

Margaret Laurence Memorial Address

by Hugh MacLennan

Hugh MacLennan delivered this address to the Writers' Union of Canada AGM in Kingston, 29 May 1987. The following is an excerpt from the Address, which is too long to print here in its entirety. Readers who want to read the full text can write to The Writers' Development Trust, 24 Ryerson Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5T 2P3. CWS/cf gratefully acknowledges The Writers' Development Trust for giving us permission to Publish the Address.

It is a very great honour you have done me in asking me to give the first of the Margaret Laurence Lectures. Profoundly, I wish it were not so. It seems a grim jest of God that she should be gone and I should be here, for I was born some eighteen years before she came into the world. I came from the extreme eastern tip of Canada before Newfoundland joined us. Margaret was born in the dead centre some two thousand miles to the west. Both of us were of Scottish origin though her surname, Wemyss, indicates that she was a scion of a prominent family from County Angus. Both of us were born in dying small towns. Both of us went abroad before we began to write. Both of us, in trying to discover ourselves, had first to discover some of the historical and psychological truths of the huge nation into which we were born.

Though I met Margaret very seldom during her lifetime, it was always like meeting someone whose professionalism I sensed so naturally that I took it for granted, as she, I believe, took me for granted. She had the inner generosity of a person whose life had been very difficult, and her work was at once a deliverance from her self and a triumph within herself. Toward the end, when apparently the whole nation held her in honour, she had to go to law to prevent a handful of self-righteous hypocrites from banning her books from the schools of Ontario. It

upset her profoundly to have to take off the gloves and fight them in the courts, and though she won the battle, she must have suffered some psychological damage from it, and it is quite possible that if this outrage had not occurred, she would still be alive.

In the last months of Margaret's life, when I knew she had terminal cancer, I telephoned her every second week and always found her calm, a little more husky of voice than when I first met her, but acceptant and even tranquil. She knew she had done her work and that it was good; she had rounded it off; she had gone out from the prairie small town into the great outer world, including the Horn of Africa and southern England. Then, as naturally and inevitably as a Pacific salmon swimming back to its original spawning bed, she returned and tackled the little Manitoba town where she had grown up. She recreated it under the name of Manawaka and in so doing, like Ulysses when he returned to Ithaca, she slew quite a few demons.

The south-eastern corner of Manitoba is one of the most historic regions on this entire country, and its history is much better known in Quebec than in Ontario. This is because of the early *voyageurs* who, over a century and a half, explored in canoes the whole nation from Montreal to the Pacific and the Mackenzie delta, as well as the Mississippi valley down to New Orleans. La Vérendrye, born in Trois-Rivières in 1685 — which happened to be also the birth-year of Handel and Sebastian Bach — returning from service in the War of the Spanish Succession, set out for the west with a party of fifty men, including three of his own sons. He established Fort Rouge on the banks of the Red River and continued west, perhaps to a sight of the Rockies. Later, after the English Conquest of New France, the name was changed to Fort Garry and now, of course, it is Winnipeg.

After La Vérendrye, there appeared on the plains in increasing numbers the *Métis*, most of them children of French fathers and Indian mothers. Colbert, the great finance minister of Louis XIV, laid it down that French settlers in America should mate with the native peoples, and this surely explains the astonishing endurance of the original *voyageurs*. Later on the Scottish Highlanders of the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company followed to some extent the same practice, though most of them had legitimate wives at home in Montreal. This fundamental part of the Canadian story was glossed over until very recently, but only a few days ago, at Percé in the Gaspé, President Mitterand of France alluded to it openly, saying that many French-Canadian expressions were derived from the Indian languages.

In modern times, when at last a true Canadian literature developed, Manitoba gave us in Gabrielle Roy the finest of French-Canadian novelists, and she was a *Métis* from Saint-Boniface. Later on Margaret Laurence gave us that wonderful *Métis* character, Jules Tonnere. The great achievement of these two women writers was to tell hundreds of thousands of Canadians who they were.

I shall never forget a reading Margaret gave in McGill during the period I used to call "our time of troubles," when Spock-marked student politicians, many of them Americans, were raging against the American Empire which was committing suicide in Viet Nam and involving much of the world in the general catastrophe. Margaret came into the campus like a wave of peace. She had an enormous audience of many ages, and though the acoustics were bad in the hall, she held them entirely with her. Waves of affection seemed to surge around her, and no wonder. For here was a woman of profound understanding of the human condition.

Academics have been trained for a long

time to put their confidence in pure reason, and the American Republic was to a large extent founded on the theories of eighteenth century philosophers, especially Locke and, to a lesser extent, Rousseau. Locke has a great deal to answer for. This childless philosopher asserted that the infant new to earth and sky is born with a mind which is a *tabula rasa* — a blank sheet of paper to be written on by the hand of experience. Every woman who has minded a baby understands that this is total nonsense, but sensible women were not listened to in the Age of Reason. Perhaps at last men are beginning to listen to them, the young ones at least. Writers like Margaret Laurence understood in their bones the truth of a sentence written by a great Frenchman long before the Age of Reason, which has triumphed in our time in the H-bomb and the Cold War. "Il est bon," wrote Malherbe, "*et plus souvent qu'on ne le pense, de savoir de n'avoir pas de l'esprit.*" The French-Canadians and the *Métis* knew this truth in their bones, and that is how they managed to survive and stay sane for two centuries after the American Revolution.

I shall now leave Margaret Laurence in peace, and speak a little of my own experience as a writer in this country...

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