

Alan R. Young

Review Article

Varieties of Nova Scotian Experience: Thomas Raddall and Alistair MacLeod.

The Dreamers. By Thomas H. Raddall. Edited by John Bell. Porter's Lake, N.S.: Pottersfield Press, 1986. Pp. 141. Paper, \$9.95.

As Birds Bring Forth the Sun, and Other Stories. By Alistair MacLeod. "Signature Series." Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986. Pp. 191. Paper, \$12.95.

Both Thomas Raddall and Alistair MacLeod spent formative years in Nova Scotia, an experience that has always been of central concern in their short stories. But there, as is evident from the publication of Raddall's *The Dreamers* and MacLeod's *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, any similarities end. This is partly no doubt due to their being of quite different generations. Raddall, who was born in 1903, published most of his short fiction between 1928 and 1942. Encouraged by John Buchan and others, he perfected his narrative skills and learned to produce a well-turned, clean-limbed tale, told with style and craft. His specialties were the yarn-like story that recaptured some vanishing facet of the Nova Scotia he knew as a child, or recreated the more distant past, or (in a small number of post World War Two stories) attempted to convey the impact of war upon the Canadians. His stories often used such familiar structural devices as the surprise twist of events at the conclusion and the framed narrative whereby the main tale is supposedly being told by one of the characters in the "frame" of the story. Emphasis is upon the working out of external events rather than the evocation of a mood or the subjective consciousness of his characters.

At their best, Raddall's stories appear to belong to the tradition of Stevenson, Conrad, and Kipling, the very writers he most admired, but the kind of stories Raddall wrote are for the moment not particularly fashionable in a post-modernist literary climate. *The Dreamers* will probably do nothing to change this, but it nonetheless will serve to remind us of Raddall's extraordinary ability to use conventional but "tried and true" techniques to great effect.

The Dreamers consists of ten stories first published in a variety of outlets between 1928 and 1955. They are preceded by a brief introduction by John Bell, who, while working with the Raddall Papers deposited at the Dalhousie University Archives in Halifax, noticed that over a dozen of Raddall's stories had never been included in his five published collections. Bell has selected what he feels are the ten best of these stories. As their respective dates reveal, these include one of his earliest published pieces, "Three Wise Men," an amusing anecdote about the visit of three pompous officials to Sable Island, that bleak sand dune a hundred miles off the Nova Scotian coast where Raddall had served as a radio operator shortly after the First World War. Included also is the last story Raddall published, "The Dreamers," and historical fiction about the various hopes and aspirations of the early French settlers in Nova Scotia at Fort Royal. As is so typical of Raddall's historical fiction (both stories and novels), "The Dreamers" tellingly evokes the life of the Habitation, but indirectly offers its own revelations about the processes of history. In this instance we are made party to the dreams that would eventually result in New France, the writing of Marc Lescarbot's *History*, the exploring of the St. Lawrence, and the explorations and cartographic work of Samuel Champlain.

"The Dreamers," the first story in the book, is aptly followed by another sample of Raddall's historical fiction, "The Credit Shall Be Yours," depicting the expulsion of the Acadians. Thereafter follow a number of stories dealing with life in the Nova Scotia backwoods. This is a favourite environment for Raddall the writer, since it permits him to reveal the beauties and rigours of wilderness life. Also it allows for the portrayal of the chief characteristics of the people who once inhabited it and depended upon it for their livelihood—their humour, their self-reliance, their special knowledge of the natural environment that no book could ever convey, and their indomitable strength in the face of adversity.

Other stories, such as "Mr. Embury's Hat" and "Swan Dance," and "Miracle" are skilful exercises in irony and humour, but all possess a

vitality, narrative control, and humanity that exemplify Raddall at his best. Not all the stories in *The Dreamers* are as consistently effective as "Mr. Embury's Hat"—the stories about the Habitation and the Acadians are at times a touch laboured in their presentation of historical facts; the supposedly humorous revenge of the old timber cruiser in "The Lower Learning" is too crude to be amusing; and the narrator of the Sable Island story is an unconvincing and inconsistent creation—but these are minor weaknesses in what is a fine representative collection of Raddall's short fiction.

Where Raddall is the author of some eleven novels, five (now six) collections of short stories, seven histories, and sixty articles and pamphlets, MacLeod's reputation to date rests largely upon the publication of one collection of short stories, *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976), a work that prior to its recent reissue by McClelland and Stewart was not easy to come by. Since 1976 MacLeod has continued to provide convincing evidence of his talents in stories published in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *The Fiddlehead*, the *Globe and Mail*, *The Cape Breton Collection*, and various other outlets. *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* collects seven of these stories and demonstrates once again that MacLeod is one of Canada's most accomplished living writers.

Quite different in manner from Raddall's stories, MacLeod's focus upon the inner thoughts and feelings of their protagonists, who, in what often appear to be versions of MacLeod himself, retell and recapture their past lives and childhoods in Cape Breton. Frequently the stories have a particular concern with the emotional reflections and the psychological state of a character who has in the course of time been cut off from his early roots by the economic and cultural forces that govern his life. Significantly, those forces suggest a familiar North American pattern, so that a deep and wide reservoir of experience is tapped here, notwithstanding MacLeod's chosen fictional focus upon Cape Breton. The melancholy ambivalence that accompanies the presentation of the loss of past (family, place, and culture) will be familiar to readers of *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* and such stories as "The Boat," but this too is a universal, for the past and its loss, whether it be Cape Breton as it once was, Celtic culture, or childhood in general, is something from which we are all exiles.

MacLeod begins his collection with "The Closing Down of Summer," a haunting first-person narrative about a crew of shaft and development miners spending the summer on a deserted Cape Breton beach awaiting the imperceptible weather changes that herald their collective

decision to return to work in South Africa. They epitomize in their isolation, their scarred bodies, and their apparent rootlessness, the economic and cultural upheaval that has made modern gypsies of those forced to leave home in search of the work they know (in this case mining). In them, past and present merge incongruously, as the narrator is aware:

Lying now upon the beach we see the external scars on ourselves and on each other and are stirred to the memories of how they occurred. When we are clothed the price we pay for what we do is not so visible as it is now. Beside up on the beach lie the white Javex containers filled with alcohol. It is the purest of moonshine made by our relatives back in the hills and is impossible to buy.

When the men leave, they visit their relatives' graves, bear springs of spruce ("mementos or talismans or symbols of identity"), and sing the Gaelic songs of their youth to pass the long hours to Toronto. In their way of life, physically hard and violent but dependent upon their special skills as miners, they carry Cape Breton with them. Ironically, however, they feel both out of place in the booming summer tourist hubbub of Nova Scotia and cut off from their families who stay on there while they are away ("my wife seems to have gone permanently into a world of avocado appliances and household cleanliness" and "our sons... will be far removed from the physical life and will seek it only through jogging or golf or games of handball with friendly colleagues").

Other stories deal with different complexities of the life of exile. "Winter Dog," for example, though primarily a first-person story of initiation into adulthood, has as central symbol a golden dog, a city animal normally fenced in but mysteriously able to jump free at will. The dog reminds the narrator of his childhood dog in Cape Breton that had saved his life: "It is because of him that I have been able to come this far in time." The story of the dog, however, is merely a memory intertwined with the narrator's own anxieties about an impending death that could necessitate a long dangerous drive through snow back towards Nova Scotia ("Should we be drawn by death, we might well meet our own"). What the narrator is and where he came from are thus at the heart of the story and it is this submerged identity, now transported to Toronto, that the dog evokes.

Different again is "The Tuning of Perfection," one of only two third-person narrations, that depicts a seventy-eight-year-old widower, Archibald, who lives upon a mountain top close to a colony of bald eagles, now threatened, the story hints, by the increasing presence

of pollutants in their food chain. Archibald's pride, dignity, and independence are also threatened when a television producer attempts to incorporate Archibald and his relations into a show ("Scots Around the World") that will include the singing of some Gaelic songs. The producer neither knows the language nor cares about the meaning of the songs. When he asks Archibald to cut and change the songs, Archibald (after dreaming of his long dead wife's singing) refuses. Yet, in moving and subtle fashion, "The Tuning of Perfection" offers some hope for the threatened Gaelic culture that Archibald represents. His grand-daughter and a crude and violent contemporary of hers named Carver show that they still retain some hold on their heritage though they have been unwittingly seduced and cynically misled by commercial interests from without. At the end, Archibald comes to appreciate Carver's "fierceness" and "tremendous energy," just as Carver claims to "*really know*" the old man's desire for perfection. The future, the story seems to imply, will be that of Carver but not one where the values of Archibald will be forgotten.

The remaining stories make further contributions, but it is not necessary to provide a detailed analysis here. "To Everything There Is a Season" and "Second Spring" both explore the passing of childhood and are perhaps the most straightforward. "As Birds Bring Forth the Sun" and "Vision," on the other hand, incorporate what may be folklore elements, the latter story being a highly complex narrative involving a slow unveiling of tangled truths. But such brief comments and those made above about the other stories fall embarrassingly short of doing justice to the emotional power and narrative skill of MacLeod. Without doubt one of Canada's finest short story writers, he is still less well-known than he deserves to be, something that inclusion of *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun* in McClelland and Stewart's "Signature Series" may help to obviate.