figuratively. And so the return of Paul Tallard and Stephen Lassiter are less moving and less convincing than the return of Neil MacRae because they contain no element of mystery; nothing can grow from them because we know far too clearly what the author wishes them to mean.

In contrast to the novels that preceded it, *Each Man's Son* is a tensely constructed and well-unified book, in which the balance of theme and mythical structure is re-established. Central to the novel is the tragedy of the failing boxer, Archie MacNeil, and in the portrayal of Archie's world of prize fights and shabby gymnasia MacLennan writes with an extraordinary descriptive power. But Archie's fate, the fate of a basically good primitive in an environment of cynical exploitation, does not suggest the only theme of the novel; there is also the even stronger theme of Calvinist guilt, which afflicts Archie and all the other people of the little Cape Breton mining town from which he comes, but which appears most dramatically in the conflicts that plague Dr. Ainslie, the brilliant local surgeon whom conscience prevents from ever fulfilling his promise as a doctor and a man.

The structure within which MacLennan develops these two themes differs considerably from that used in *Two Solitudes* and *The Precipice.* There he allowed the statement of a problem to be followed in chronological sequence by its solution, and the result was a linear pattern whose lack of inner tension undoubtedly contributed to the anti-climax into which both books eventually fell. In *Each Man's Son* MacLennan returns emphatically to the counterpointed pattern of the Odyssey. Life in the Cape Breton village, where Archie's wife Mollie and his son Alan await his return, alternates with Archie's own wandering adventures just as life on Ithaca alternates with the distant adventures of Odysseus. Mollie, like Penelope, is subject to many temptations. On one side there is Dr. Ainslie, whose mental agony is complicated by an emotional conflict with his wife, arising largely from their lack of children. He meets young Alan MacNeil and, realising

his exceptional gifts, begins to take an interest in him, to educate him, until the child assumes in his mind the position of the son his wife cannot bear. Eventually, fearing Ainslie's influence will alienate Alan from her, Mollie opposes a continuation of the education plan, and listens to her other tempter, Camire, a glib little Frenchman who has settled in the village.

But the night Mollie gives herself to Camire is also the night on which the two paths of the novel run together, and the wanderer returns, a wrecked man going blind, but not too blind to see what is going on when he opens the cottage door. So the slaughter in the great hall of Ithaca is repeated in miniature. Archie kills Camire, mortally wounds Mollie, and falls in a stroke from which he quickly dies. Alan, the terrified witness of it all, is left completely alone, and, now that all the intervening characters have so providentially been swept away, Ainslie can at last claim the boy as his own.

The tragedy is almost grotesquely inevitable. As in his earlier works, MacLennan cannot avoid seeing life running in the lines of Greek tragedy, and the mechanics of a classical destiny grind their pattern all too heavily and harshly on the human weakness of his characters. Yet this incorporation of destiny, with its corresponding weakening of the sense of human freedom, is not entirely inappropriate in a novel so permeated with the ambient darkness of Calvinist guilt. For the people MacLennan creates, destiny is an inner reality, and so for once the novelist's own fatalism accords with his subject. MacLennan suggests with powerful effectiveness the fear that always seems to overtop hope in the hearts of his Cape Bretoners, and he portrays equally effectively the relationships of classes and persons in a little society bound together by a common faith in its own damnation. MacLennan himself comes from Cape Breton, and it is likely that the immediacy one feels in this novel, the tension that unites structure and theme and myth, and makes the characters convincingly human even when they are most the slaves of circumstance, stems from its closeness to his own experience.

WHEN WE COME TO *The Watch that Ends the Night,* MacLennan's largest and most ambitious novel, we are reminded immediately of *Barometer Rising,* for here again a *revenant* comes back from the battles of life and the shadow of death to the haunts of his youth. But, once beyond this common starting-point, MacLennan's first and his most recent novel diverge on their separate errands. In *Barometer Rising* the action really centres around the efforts

of Neil MacRae to claim his rightful place among the living. But Jerome Martell in *The Watch that Ends the Night* comes home from the Nazi torture chambers —by way of a long pilgrimage through Russia and China—only, like the original Odysseus, to renew his wanderings. His return, in fact, is important most of all for its effect on his former wife Catherine, and on George Stewart, the lover from childhood whom she married after hearing the false reports of Martell's death. For years Catherine and George have lived in the quiet campus security of a present which seems sealed off from the more destructive acids of memory. And then George rings up a number which the college porter has given him and—as he hears Jerome's forgotten voice—finds himself in the echoing tunnel that leads towards a past he had thought done with for ever.

By this means *The Watch that Ends the Night* becomes a novel constructed in receding vistas of time, and in handling the leaps of memory MacLennan's craftsmanship is unobstrusively sure. We retreat with George—who in his role of narrator acts as a sensitive intermediary recording the effects of Jerome's return on others as well as himself—first into the childhood in which, by regarding Catherine as a girl rather than an invalid, he gives her the confidence of her own femininity. Time surges forward to the Thirties, the Depression and Spain and the Leftist Dream, and Jerome appears with them, an idealistic surgeon, deft with a scalpel and crushing with an argument, a figure larger than life who bursts dramatically into George's memory in the middle of that fateful telephone conversation.

> He was right in front of me now, Jerome Martell in the mid-Thirties, ugly-handsome with muscular cheeks, a nose flattened by an old break, hair cropped short because it defied a brush, a bulldog jaw, nostrils ardent like those of a horse, mouth strongly wide and sensual, but the eyes young, hungry and vulnerable, quick to shame as a boy's, charming with children and the weak, quarrelsome with the strong. There he was, that oddly pure sensualist so many experimenting women had desired, the man so many of us had thought of as wonderful in those depression years when we were all outcasts.

Jerome, though not technically the hero of *The Watch that Ends the Night,* is a figure in the heroic mould, the wanderer and the giant and the medicine man all in one, an energumen in the thirties, a man of sorrows and saintly wisdom in the fifties, who seems for most of the novel too far above common clay to be either true or tolerable unless we accept him as myth incarnate. Yet there is one point at which even Jerome becomes authentically human; that is when another tunnel of time opens up and takes us back into the New Brunswick woods, to the child-

hood of a boy born of an illiterate Central European immigrant and brought up in the primitive turn-of-the-century logging camps where his mother works as cook. The mother is murdered by one of her lovers; the boy escapes downriver and is adopted by a simple-minded pastor who finds him starving on a railway station. This part of the book is written as admirably as MacLennan has ever written of primitive action; the woods of New Brunswick take shape in one's mind as a distinct physical presence, different from any other woods one has ever read of or walked in, and the night scene in the sleeping camp when the boy escapes from the murderer is powerfully thrilling.

At the end of *The Watch that Ends the Night* Jerome dispenses his wisdom and departs for the west. The shock of his return has shortened Catherine's life so that she is now an obviously dying woman, but Jerome has enabled her and George to find themselves, to face their pasts, and to wait tranquilly in a world of gathering shadows for death. In fact, in a sense he has passed them through death, and so the three main characters become united at that key point of the Odysseus myth, the descent into the underworld that precedes rebirth into the sunlight.

There is a flavour of pietistic smugness about this ending which is hard to accept; there is also, throughout *The Watch that Ends the Night,* a suave mawkishness in talking about sex which amounts almost to diplomatic evasion. MacLennan still suffers from his Calvinist background. But, granting such shortcomings, granting also the difficulty one experiences in really believing in Jerome, *The Watch that Ends the Night* is still a novel that impresses one for a number of reasons—its craftsmanly construction, its descriptive power, its ambitious grasp of the variety of Canadian social situations, from the primitive logging camp to the set of fellow-travelling academics, from the Halifax manse to the Anglophile boarding school and the C.B.C. and the Ministry of External Affairs.

In mid-career, MacLennan is still clearly developing as a novelist. His didacticism, which will probably never leave him, is at least presented now with a discreet indirection; his fatalism has largely acquired meaning in terms of the content of his novels—it is a fatalism proceeding rather from within his characters than from the world outside. He has, in other words, largely neutralised some of his most evident defects as a writer of fiction. It is true that his handling of any kind of sexual relationship remains almost as clumsily romanticist as ever it was; indeed, in this respect *The Watch that Ends the Night* is a regression from *Each Man's Son.* On the other hand, in his three successful novels, *Barometer Rising, Each Man's Son* and *The Watch that Ends the Night,* he has steadily widened

and varied his portrayal of the character of Canadian life. Ultimately, perhaps, he is best as a social novelist, using his central myth to demonstrate the underlying universality of the personal and national experience he re-creates. And doubtless it is this function that really explains the consideration we accord him. Few Canadian critics, even among those who praise him, would seriously claim him as a great writer adept at exploring the intricacies of the human heart and mind; most accept him as the best example of a kind of novelist that may be necessary in Canada today, the kind of novelist who interprets a rapidly maturing society to its own people in the same way as Dickens and Balzac interpreted the society of the industrial revolution to the English and the French a hundred years ago. MacLennan may not have the variety or the abounding vigour or the sheer greatness of texture shared by these imperfect giants, yet in his way he is of their kind and no writer has yet come nearer than he to writing a Canadian *Comédie Humaine*.