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REGIONALISM AND THE SURGEON FIGURE IN HUGH
MACLENNAN'S FICTION

For Dr. B. E.

Hugh MacLennan was born on March 20, 1907 in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia and died on November 7, 1990 in Montreal, Québec. In between the two dates he had widely travelled in Europe and lived most of his life in Montreal. Had he obtained a job in the Maritimes he would never have ventured out so far from his birth place. Later in his life he visited his relatives, his home-town friends there. During the months of October-November 1982 he occupied the Winthrop Pickard Bell Chair of Maritime Studies at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick.

Hugh MacLennan was thrilled at being able to work "at home":

"Here I am working at last—in a Maritime University. Coming back to the Maritimes has always been a home-coming to hundreds of thousands of us exiles. Life is gentler here than in the great cities. It is certainly much healthier and saner... So now I am home again. On holiday, one might say, from the divided metropolis where I have spent nearly all my working life. I am very glad to be here..."¹

¹ Hugh MacLennan, *On Being a Maritime Writer*. (Sackville: Mount Allison University, 1984), p. 8.

The birthplace had been living on in Hugh MacLennan's memory and inspired him to make the area for several of his fictional characters' story. From among the seven novels he had published the plot of *Barometer Rising* (1941) and *Each Man's Son* (1951) totally and that of *The Watch That Ends the Night* (1959) partially takes place in the Maritime Provinces.

Incidentally these are the same novels which have surgeon figures in them, another biographical element. His father, Dr. Samuel MacLennan was a colliery doctor, a surgeon, a stern man who in his leisure time read the ancient classics in their original tongue. The father-doctor figure had had a life-long impact on Hugh MacLennan, the writer.

In the English speaking literature of the world—besides Somerset Maugham, a doctor himself—and Sinclair Lewis with his Arrowsmith, it was Hugh MacLennan who created in his fiction the most authentic doctor figures by giving accurate description of cases, diagnoses, hospitals, and shower his familiarity with the doctor's world in general.

Who are Hugh MacLennan's main doctor figures? They are: Angus Murray in *Barometer Rising*, Daniel Ainslie in *Each Man's Son*, and Jerome Martell in *The Watch That Ends the Night*.

What is the medical profession like at all? It is larger than life, it is overpowering any other human feeling and/or problem. Practising surgery, the toughest of all medical practices is a life long ambition, often a solution for life's problems. Surgical skill and the psyche of the surgeon are closely related. If a doctor masters the surgical skill, he feels superior to other human beings. He can do what other human beings cannot. And the wish to operate when the need arises surpasses any other wish, any other obligation the doctor may have.

The wish to operate is a call the doctor has to fulfil. It is a feeling that comes from the inside, it is a duty that nothing can alter or channel into another direction. A surgeon must operate, otherwise he feels crippled, maimed to a shallow, meaningless existence. The surgical skill is taken for granted with the macLennanian surgeons. The wish to operate too. Nothing and nobody can impair that quality or take it away.

Angus Murray's hands were not quite recovered from the war injuries, yet the first thing he does after the explosion in the Halifax harbour is that he sets up a hospital in the Wains' house and operates.

"Now there was no chance of turning back. His hand would have to do its work, and if it failed, no one would be able to repair the damage. His forehead was moist with sweat as he anaesthetized and washed out the conjunctival sac. Then he paused for the anaesthetic to take effect and observed that Mrs. Stevens had laid out the instruments in their proper order...

..She handed him the deWecker's scissors and he took them with his right hand and tested the strength and steadiness of his fingers. The movement hurt exceedingly, but the fingers were able to apply pressure and close the blades firmly. It would be a short operation. He had done dozens of prolapsed irises and used to think nothing of them. The trouble was that one had to use several instruments simultaneously. He had done it without help several times in France and he would do it now. He would be able to accomplish most of the preliminary work with his good hand, and that would rest the weak one. There was a faint smile around his mouth as he inserted a speculum into the eye and secured the lids with a pair of fixation-forceps."²

Jerome Martell after having been tortured in Ausswitz by the Nazis, and after having been transported to a Soviet concentration camp, and having lived in Hong Kong after escaping from the camp, upon coming home to Canada, wants to operate again:

"My hands—he held them out and for the first time I (George Stewart) noticed those splayed fingers—aren't much good for difficult operations. But they can do routine ones, and I'm still able to work."³

² Hugh MacLennan, *Barometer Rising* (Toronto, Montreal: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1958), p. 174.

³ Hugh MacLennan, *The Watch That Ends the Night* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1975), p. 368.

The wish to operate is nearly a superhuman feeling which is connected to the desire of healing others' wounds, to cure people, to serve people in the noblest sense of the word. This is what Angus Murray is doing and plans to do when his plans for a happy private life with Penelope crumble, this is what Daniel Ainslie had been doing all his life, and this is what Jerome Martell is hoping to do once again in the West.

The doctors achieve confidence, trust, respect, reverence and consequently authority in their community. When Angus Murray sets up his hospital in the Wains' house and takes hold of the place, even Aunt Mary, who had intensely disliked Murray "She hesitated, then looked directly at him. 'I have every confidence in you, Doctor.' He had heard this remark hundreds of times"...⁴

Daniel Ainslie's hospital is called "the lighthouse over the whole town".⁵ Daniel Ainslie tells a patient: "...this is the place where people are made right again. We're going to take good care of you. You're in the best and safest place in the world."⁶

The hospital along with the doctors represents education, learning, culture, a behaviour set by a code of morale, consequently the surgeons reach out to the sick, the uneducated, the wretched, and want to save them. They want to cure the sick, educate the uneducated, psychologically heal the wretched, and serve society at large.

They do not spare themselves in the process. As duty calls them, surgeons work irregular hours up to the point of complete physical and mental exhaustion.

The fourth day after the explosion Angus Murray is on the verge of collapse. "Since Wednesday morning he had not had more than six hours' sleep, and although the strain and fatigue and the constant throbbing of his injured arm bowed his shoulders and made him appear like an old man, he was too nery to want to rest. He wanted more than anything to be alone, he wanted to see something that had not been maimed or destroyed; above all,

⁴ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 2, 173.

⁵ Hugh MacLennan, *Each Man's Son* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, 1971), p. 43.

⁶ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 5, 47.

he wanted to think and to have time to recover the only thing he had left in the world, the sense of his own personality.”⁷

Daniel Ainslie quite often is felt sorry for by his wife Margaret when he is in the state of complete exhaustion.

”During the past three nights he had slept no more than a total of eleven hours, not counting the hour or two he might have dozed in his carriage. This morning he had performed five operations and then he had made his calls and seen patients in his surgery all afternoon.”⁸

Jerome Martell is the strongest, he has an all enduring physical constitution which matches his spirit.

”His daily routine called for about six operations in addition to his calls, he lectured in the university, he spent two hours every day in a free clinic he had established for the unemployed, and he was involved in various public causes. Besides all this he managed to find time to read, to help people in trouble, and even to play with his child. The one thing he almost always did: he came home for dinner and reserved the half-hour before it for Sally.”⁹

The surgeons of MacLennan feel a special tenderness for children and wish to have one. Just as Jerome Martell reserved his half an hour for his four-year old daughter, Sally before dinner, Angus Murray acknowledges the fact of liking children as if stating a diagnosis: ”I’ve got a weakness for all children, I guess. So naturally I like this one.”¹⁰

Daniel Ainslie at the age of forty is married to Margaret. She cannot have a child for she had to undergo an operation a few years before. This operation deprived the couple forever of having a child of their own. The craving for a child, a son is so strong with Daniel Ainslie that he would not think twice to get hold of Alan, eight-year old son of Molly and Archie MacNeil and give him proper education. The feeling overwhelms his psyche, his logic, his respect for other people. He takes it for granted that

⁷ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 2, 203—4.

⁸ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 5, 25.

⁹ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 3, 150.

¹⁰ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 2, 73.

by sheer mental and financial superiority, let alone education, he has every right to get hold of the half-orphan small boy and take over the responsibility for Alan's future.

The surgeon does not like to have any authority limiting his action. This fact probably comes from the ability to operate, the medical knowledge which distinguishes him from other average human beings, who cannot do what he can. Just as Daniel Ainslie does not respect the motherly feelings of Molly in wanting to have Alan as his son, the same way but in magnified proportions does Jerome Martell not accept any judgement and authority regarding his own deeds be it of a medical or political nature.

Catherine had a rheumatic heart condition and was not supposed to give birth to a child unless she was ready to shorten her life. Jerome Martell challenges that medical evidence by marrying Catherine and getting her pregnant and giving her a daughter. The daughter makes Catherine a happy mother, but it is a medical challenge in the first place for Jerome Martell, the doctor.

"You know, he said, the purpose of medicine is supposed to be the preservation of life. But that's not my idea of the purpose of medicine. My idea is to help people get the most out of what life they have."¹¹

Jerome Martell also challenges the medical authority within the hospital, when he takes part in the radical political movement of the Depressions years in Montreal, and gets involved in a love-affair with a Communist nurse in the hospital. The all enduring surgeon thinks he can decide for himself what to do irrespective of the codes of society his profession binds him to.

"Jerome—I really came to believe this—could never belong to any particular group of human beings; he belonged to humanity itself. This he never seemed to know. He had less ordinary social sense than anyone I ever knew, and if he met the King of England he would have been interested in him solely as a human being, and if the King bored him he would have been quite capable of changing the subject of walking away to talk to somebody else. He was utterly without a sense of class distinction, and the subtle

¹¹ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 3, 154.

layers of these distinctions in Montreal entirely escaped his notice. I'm sure he was snubbed dozens of times; I'm equally sure he never noticed it."—says George Stewart—¹²

To carry his disrespect for morality into extreme, he applies violence, punches people when no other argument works. Jerome Martell's terms of human obligations seem superhuman just as his physical and spiritual abilities are superhuman. He embodies life-force. Towards the end of the novel Jerome Martell encourages George Stewart to live Catherine's death. No matter how strong George's anger towards Jerome is, for having shortened Catherine's life with moral strength to not only continue to stand by Catherine, but also to make her last years happy.

"You must learn to build a shell around yourself like a snail and every now and then you must creep inside of it. Two days inside and you'll come out able to face anything... The shell is death. You must crawl inside of death and die yourself. You must lose your life. You must lose it to yourself... When things become intolerable—you must die within yourself. Your soul is making your body revolt against what you think you have to bear. You can only live again by facing death. Then you outface it. You must say to yourself, and mean it when you say it: 'What difference does it make if she does? What difference does it make if I die? What difference does it make if I am disgraced? What difference does it make if everything we've done means nothing?' You must say those things and believe them. Then you will live."¹³

The doctor figures of Hugh MacLennan can love women, however, they are never romantic. Reason, logic, scientific knowledge, thus objectivity reigns over their emotions.

Angus Murray had once been married to an American girl and she died soon after he had left medical school. He left for France to fight in World War I and "Death suddenly seemed unimportant and life seemed everything" to him.¹⁴

¹² Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 3, 157

¹³ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 3, 366.

¹⁴ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 2, 33.

Angus Murray overcomes his feeling for Penny too by rationalizing his thoughts about her as if setting up a diagnosis of Penny—thus once again the mind of the doctor takes over and is always in control as far as his emotions are concerned:

”He faced her with as much detachment as he could. God damn people like Penny with that tense calm like still water under pressure! The idea that he might have married her appalled him now. That calm, that potential energy in the girl would annihilate him if he ever had to live with it. A stubborn, imaginative, violent man like Neil MacRae would be just the sort to make her do whatever he wanted, make her forget to think, force her into the pattern of his own life without even knowing he was doing it. The next time he thought of getting married, Murray decided, he’d hunt someone capable of hysterics.”¹⁵

Daniel Ainslie was keeping his emotional distance from his wife, Margaret. Instead he reads the Greek classics in the original, it is a feeling which lifts his spirit above the everyday routine sufferings he has to witness. It is an activity which makes up for the warmth, the tenderness he cannot show his wife for fear of giving away his fallibility as a human being who craves love and understanding.

Each Man’s Son other doctor figure, Douglas MacKenzie attributes this to the puritanic past, the Protestant innate guilt feeling. I believe that it goes deeper than that. It goes back to what traditionally society expects of man: to be rock that the woman can lean on, be the dominant sex, the tower of strength in the family. This expected role is underlined by the fact that Daniel Ainslie is doctor, an authority not only in the operating theatre, but outside it in the local and very close-knit community of Broughton. If he lets himself go, he cannot go back to the role of the strong man, and he falls victim to his own fallibility. As long as he closes in himself, he does not betray his strength, he does not have to give himself away and thus become victim to the woman, his mate in life. It is obvious that he can give himself away, be sincere only to the older and much respected colleague Douglas MacKenzie, and also to a certain extent. They communicate verbally up to a

¹⁵ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 2, 193—4

certain point, and that communication comes from the common background of being surgeons.

On the other hand Daniel Ainslie finds himself suddenly in love with both Margaret and Molly: "He wanted to go off and lose himself in the forest and find there a woman with Margaret's body and the eyes—good God, the eyes of that girl Molly MacNeil—who would hold his head and tell him that for all his worthlessness she loved him and for all his confusion she understood him..."¹⁶

Ainslie reaches communication with Molly, however, this contact is seen as communication by Margaret, his wife as communication attributed to the Gaelic origin of both her husband and that of Molly, whereas she comes from a Loyalist family said to be more outgoing and fun-loving. I think that Daniel Ainslie and Molly may be on the same wavelength—to use a modern term—or may not be at all at the same wavelength only Margaret feels that way. Maybe Dr. Ainslie is simply attracted to the pretty young woman—see the dream above—as a healthy male does in spite of the fact that he is a doctor.

Dr. Doucette in Louisbourg "grinned. He put his hand on Ainslie's kne and squeezed affectionately. 'Tell me something—when you've finished a gook job, do you feel you deserve a new woman?'

'Ouch!' said Ainslie.

'So you do!' He let a few seconds elapse. The he said, 'How's Margaret?'

'She's the same as ever.'"¹⁷

Jerome Martell was described "as the most attractive male animal in Montreal."¹⁸ He loved Catherine in his own way, however, as Peter Buitenhuis pointed out, "...one of Jerome's main troubles is that he has too much energy. He constantly needs outlets that his invalid wife, Catherine, is not able to supply."¹⁹

¹⁶ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 5, 65.

¹⁷ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 5, 126.

¹⁸ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 3, 121.

¹⁹ Peter Buitenhuis, *Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto: Forum House, 1969), p. 60

For him life is a gift, all his morale is different, originating in the fact that he has too much energy. He feels he belongs to a world larger than his immediate environment, he wants to grasp and save the whole world, and challenges authority of any kind. He loves LIFE and not just one woman or a friend. His feelings belong to the world he claims his own and sets up his own moral code in everything he does. He, himself is a life-force, a healing force if in the right track. He is deeply convinced that he is always in the right track, because he sets up the rules for himself.

The doctors of Hugh MacLennan appreciate beauty when they meet with it. It satisfies their aesthetic need, it a strength they can draw inspiration from to continue their hard work on the one hand, and on the other, it makes them contemplate, to philosophize which in the end comes to the same thing, it helps them to face the sick, the operations, and death if necessary. The process is the following: they take delight in sheer beauty of the scene they are watching, the sight makes them contemplate on mankind, the very existence of man, their country Canada, which thoughts lead them back to reality, the immediate problem they have to solve.²⁰

Angus Murray watches Halifax:

"Spread below him, the town lay with the mist concealing every ugly thing, and the splendour of its outline seemed the most perfect, natural composition he had ever seen. He thought that a man could only know the meaning of peace when he longer reached after the torment of hope. He had lost Penny, with to argue or justify himself any more; unhappiness could no longer have meaning, for there was no longer anything positive for him to be unhappy about. There was nothing to worry him. Last night he had relinquished the last thread of ambition which had held worries tight in his mind. But the beauty of the world remained and he found himself able to enjoy it; it stayed constant in spite of all mankind's hideous attempts to master it.

With eyes blinking in the light he surveyed Halifax fanning away under its bare trees from the rounded base of the Citadel. Almost every street and building held for him a fragment of personal history dating back to the time, twenty-seven years ago, when he had first come as a boy raw

²⁰ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 5, 143.

from the farm, to Dalhousie College. The faces of classmates crossed his memory; some were successful in the upper provinces or the States; one was famous; few were left in Nova Scotia.

Even as he watched, the mist was dissolving, and glancing down to the harbour, he saw the British cruiser coasting in to her anchorage. The incisive outline of the ship seemed to emphasize and sharpen the essential helplessness of all small places in the world to resist the impact of the outer world. Murray sighed. The town throbbed with the war and the people in their hearts were not sorry. They welcomed it the way a doctor welcomes a prospect of a dangerous operation which he alone can perform, for England could not fight the war without this town. The great cities which made the wars and sought to circumvent the nature of things could not do without Halifax now.

He took hold of his injured hand and began to manipulate the fingers. They were stiff with the morning cold, but it was obvious they were recovering and soon would be fit for work. He would still have his trade. That would have been enough from now on.”

Daniel Ainslie’s mind undergoes the same process when he wanders outside the town of Broughton to the sea and watches the night at the shore. Into his thinking comes the contemplation on God and man’s existence, and on going home he is relaxed. He cured himself, he set his mind in peace. He contemplates:

”If there was no God, then there was nothing. If there was no love, then existence was an emptiness enclosed within nothing. He felt as though his spirit had hurled itself against the window of his life like a wounded bat and broken the glass. It has been caught in a prison and now it was free. But its freedom was the freedom of not caring, and the things it witnessed now were different from those it had seen before... a world where there were no gods, no devils, no laws, no certainties, no beginning, and no end. A world without purpose, without meaning, without intelligence; dependent upon nothing, out of nothing, within nothing; moving into an eternity which itself was nothing.”²¹

²¹ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 5, 44, 218—222.

These thoughts reminiscent of existentialism reveal the learned man whose mind can wander into nothingness to find his active, helping, healing self again.

Philosophizing is an important preoccupation which the mac-lennanian doctor is often engaged in. Here it also counterbalances the guilt feeling inflicted upon him by the pernicious influence of his puritanical upbringing on the one hand, and on the other it serves to illustrate the way the learned man solves his conflicts compared to the uneducated. For the miners in Broughton a punch-up is the solution to all their problems, for the doctor it is contemplation, watching nature, the procedure of combining visual sensitivity to brainwork which serves not only as an eye-opener but as a physical outlet for tension in his organism.

For Daniel Ainslie the real beauty comes from having saved someone's life: "Life was never so vivid as when it was in danger nor was a human being ever so vitally himself as when he had passed through pain and emerged on the other side of it."²²

REGIONALISM

Barometer Rising and *Each Man's Son* take place in the Maritimes, *Barometer Rising* in Halifax and *Each Man's Son* on the island of Cape Breton.

Jerome Martell's early childhood in *The Watch That Ends the Night* was spent in a logging camp in the woods of New Brunswick, and the description is so vivid that the reader can feel the physical presence of the woods. The first ten years of Jerome never sank into oblivion in spite of the fact that the obscurity of his origins haunts him all his life. This is the way the grown-up man remembers the New Brunswick area: "... those little fishing ports and lumber towns along the Gulf shore and in my mind I can smell them. Such ripe combination of smells they give out: balsam, lobster pots, drying fish, oakum, new lumber, bilge, and the stench of fish-offal on beaches under umbrellas of screaming gulls. But inland, even four miles inland in that country, there is no sense of ocean at all, but only of this primeaval forest of spruce with the tangle of deadfalls and the sound-

²² Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 5, 84.

absorbing carpet of spruce needles that have accumulated over the centuries. The rivers run through it teeming with trout and salmon, and moose, bear, deer, and all the northern animals large and small are at home in the tangle of threes. So are blackflies and mosquitoes in the spring, and in winter so is the snow. In winter this whole land is like Siberia.”²³

Hugh MacLennan’s father died in 1939, almost two years before *Barometer Rising* appeared. He created the three doctor figures with roughly a decade’s difference between them. Hugh MacLennan as a grown-up had formed a close and warm friendship with his father in the latter’s few years. He could not get quite distanced from his father in his first novel. Angus Murray is a minor character in the book, well drawn, but not quite a round character.

As the years pass Hugh MacLennan got distanced enough from the immediate presence of his father, and as the doctor’s figure lived on in him, he created and recreated not only his father’s figure but he came closest to revive his parents’ marriage in the Ainslie couple. Ainslie just like his own father was determined to live in Broughton, the colliery town.

Hugh MacLennan is quite ironical to people, like himself who had left the Maritimes: “It was a place, I used to assume, where more people were born than died. Ambitious men tended to leave it; having done so, they also tended to yearn for it and to save up to come home on vacations. Wherever they went, they had the habit of telling strangers it was one of the loveliest spots on earth.”²⁴

As the doctor figures grow in characters in the novels, so do they see not only more of Canada but also more of the world. Angus Murray lived in Halifax, fought in the first world war in Europe and then went back to his home-town which he decided to leave and start a new life somewhere west of it.

Daniel Ainslie having lived in England, spends his life in Broughton.

²³ Cf. *op. cit.* pp. 3, 173.

²⁴ Hugh MacLennan, *The Scottish Touch: Cape Breton in The Other Side of Hugh MacLennan*, ed. Elspeth Cameron (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978), p. 214.

Jerome Martell started out from the New Brunswick woods, had been given an education in Halifax, lived many years in Montreal, then set out for Europe, has been to Asia and on getting back to Montreal, he decides to go West. To go West means in Canadian literature to start a new life, and that is what happens to each doctor protagonist at the end of the novels. Their life is bound to take a new turn which may result in the physical change of environment or a change of lifestyle as in the case of Daniel Ainslie, when he becomes a father by adopting Alan.

As the characters grow in importance in the novels, so they scan more of Canada and the world. They themselves psychologically grow in the process. However the purpose of their existence reaches a conscious definition: to live in Canada, to devote their surgical skill, their medical knowledge to Canada.

George Woodcock has been led to express this as follows: "... there is no doubt of the presence in MacLennan's novels of a strong but benign form of nationalism. Indeed, he is the first novelist in the history of his country who has been able to take the drama of development and survival of Canada and to use it effectively as the framework for his fiction. This nationalism which irradiates the novels is compound of a deep love of the physical land and a sense of belonging to a group of peoples which, despite geographical anomalies and historic divisions, has plunged into the primeaval wilderness the roots of a unique human community."²⁵

²⁵ George Woodcock, *Hugh MacLennan* (Toronto: The Copp Clark Publishing Company 1969), p. 34