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Margaret Duley and Newfoundland*

In 1934 Newfoundland gave up self-government to endure for a decade and a half the indignity of rule by an appointed commission. She did not give up her sovereignty as a nation; just her right to self-government, for a time. What made this surrender necessary, if indeed it was necessary, is a question we need not consider here. But as the end of the twentieth century nears and the shape of past events becomes clear to history, it may well prove that the advent of Commission government in 1934 was of far greater moment that the second referendum of 1948, which led to Confederation. One prepared the way for the other, got people used to the idea of not controlling their own political destiny, and perhaps ensured that the actual loss of independence which occurred in 1949 would be possible. In any case, we can view the two events as part of the same process, the curious business of a people, shaped over centuries into a distinct nation, trading their nationhood for promised economic security in a century noted for its strident nationalism. To a student of our regional literature the events of 1934 and 1948 are attended with a startling irony. It is this: just as Newfoundland's government faltered and her separate existence as a nation state was jeopardized, Newfoundland writers began to realize what that nationhood meant. Our writers started articulating a national self-consciousness and exploring their people's uniqueness, just before the people agreed to become part of the indistinctness of Canada. Nowhere is this more strikingly illustrated than in the novels of Margaret Duley, which were produced during the Commission of Government period. This paper is a brief introduction to the work of this neglected writer, or rather to the first three of her four novels—those which focus upon Newfoundland.

Margaret Duley was the first native Newfoundland writer of significance to see and to affirm that the country could inspire a national literature. I believe she tried, on a modest scale, and not in any organized, political way, to do for Newfoundland what the poet William

Butler Yeats did for Ireland—claim for it a status as an imaginative resource for writers, as a place worth looking at for itself, with a presence, a power unlike that of all other countries. In a revealing article she wrote for the *Atlantic Guardian* in 1956, she noted that her works were "all born of some Newfoundland compulsion" and defiantly acclaimed her country as "a magnificent and dramatic background" for fiction. She defines that background in three of her four novels, not always in meticulous, realistic detail, but in its essence, and if we read these books in sequence, we can see a progressive and deepening understanding of the experience of life in Newfoundland, and sense the author's growing involvement and gradual reconciliation with her homeland.

Margaret Duley was born in St. John's in 1894. She was the daughter of a well known businessman and was educated in St. John's and in England. Thus by birth and education she belonged to the moneyed élite of the capital city. She never married, but was a beautiful, witty, and appealing woman. She travelled widely, in Newfoundland as well as in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, and her novels show factual knowledge not only of St. John's but of the outports and of Labrador. Her first novel, *The Eyes of the Gull*, was published in 1936; *Cold Pastoral* followed in 1939; and *Highway to Valour* appeared in 1941. All three books were issued by international publishing houses. Her last novel, *Novelty on Earth* (1942), is the only one of her four novels not set in Newfoundland. It may represent an attempt by the writer to overcome her reputation as a regional novelist, or, as one newspaper referred to her, a "Northern primitive." Margaret Duley's last book, really little more than a pamphlet, was *The Caribou Hut*, published in 1949. It is an account of the endeavours of the St. John's War Association to provide entertainment to a great number of servicemen who visited St. John's during World War II, an activity in which Duley played a leading role. She died in 1968 in St. Luke's Home, St. John's.

I mention Duley's roots in the élite of St. John's for a specific reason. It makes her insight into outport life in a novel like *Highway to Valour* the more remarkable. Whatever sympathy was shown to outport Newfoundlanders in writers before Duley came from outsiders like R.T.S. Lowell, Norman Duncan, and George Allan England, two Americans and one Canadian who sensed that outharbour Newfoundland may have been the locale of a vital and unique way of life, perhaps better than their own. These represent important exceptions to the prevailing attitude before Duley, which was largely one of contempt. E.J. Pratt, born and bred in outport Newfoundland, is a special case, whom I cannot discuss adequately here. However, a necessary discrimination must be made. There is not the same commitment to Newfoundland in Pratt that there is in Duley. Pratt was born in Western Bay, Conception Bay, and grew up, taught school, and preached in a variety of outports. Presumably, his knowledge of Newfoundland was much more profound than Duley's. What he did not do, in his life and in his poetry, was to concede that the Newfoundland way of life had a validity, was a viable alternative to other modes. I don't intend this remark to be disparaging, and willingly admit that Pratt was a fine poet. Neither would I argue that Pratt's Newfoundland background left no imprint on his sensibility; of course it left a profound imprint on everything he wrote. But Pratt left his country for the first time, and for good, in 1907, at the age of twenty-five, and thereafter Toronto was his actual and intellectual home. Look at what is left out of his poetry about Newfoundland. His verse displays no curiosity about the country's history, a fact which is the more surprising when it is recalled that he lived for quite long periods in the venerable old communities of Blackhead and Cupids. There is very little interest shown in individual human personality or character, and little effort to see how the people adapt to the harsh conditions of life. There is hardly any knowledge displayed of the people's songs, lore and culture. I can't as I write this recall a poem in which he uses distinctive local vocabulary, except for words like "sculped" and "harps" in *The Ice Floes*, which any educated mainlander would know and which are placed in inverted commas to distinguish them from the standard English context. It is not the Newfoundland people who interest the poet Pratt, but rather the nature and strength of forces which surround and defeat them. Pratt's outharbour men and women are victims, and his Newfoundland poems provide a sombre chronicle of human defeat, reflecting his own grim experiences in outports, and perhaps especially in the village of Fortune where his father, John Pratt, a Methodist minister, had to comfort many families hit by disaster. But in any case his Newfoundland poetry should be seen in its proper perspective: as the work of a writer who has chosen what he evidently conceives to be a broader panorama, larger Canadian and imperial themes, to write about Brébeuf, the Last Spike, Dunkirk, the Titanic. Big stuff like that. No narrow gauge railways for him. Newfoundland is a setting he has grown out of, not one he continues to explore. It is seen from a distance of time and place, in the stark and fixed outlines to which memory sometimes reduces the distant past.

Whatever we decide about Pratt in this context, it is certainly the case that St. John's attitudes to rural Newfoundland have been, until the most recent wave of tiresome and patronizing "Newfcult", unfailingly hostile and condescending. To get an indication of how persistent this 'townie' attitude has been, it is only necessary to turn to Harold Horwood's description of "Caplin Bight" in *Tomorrow will be Sunday* (1966), where outport people are pictured as "almost a lower species" by comparison with someone having an urban education. I need hardly mention where Horwood was born.

Margaret Duley grew up with such an attitude, and her first novel, *The Eyes of the Gull*, is largely an expression of it. *The Eyes of the Gull* tells the story of Isobel Pike, aged 30, trapped in an outport from birth, who experiences a summer of sensual love with an artist named Peter Keen. He is probably modelled on Rockwell Kent, who lived in Brigus, Conception Bay, during World War I and was deported for alleged espionage. Keen comes to Isobel's outport unexpectedly to paint for the summer, and, as it turns out, to do more that just paint. He is rich, has a servant, has travelled widely, and is an accomplished artist with radical ideas about freedom and amorous adventure. "For myself," he says at one point, "I believe most strongly that nothing lasts, everything changes, and no one note is struck forever." Hearing such advanced and cosmopolitan ideas, Isobel Pike is entranced. She has been "in spiritual rebellion" to "savage, bitter and chill" Newfoundland all her life, and has never before accepted a lover. The outporters who have been the only possible husbands for her "don't wash enough", and have "slack shoulders" and "leather faces". They would make her "fat and ugly" and condemn her to a life of "working from daylight to dark". Moreover, they would keep her perpetually pregnant, producing children who would turn out to be "inert slatterns . . . with smeared mouths." Repressed for three decades by the narrow and stifling outport, she now awakens to a world of sense and love. This lasts until the end of the summer, when Peter Keen goes his own way and leaves her desperately alone. Although he has encouraged her to seek freedom, and given her enough money to get to Spain, to the Andalusia she has always desired, she cannot break away from her surroundings, and she dies in frustration and lunatic fantasy.

The Eyes of the Gull is not far above the level of mere romance, and there is little point in prolonged analysis. Note, however, the values enforced in it. Love is evidently determined by latitude: the Spanish variety is good, Newfoundland's bad. The poppycock of Peter Keen's ideas, adolescent nonsense really, is seen as profound truth. He gets off scot-free after meddling with Isobel's life and muddling her values for a summer, and neither he nor the novelist seems to think that he bears some responsibility for her future. Newfoundland life, glimpsed only occasionally as background, is not explored, although the landscape surrounding the outport is seen in its stark and appalling beauty. The outport itself is merely "a huddle of whitewashed houses", sucked at by the sea. The occupations of the people, their religious values, and family loyalties are not seen as possessing any intrinsic worth. "How could I learn anything in this place?" Isobel asks, ignoring the inheritance of gradually accumulated skills and attitudes necessary for maintaining life in such an environment. She is made captive and dumb by primitive life and blind, brutal forces. At one point, after a minor quarrel Isobel knows she has caused, Peter Keen asks her why she didn't take the initiative and say she was sorry: " 'Peter', she answers, 'I never thought of it. I thought there was nothing to do but wait.' He laughed for a moment then sobered quickly. 'Isobel you mustn't have such acceptance. It's all wrong! You must help yourself—reach out.' 'Peter,' she said unhappily, 'It must be the place, the wind, and the sea. They do what they like and we accept it.' " This attitude, which Duley sees as stupefied stolidity of character, is ultimately what Isobel is unable to overcome. It is Peter who has the good life and the correct attitudes. It is the life on the outside that has value. A life of what? At one point in the book, Isobel spends a day and a night with her lover, and we are given a hint of what the good life outside consists of: eating "strange and fascinating looking dishes", sipping wine, kissing hands, reading Tennyson and Keats, having a servant in attendance, and whispering sweet "nebulous things". To sum up: genteel laziness and self-indulgence. That's what's outside. Or what is thought to be outside.

In *Cold Pastoral*, Duley's second novel, we begin with a situation similar to that in *The Eyes of the Gull*. Mary Immaculate Keilly, a chil recognized as especially gifted and beautiful, is growing up in a tin Newfoundland cove for which she feels mostly distaste. There is in th description of this cove, however, a far greater attention to squalid deta than we find in the earlier book, showing the author's combined fascin tion and horror as she draws closer to the gruesome details of outha bour life. We find Mary Immaculate refusing to go look at the brok body of a cow that has fallen off a cliff onto the landwash; also she is fended by "the strong suck of the sea" and by the "sea's offal", findi it "impossible to touch the slime of cod or press spawn from the body a caplin." The smells, spurting blood and guts, and buzzing f associated with fishing, all frighten her. She dislikes the fishy taste of chicken, and notes the ugliness of her father's hands, which are "calloused, cracked, blunted at the finger tips, scarred with lines and twines and splitting knives." Even her mother, with her "oily" hair, "scorched" face, "sagging" flesh, rotting teeth, and swollen red hands, is seen by the young girl as nearly repulsive. Mary looks destined for a life like Isobel Pike's, until one day at the age of 12 she runs alone into the woods behind her settlement, gets lost and frostbitten, becomes the object of a lengthy search that receives international attention, and ends up in a St. John's hospital, something of a celebrity, with a great deal of money contributed by concerned outsiders. Her doctor, Philip Fitz Henry, recognizes that Mary Immaculate is special, and arranges to have her adopted by his own family—which is, as the name indicates, of the very finest St. John's stock. So Mary Immaculate, to her own and her mother's delight, escapes from the outport by page 60 of the novel, and the rest of the book shows her coming of age in the world outside, at first in the best St. John's society, and, much later, in London.

Mary Immaculate is now, by a lucky chance, fully a part of the world that Isobel Pike desired. The outharbour girl adapts to her new life. She loses her uncivilized accent, learns to respond to affection with gracious touches rather than with the bay's "inarticulate grunts", and is slowly moulded into a young lady. She starts calling Lady Fitz Henry "mater", and keeps the homely "mom" for her own jettisoned mother. Her Roman Catholicism becomes weaker. "The welter of folklore" in which she has grown up gives way to "sanity". By 18 she can speak and read French, is a zealous pianist, and can skate, swim, and play tennis, golf, and bridge. This process continues at length, rather tediously for the reader perhaps, but with no disapproval from the novelist, until far into the novel, when we suddenly begin to doubt whether what is happening to the heroine is good. The reader questions it, because the author herself apparently starts having second thoughts and seems to depart from her original conception of the character's development. We hear Mary Immaculate described now by disinterested outsiders as an "awful young snob" and "a prig". The whole Fitz Henry family is described as "prigs". A subtle questioning begins of the whole set of values and behaviour which had hitherto been thought beneficial, and Mary Immaculate acquires an independent life, or rather is perceived by those who know her as a different being. The phrase "a fisherman's daughter" reappears in the novel, and is used to explain her distinctiveness. "We've never seen Mary," David, Philip's brother, says of her, "She comes of people who have lived generations in predatory fight with nature." A disaster involving a young man who loves her sends Mary to London, and after the initial excitement over the wonders of the city, she begins to see even it, the centre of so-called civilization, with "balanced eyes". She sees at the very end of the novel that "If she stayed (in London) long enough she would begin to feel pinched. This need be no more, this could be so much less, than the Cove. There people stood foursquare to natural peril. Here people cowered under man's unnatural threats." This comment at the end of *Cold Pastoral* is the only direct statement in the book that her earlier life, in the cove among people long abandoned, had a validity. Even though we are prepared for it by the suggestions I have noted, it is still a devastating comment, torpedoing all that had been implied earlier of the values of sophisticated society, and qualifying the romantic ending of the book: Mary's anticipated marriage to the doctor who treated her years earlier, Philip Fitz Henry. This conventional ending possibly does violence to the subtle disentanglement of the heroine from the urban values represented by the doctor and his family.

The milieu which in the *Eyes of the Gull* is seen as stifling and destructive, and in *Cold Pastoral* is given, perhaps, only a token, confused recognition, is confronted and explored in Duley's third and best novel, *Highway to Valour.* The title comes from a passage in the Roman poet Ovid: "A highway is made to valour through distress." The book describes the odyssey of a young outport Newfoundlander, Mageila Michelet, through a variety of sufferings to a final situation of equanimity and independence. The essential conflict in this book is similar to that in the earlier novels: a conflict between Mageila's sensitive nature and the environment in which she grows, an environment which makes hard demands of her, almost destroys her, but which eventually shapes and even dominates her. At the beginning of the book a scene occurs which I think deserves to be pondered over. Mageila lives in Feather-the-Nest in southern Newfoundland. Being the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, she has the power to cure, and we see her going along the landwash to the house of a neighbour, Mrs. Butler, to cure the toothache of Mrs. Butler's little son, Bertie. It is November, 1929, on the eve of the great earthquake and tidal wave which caused so much destruction in our province. The settlement is peaceful, cold, lit by the glare of sunset:

> Between sea and settlement she walked slowly, feeling the soundlessness of snow underfoot. "My first snow is delicate," she thought, "soft as a chick, white as a duck on a pond, different altogether from the dense piling up of drifts."

> There were so few people around that she walked alone, coldly bathed in the dwindling glare of the western sky. Marvelling again at the stillness, she savoured the relaxation of a Newfoundlander perpetually tightened from the torment of wind. Now she felt herself walking softly like an Indian, moccasin-clad, easy in body, unblown and unpuckered. Occasionally she paused, knowing she was seeing stark beauty bathed in red. A streak of sunset on snow made her think of blood on white fleece. Her narrow world had brought her close to the slaying knife, the axe, and the barbed hook, striking at the fruit of the sea. Blood, blood, she thought unhappily, visualizing the beauty of the slain lamb and the proud strut of the rooster laid low on the block; but she bade herself look at them, firmly knowing such things must be.

Women, according to George Eliot, "are always in danger of living too exclusively in the affections; and though their affections are the best things they have, they ought also to have some joy in things for their own sake." If this is true, then perhaps we have a clue to the kind of development seen in Margaret Duley's novels—a sensibility emerging from a cocoon of oversensitivity to confront the world's images. At any rate, in the passage quoted there is a new responsiveness to the Newfoundland landscape, to the texture and feel of the environment. How true Margaret Duley's eye was when she learned to look! And what a gift she had for seeing the grim contrasts and cruelties which combine to form the Newfoundland experience. As the scene continues Mageila goes on to Mrs. Butler's house and enters the kitchen. The room is "scrubbed and warm with the perilous comfort of a hand-to-mouth existence." There sits Bertie on the settle, "a six year old boy with eyes small from weeping, a black stocking tied round his head, his face peering out peaked and shadowed with childish grief." Note the contrast between this compassionate depiction of a youngster's suffering, summing up so much of what was wrong with oldtime Newfoundland, and the image of uncouth urchins in *The Eyes of the Gull.* The author has now entered the lives of these ordinary people, whereas previously she had stood aloof and passed judgment. Bertie's pain shows man's vulnerability and helplessness. In opposition to him is the violent face of nature, inescapable and punishing, symbolized in the scene we are now looking at by the tidal wave itself, which horribly and unexpectedly rushes in soon after Bertie falls asleep, viciously tears the house from its foundation, flings it inland, and crushes the whole community of Feather-the-Nest. There you have the contrast which pervades *Highway to Valour*—the fury of a hard and unpredictable nature, and frail men and women struggling to endure and make a living alongside it.

The tidal wave kills Mageila's family. Horrified and sick with despair and hate and fear, appalled more and more "by the comfortless land"

and treacherous ocean, Mageila has still other horrors to face and more pain to try and relieve. The tidal wave disaster gives her a glimpse into her future, where she can see "human burdens that must be endured beyond outer expression." Wherever she looks she sees the rawness of nature and the scars of calamity: her friend Mrs. Slater's grotesquely deformed back, deformed through decades of labour; the antlered heads of two stags, who fought, got entangled and interlocked, and starved to death; a malodorous and bloody whaling station on the Labrador coast, with a "mass of bleeding flesh on the platform in front of the factory"; and still other horrid images. The journey to Labrador which Mageila undertakes in the book is seen as a healing encounter with raw, brutal nature. To Trevor Morgan, the Englishman who loves Mageila, the land is "too rough, too elemental", and the people too "tightened up". But Mageila, through suffering, becomes reconciled. Having feared the sea, she eventually comes to know that her fear is unworthy, deciding that she will not "grovel away from her heritage". Ultimately what does she learn? Trevor Morgan, who seems to understand Mageila less and less throughout the novel, sums it up in this way: "You Newfoundlanders," he exclaims, "So full of acceptance! You are all terribly accepting. It's wrong!" The remark is very similar to one quoted earlier from *The Eyes of the Gull*, one made by Peter Keen to Isobel Pike.

"Accepting" is the correct word to describe Mageila at the end of the novel. But acceptance is not seen here, as it was in *The Eyes of the Gull*, as dumb subservience, making Mageila inferior to Trevor Morgan. Far from being inferior to him at the end of the book, she is clearly above him in understanding of life, in courage, and in her dedication to the welfare of others. Neither is her acceptance an insensibility to pain. It is not unawareness either. It seems to be a kind of knowledge, a sense of belonging and a quality of character brought out in her by the experience of suffering. Perhaps it is the attribute that Wordsworth described in one of his poems as a "wise passiveness". Through distress, Mageila has gone on to valour. At the beginning of the book we see her turn away from the ocean in nausea. At the end we see her "turning (her face) towards the cold sea that was her heritage." Duley does not give Mageila the customary romantic ending of 90 cent novelettes. Instead, we leave her, still young, dedicated to a life of service in remote Newfoundland, possessing a mysterious and dogged devotion of spirit.

Along with this new sense, in *Highway to Valour*, of the value of the traditional way of life in Newfoundland, there is also a growing distaste for the life of privilege that is seen as desirable in *The Eyes of the Gull*. Mageila, like Mary Immaculate in *Cold Pastoral*, eventually goes to live with a wealthy St. John's family, as a governess. Her employer, Mrs. Kirke, is world-weary, "saturated with disillusion", involved in a sham and hopeless marriage. She tells Mageila that there "should be a way to abolish privilege in case it enervates a generation." Her husband is a drunk and drug addict, decayed into premature senility by his filthy habits. The whole society of which the Kirkes form a part is decadent, and the girl Mageila brings into it freshness and energy. However, it is not just the upper caste of St. John's which is seen as unappealing. In the great world outside Hitler is gaining power, and the shadow of war is falling over Europe. Andalusia is no longer inviting.

Let us look, then, at where we belong. This is the point of *Highway to Valour*. It is to the credit of Duley that we see in her book much less sentimentality than is found in the earlier novels and hardly a trace of effusive patriotism or obnoxious xenophobia. Newfoundland is seen for what, in 1941 and centuries before, it was, and in large part perhaps still is. A place where man must take second place to nature, where he must consent to be dominated and subdued, to accept and try to love what is easy to hate. Duley was right in seeing that sentiment is out of place in Newfoundland. Nothing is pretty or gentle or nice about it—these adjectives don't fit our "frayed edge" (as Norman Duncan called it) of the North American Continent. Human activity has not changed it much in three and a half centuries of settlement. The spit of the sea and jagged edges of its grim landscape defy us yet and force us to acquiesce. Acceptance: the note is sounded again and again in our ballad literature, corroborating, or at least supporting, Duley's perceptions in *Highway to Valour*. In the face of "great big seas", caught on what Pratt calls "Neptune's whirligig", what can mere mortals do? Make the best out of what must be an uneasy co-existence in a land which, for all its apparent indifference to human life, is our own.

What Duley tried to do in *Highway to Valour* was to define the Newfoundland character. Her book was thus the most ambitious novel undertaken in Newfoundland and she seems to me to be the only novelist to show an understanding of outport life and to provide some kind of integrated view of the whole of Newfoundland society. In no other writer in Canadian literature is Newfoundland so strongly felt as a presence, a special atmosphere. She is able to recreate what it feels like to live on our old island. Newfoundland is in her bones and sinew. "Whatever Newfoundland has been," she wrote in *The Caribou Hut*, "she was never trivial." The country dwarfs her; she feels surrounded by huge forces, close to the elemental and mysterious. All this is richly communicated in her books. And yet she is also alive to the day to day ordinariness of existence and is able to capture this in small vignettes, with great concreteness and clarity.

When *Highway to Valour* appeared, Newfoundland was in the middle of the second world war, occupying a position of strategic importance such as she had never experienced before or has since. Forces were at work which were threatening and undermining the traditional way of life in many places. A new salaried mode of life was being made available to men and women working on the American bases or willing to go to Canada to work on docks and farms and in mines—dirty work mostly, but there was ready money in it. The bustle and urgency of war increased and tempo of living, and the North American way of life, noisy, rich, and alluring, became visible. Thus Margaret Duley's novels were published at a time of changing values, and were a response to, and a questioning of, new influences stirring in Newfoundland. In the process of articulating a private, anxious quarrel with her own background, she may also have voiced the deep and ambiguous feelings of her people about their heritage, feelings that would be conveyed in the two referenda of 1948.

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