

THE STORY OF A NOVEL

Hugh MacLennan

This account of his problems as a writer and of the genesis of his most recent novel, *The Watch that Ends the Night*, is a version — somewhat revised — of a talk which Hugh MacLennan originally gave on the CBC *Anthology* programme.

I HAVE NEVER BEFORE spoken intimately in public about my work. Previously I have been too shy or too proud. I have accepted the common professional attitude that a man's work should talk for itself. I have said little or nothing when I have heard, or read, statements about Canadian literature which seemed to me to be sheer nonsense. Only occasionally have I protested, and never in my own case, against the habit of some of our reviewers of selling our best work short. Only once have I written that the most famous reviewers of New York regard our best work as belonging to the literature of the modern world, while many of our reviewers at home still assume that Canadian writers are like ball players competing in a bush league.

But no writer ever should argue with the critics, least of all the writer who is talking to you now. Lately Canadian reviewers have been very kind to me. I know they want to see us do well. I know also that their Canadian pride makes it hard for them to overpraise for fear that they will seem to be provincial, but I do wish, sometimes, that they all knew what the reviewer of a famous American paper said last fall of Colin McDougall's magnificent novel, *Execution*: "This is the final proof," he said, "that the most important writing in the western hemisphere is now coming out of Canada."

If this statement is true—if it is even half true—it is because Canadian writers are hungry writers. They are writers who have had to work exceedingly hard in order to live. They are writers who write, not just for money, but because the excitement of discovering Canada compels them to write.

Writing is a fascinating, arduous and solitary profession. The technical skills necessary to produce even a commonplace novel are quite as complicated as those necessary for a brain operation. It took me two unpublished novels and eight years of continuous disappointment before I even began to learn how difficult it is to write an original novel. The only way I learned how to write was by endlessly re-writing. When I tell aspiring young men how much I rewrite—I do it in order to make my characters and scenes live for myself—they often turn pale. Let me give some figures on that.

My first published novel, which was called *Barometer Rising*, was a relatively simple tale located in my home town of Halifax. When I had finished about two hundred pages I threw them away and started all over again because now the story-line seemed clearer. When I had finished a hundred and fifty pages of this draft I threw them away and started again. *Barometer Rising* in its finished form contains about 100,000 words. In order to arrive at that finished product I wrote about 700,000.

My next novel, *Two Solitudes*, was published at 135,000 words. In the writing of it my wastebasket received approximately a million and a quarter. My third novel, *The Precipice*, was published at the same length as *Two Solitudes*. To the best of my recollection my wastebasket received a million and a half words before the script was mailed. The fourth novel, *Each Man's Son*, was the shortest of them all: it was just under 100,000 words. It was a transitional piece—a kind of bridge between *The Precipice* and my last—and so far as I recall, my wastebasket received no more than a million words on that particular job.

The fifth novel, *The Watch that Ends the Night*, I shall talk about in some detail later on. At the moment, let me say that I lived with it for more than six years, and, in order to produce the 140,000 words the finished script contains, I probably wrote more than three million.

I submit that a practical man will recognize this as a preposterously wasteful manner in which to earn one's living. What is more, he will be still further shocked if he knows the conditions which have developed within the book trade during the time I have been working like this.

In the spring of 1951, when my fourth novel was published, the bottom fell out of the conventional novel market in North America. The reasons for this collapse are now apparent. For years, the chief difficulties in the trade had been concerned with the price of books and the problem of

distributing them to a population scattered between Halifax and Victoria in Canada, and Provincetown and San Diego in the United States. The small communities where most of the population lives could not support regular book stores. In the whole of Canada there were less than twenty-five. The business of keeping a bookstore in a small community was notoriously unprofitable. Not only could the merchant not risk buying the great variety of books on which a healthy trade depends; rising costs of stock and labour were almost pricing first-run cloth editions out of the market except in the large cities.

The economic impasse, so far as the consumer was concerned, was solved by the triumphant success of two relatively new selling agencies: book clubs on the one hand, and paper-back reprints on the other. The book clubs worked like mail order houses, selling masses of cloth covers all over the continent through the mails at cheap prices. The paper-back reprints — utilising drug stores, railway stations, airports, hotel lobbies and even street corners — developed more than two hundred thousand outlets for selling books at cheap prices. This was the greatest revolution in publishing since the invention of the steam press. In 1951, more than 260 million paper-back reprints were sold in the United States alone.

All this looks wonderful for the writer — and it is wonderful if what he wants above all else is a large reading public. But economically it has been little short of disastrous to most of us who depend on writing in order to live. A sale of 50,000 books in cloth through the stores will generally gross the author about \$25,000. But a sale of 50,000 paper-backs once grossed me only \$250 — in other words, not enough to pay two months' rent. Terms are better now than they used to be, but they are still unsatisfactory.

Still another economic shock followed in the wave of the book club and paper-back revolution. This new competition cut the sales of regular first-run editions to a fraction of what they had been a decade previously. Popular books in the United States in 1946 often sold a million copies in the stores. Since 1951, a top best-seller seldom has gone over the 100,000 mark, and many a book which reached the lower rungs of the *Times* best seller lists grossed the author less than \$12,000.

Looking at this situation in 1951, when I should have been established in my career, I recognized that, far from being established, I had become another young man with my way to make. In short, I knew it was im-

possible to try to live by writing novels alone, as I had been doing for nearly ten years. I accordingly took a part-time job at McGill, which turned out to be one of the happiest decisions I ever made. I also began writing regular monthly essays for *The Montrealer* magazine, and did a lot of free-lance articles for *MacLean's*, *Saturday Night* and the American magazine *Holiday*. It was while carrying this extra load, which I enjoyed carrying, that I wrote *The Watch that Ends the Night*.

BUT ENOUGH about the economics of the trade. No writer in his senses writes solely to make money. If money is what he wants most, he needs his head examined if he becomes a writer. There are hundreds of easier ways to make money than with your pen or your typewriter. Writers who stay with the profession do so because they can't help themselves. They enjoy writing so much — or rather, they are so miserable if they aren't writing — that they will gamble their lives again and again no matter how unfavourable the economic aspects of the trade may be.

Far more serious to me in 1951 was my sudden realisation that the traditional novel was failing in its function. I submit that our basic attitudes to society have changed, inwardly, out of recognition since the war. I submit further that the conventions of the traditional novelists have failed to meet and translate this changed attitude into art.

The traditional English novel dealing with what might be called human destiny has been the unconscious slave of Shakespeare for the past century and a half. Shakespeare's tragedies were based on the assumption that human destiny is to be found in the interplay of human characters. So, to an extent, it is. But Shakespeare wrote for the stage, and the stage requires that actions be made visible. Though the essential action in *Hamlet* is invisible, within the minds of the characters, Shakespeare nonetheless translates it at the end into violent action. The second greatest play in our literature ends in melodramatic absurdity.

Somewhere around 1950 it seems to have occurred to millions of readers that this kind of external action — this drama played as a means of revealing the tragic nature of man — was apt to be both inaccurate and inadequate. Within a civilised society, only goons, primitives and

psychotics tend to settle their conflicts as Shakespeare's people settle theirs. Modern psychology reinforced the feelings of intelligent readers that most modern novels had become peripheral. If they were tragic they usually dealt with outcasts, with men excessively violent, with men excessively primitive, with men excessively criminal.

Around this time, it seemed to me, as it seemed to the educated public, that the basic human conflict was *within* the individual. But how to find an artistic form for this concept? That was the question. Certainly the novelists failed who wrote clinically; they absolutely failed to purge the soul of pity and terror, which is art's supreme function. When I began *The Watch that Ends the Night* I was at least clear on that score. I would *not* write a clinical book. But somehow I was going to write a book which would not depend on character-in-action, but on spirit-in-action. The conflict here, the essential one, was between the human spirit of Everyman and Everyman's human condition.

In order to find an accurate fictional form for this concept of life, I wrote millions of words and postponed the publication of *The Watch that Ends the Night* for some eight years. Or rather, I spent more than six years learning how to shape a new bottle for a new kind of wine.

It was an intense, illuminating and at times a wonderful experience. I wrote on and on, I tore up again and again, and all the while, in order to earn a living, I kept on turning out essays and teaching at McGill. I refined my style and discovered new techniques I had previously known nothing about. And finally in the greatest single burst of writing energy I ever had, I began all over again and wrote the whole finished version in a space of five months.

Now this novel has been in the hands of the public for a year and it is mine no longer. Looking back on it, I sometimes have the feeling that it was written by another man. The public has been kind to it. It has had a moderate success in the United States, and in Canada a considerable success in terms of the Canadian market. It will be, or is being, published in England, Sweden and Spain, and probably it will appear in a few more translations before its course is run. Now, like most writers, I am waiting for the emptied well to fill again, and after a while I suppose it will. Meanwhile I again feel like a young man with his way to make, for every novel is a new experience and every experience must be lived through until it is done.