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## Personal Essay Margaret Laurence's Long Journey Home "I Love The Damn Country, That's The Trouble"

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PERSONAL ESSAY

MARGARET LAURENCE'S

LONG JOURNEY HOME

"I LOVE THE DAMN COUNTRY, THAT'S THE TROUBLE"

LYALL H. POWERS

... blindly groping for the beginning of the lifelong voyage toward myself.

—Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life*

The subtitle comes from a letter Margaret Laurence wrote to Al Purdy on 31 October 1968, when she was still vacillating over her second reconciliation with her husband.<sup>1</sup> She was also looking ahead to her return to Canada to be Writer-in Residence at the University of Toronto for the academic year 1969-70, and vacillating over that as well. There is evident reluctance in her confession to Purdy about her attitude to Canada. Resistance to any favorable attitude to that country began early in

her and accounts for two persistent features of her life and career as she struggled to establish her own identity. Her life was punctuated by a series of escapes that resembles a sustained quest, much like Huckleberry Finn's trip down the Mississippi. Initially she wanted to escape the stifling atmosphere of small-town Manitoba and the restrictive identity imposed on her there as "Bob Wemyss' daughter." Like Huck, she wanted to discover a locale that would enable her to find her proper self and that would accommodate and foster that identity.

She first escaped her hometown of Neepawa, Manitoba, when she went off to college in Winnipeg in 1944, and discovered she did belong in a group of writers who published in the periodicals of United College and the University of Manitoba—even though she published under "J.M.W." or "J.M. Wemyss," protectively. Soon after graduation she changed identity by becoming Mrs. Jack Laurence (although her friends still called her

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"Peggy" or "Peg"). She then escaped Canada altogether in 1949, accompanying her husband to England. The "mother country," however, regarded her as a colonial or (egad!) as an American. She escaped further, into exotic Somalia, where Jack had secured a job. En route she noted in her diary her anticipation of adventure and discovery: "... in your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to You is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself."<sup>2</sup>

In Somalia she was certainly a stranger, viewed by the natives as another colonial *memsahib* of the Establishment. Her identity as writer, however, was confirmed as her interest in Somali poetry and folktales prompted her to give them greater longevity by translating them into English—and setting them down in print. Incidentally, she also discovered the importance of tribal organization. Perhaps her consciousness that she was herself without a tribal identity led her to tell her friend B. W. Andrzejewski one night around the campfire that she had Canadian Indian blood.<sup>3</sup> Answers to the questions: "Who am I, really?" and "Where do I really belong?" continued to be increasingly urgent matters for Laurence.

In January of 1957 her mother's failing health summoned her back to Canada. She and Jack and the children remained in Vancouver for five years. She maintained her identity as writer by completing a novel and several stories set in Africa.<sup>4</sup> The need to escape nevertheless asserted itself once again. At the end of 1960, at the urging of a Vancouver friend, she decided to escape from "Peggy" and become "Margaret," the identity under which she published all her adult work. She explained her choice to Adele Wiseman, "I've always detested my name, and only you and Jack and one other very close friend now call me 'Peg,' which I don't mind so much—it was Peggy I hated . . ."<sup>5</sup>

A more drastic escape was her taking the children to England in October 1962 rather

than accompanying Jack to his new job in East Pakistan. A significant Canadian item moved to England with her, however, the manuscript of her first Canadian novel, *The Stone Angel*. She had been working at it during 1961. Jack's unsympathetic response to the novel was a main cause of her departure. In 1964 McClelland & Stewart published *Angel*, her first novel set in "Manawaka," a fictional rendering of Neepawa, Manitoba.

During the rest of the 1960s, Laurence and the children came to feel at home in the rambling Elm Cottage in Bucks, where she continued work on what became known as her Manawaka fiction. Yet her quest for a place of true belonging that would clarify her own identity was focused on Scotland. She visited Glasgow in June 1963, but the most crucial visit was to the Scottish Highlands in April 1965, which led to her article "In Pursuit of My Past on the Road From the Isles."<sup>6</sup> Just a month earlier she had announced she was at work on an essay about the important Somali poet and nationalist leader, the Sayyid Mohamed Abdullah Hassan (1864-1920).<sup>7</sup> The two pieces share significant ideas about tribalism and tradition, and speak to Margaret Laurence's quest for answers to "Who?" and "Where?"

The Sayyid essay compares the Somali people under his leadership confronted by the British Imperial forces, in the early years of the twentieth century, to the Scottish Highlanders confronted by the British at Culloden in 1746 and also to the Canadian Métis under Louis Riel confronted by British Imperial forces at Batoche in 1885. Laurence specifically compares the Sayyid and Riel as leaders of "basically tribal and nomadic people (the camel herders of Somaliland; the Métis buffalo hunters of the Canadian prairies) . . ."<sup>8</sup> The Scots article makes similar associations: the Highland clan system resembled tribal systems anywhere; the Highland Clearances moved her quite as much as the African slave trade and the plight of the Canadian Indian. This association is developed to introduce a

new concern: "he has been taken up and glamorized and must act a part now. The Dance of the Ancestors—slicked-up, prettified, and performed forever in the same way. Nothing must change. . . . Nothing must ever make reference to reality, to real sores, to now."<sup>9</sup>

That development is important not only because it reiterates a constant theme in Laurence's fiction—that one accept in life the phenomenon of mutability (and its ultimate stage, mortality)—but because it signals a discovery in her quest for identity, part of the answer to "Where?"

The Scots article traces Laurence's recognition that Scottish history is evidently not hers, but that other ghosts lurking there speak to her in a special way—the names of places. Names like Sutherland, Selkirk, Bannerman, Kildonan she recognized as names of Winnipeg's streets. Similarly, "The Poem and the Spear" led also to the same spot in Manitoba—Winnipeg—through its reference to Louis Riel, for between the last two street names in the brief list is the omitted Seven Oaks—commemorating the Battle of 1869, the first Riel "rebellion."<sup>10</sup> In spite of the apparent irony that her quest into Scotland led back to Winnipeg, she returned again and again to the Highlands. Was the purposes of those forays to acquaint herself thoroughly with her true sources, or to be reminded of her roots on the other side of the Atlantic? Whatever the purpose, her Manawaka fiction continued successfully with two novels about Stacey and Rachel Cameron, *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers*. *A Jest of God*, published in 1966, led to two visits to the locale of those roots.

In summer and fall of 1966, her Canadian publisher gave her a publicity tour across Canada for two and a half months and the next year she returned briefly to accept the Governor General's Award for *Jest*. Back at Elm Cottage, she turned at once to the recalcitrant material of *The Fire-Dwellers*. Her renewed experiences of Canada revived her feeling that she should go back, if only to hear "the sound of my own speech,"<sup>11</sup> which she

felt she was losing. She was unable make the trip, however, because of the conflict among her roles as wife, mother, and writer, and the obligations they imposed.

Her resolution of the dilemma was to accept reconciliation with Jack late in October 1967, and she felt justified in that decision as *The Fire-Dwellers*, began to flow. Even so, a series of events in 1968 seemed to vex that justification while they strengthened her sense of the importance of tribalism and cast various light on her identity as a writer. In April she took the children to Scotland, but this time making the significant exception of going to the Lowlands, to Burntisland and "the village in Fifeshire where my people came from,"<sup>12</sup> she informs Wiseman in May—as though to counter her claims in "The Road From the Isles." In July she notes in a letter to Al Purdy her fondness for the bagpipes, claiming: "I feel it is still my tribal music".<sup>13</sup>

For the now-successful writer, the nagging "Where?" and "Who?" persist. At the end of the summer, contemplating her temporary repatriation, Laurence tells Purdy she hasn't accepted Thomas Wolfe's dictum "You can't go home again" and immediately challenges it: "On the other hand, is it so certain that one can't?"<sup>14</sup> She wonders how she can think of leaving Jack and the children behind as she goes off to Toronto; then that revealing *cri de coeur*, "I love the damn country, that's the trouble." But is it *Home*? She and the children also "love this goddam ramshackle house . . . we've made a home here" in Elm Cottage, and while she doubts she will ever be entirely at home anywhere, she tells Adele "I do love this place more than I can remember loving any other place except the house I was born in."<sup>15</sup> Surely a significant exception, suggesting it wouldn't take much to tip the scales: she can almost see herself there.

That idea was almost realized. Before she left England she saw the film "Rachel, Rachel," developed faithfully and beautifully from *A Jest of God*. Adele Wiseman and Al Purdy both reported their approval to Laurence in

the closing weeks of 1968. She herself liked very much what Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman had done: it looked like home. She was struck by signs in the movie like "Manawaka Theatre" and especially by the cemetery and the Cameron family stone, black granite: "that goddam stone could have been my family's burial stone," she exclaimed to Al Purdy. And she was reminded of her last visit to Neepawa, in the summer of 1966, and of her thoughts at the gravestone, of "my father and mother being skeletons somewhere there, quite meaninglessly, for if they exist at all (and they do—all the ancestors do) it is not in crumbling calcium bone but in my head."<sup>16</sup>

Motivated, at least in part, by the film and the memories it awakened, Margaret took up the seven Vanessa MacLeod stories, reviewed them, and in March of 1969, wrote "Jericho's Brick Battlements" to conclude the collection she would call *A Bird in the House*.<sup>17</sup> She told Al Purdy that the stories added up to a character sketch of her "puritanical authoritarian pioneer" Grandfather Simpson: "What a terrible man he was. It's taken me years to forgive him and to see what I owe him."<sup>18</sup> The concluding story ends with Vanessa, now forty, returned to the brick house; she observes, "I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins." The collection is especially important as it spans the period of publication of the other three Manawaka novels.

The avowedly autobiographical *A Bird in the House*, traces the childhood and youth of Vanessa, focusing on the important influences in her life. That retrospection was developed while Laurence was exploring the possibilities of her other Manawaka characters, Hagar (Currie) Shipley and the Cameron sisters, Rachel and Stacey. That journey of exploration, from 1963 to 1969, was a successful quest for the identity of those four heroines, who chafed under the restraints of small-town Manitoba and who left to "find themselves" in another locale. Vanessa's epiphany results from her return and reconciliation with the old man or, rather, with his spirit. Margaret later told

me that she "could never have finished that collection if I hadn't gone back to Neepawa that summer." While working on "Jericho's Brick Battlements" she told Purdy it would be "the last thing I ever write about that prairie town."<sup>19</sup> It was as if that story was the equivalent of Margaret's reconciliation with Canada and she no longer needed the assistance of her fiction to answer her "Where?"—the locale that would accept and nourish her identity—as soon as she could confidently answer "Who?"<sup>20</sup>

Help with finding that answer came during the first days of May 1969 with Jack's request for a divorce. Shocking news but wonderfully liberating for her. Margaret had two quick responses to the request, significant and intimately related: (1) now I can be my real self ("another psychic change . . . to self-image of professional writer . . . that beings as they say, the REAL ME. Which I always knew") and (2) now I can go home ("I shall be so much more free to return to Canada").<sup>21</sup> Her experiences in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada during 1969-70 confirmed her resolve to make her home in her native land, and in late 1969 she bought a piece of the country on the banks of the Otonabee River near Peterborough, Ontario, and a shack in which to finish her work. The rest of 1970 was sterile, as she fondly pursued the wraith of a novel set in Africa. Her pen was revitalized, in part by the publication that year of *A Bird in the House*, and one spring morning in 1971 she simply began writing her last Manawaka novel, which she knew would be called *The Diviners*. "What I was avoiding," she would later recall, "was the necessity of coming closer to home, closer to myself."<sup>22</sup>

Laurence's literary career records her own quest for answers to "Who?" and "Where?" and traces her gradual discovery that the *past* is not to be fled, only its dead hand. The flight of her heroines looking for those answers culminates, in *The Diviners*, in Morag's retracing Laurence's own steps to Scotland and finding, like Laurence herself, that the old country offers an epiphany that sends her

home.<sup>23</sup> The well-named McRaith speaks as representative of that country, but he is not her true love, although almost so: he has lost the Gaelic yet his voice retains the echo of it. The voice that never had the Gaelic yet seems also to contain its echo and speaks to her of that country mythically is the voice of Christie Logan. Brooke has also lost the Indian language he spoke as a child (Hindi), but it was never really his, so no echo remains—except in the plaintive “Minoo” who is also lost. Jules Tonnerre has been doubly deprived having lost both Cree and French; yet like Christie, he too rehearses the myths of his ancestry, the Tonnerre participation at Seven Oaks and Batoche. What the Thunder said.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout her Manawaka fiction the Scottish theme is constantly present and it is accompanied by a complementary theme that steadily increases in importance as the saga unfolds, that is the role of the Canadian Native People—“Indians,” usually “half-beeds” or Métis. Associated with them is a series of surrogate Indians, also outsiders-like Huckleberry Finn in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Bram Shipley is described as an Indian and freely mingles with half-breeds in *The Stone Angel*; Nick Kazlik and his father in *A Jest of God* also have Indian features; in *The Fire Dwellers* Luke Venturi is constantly in an “Indian sweater” and even Buckle Fennick looks like an Iroquois. The Tonnerres, Manawaka’s Métis family, gradually emerge from the peripheral shadows in *Angel*, to appear as Valentine in *The Fire-Dwellers* and Piquette in *A Bird in the House*, and come to prominence with Jules in *The Diviners*. Jules joins his mixed strains with Morag’s. A figure of conciliation, he represents not only his Cree and French ancestry but also that new identity he assumes in his kilt of the Cameron tartan that he wears to Dieppe.

Together Morag and Jules create, freely, the natural child, their love-child, Piquette Tonnerre Gunn (or Piquette Gunn Tonnerre, as Jules calls her, the order does not matter, the contiguity matters much). She is the equivalent of a later version of the Canadian

anthem Morag learned in school, “The lily, thistle, shamrock, rose/ And maple leaf forever.” She inherits the artistic talents of her parents. As Wes Mantooth points out in his essay in this issue, Laurence’s songs are also artistic formulations of her history, an equivalent of the original historical data, like a translation of the original oral record in a lost tongue, which maintains the essence of what needs to be remembered. Pique leaves at last to seek out her father’s people, her tribe too. Laurence urges that the thread linking Past and Present must be interwoven with the perpendicular thread—the warp to that woof—that links Here and There, Us and Them, and that such knowledge comes with understanding of “What means *Home*.”

Laurence had proposed, that “the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself.”<sup>25</sup> As Nora Foster Stovel notes in her essay in this collection and as Laurence’s unpublished Preface to *Heart of a Stranger* states, “those essays . . . end, as most outer and inner journeys end, in a homecoming.” Laurence had told Al Purdy in September 1968 that she hadn’t learned “you can’t go home again” but added, “who says you can’t?” In *The Diviners* Morag has a more definite answer: “You have to go home again, in some way or other”<sup>26</sup>—to be sure of the answers to “Who?” and “Where?”

Once freed to be her real self Margaret did indeed “go home again,” back to the brick house which was once a mortuary—not the Brick House, once a mortuary, that was the home of her Grandfather Simpson in Neepawa and figures largely in *A Bird in the House*, but one in Lakefield, Ontario (north of Peterborough).<sup>27</sup> That house is appropriately portrayed in the earliest illustrations, by Muriel Wood, in the first edition of *The Olden Days Coat*, Laurence’s last piece of Canadian fiction.<sup>28</sup> In this beautiful little fantasy, or perhaps myth, donning the navy-blue coat transports the ten-year-old Sal into the Past, the days of her Gran’s childhood, to meet her Gran at age ten. Or is it herself she meets?



FIG. 1. Margaret Laurence, Lakefield, Ontario, Thanksgiving, October 1986. Courtesy of Lyall H. Powers.

Was it memory or portent? It doesn't matter, for the current flows both ways—as it does in the story of Hagar Shipley's encounter with her self, two generations earlier, as Hagar Currie in *The Stone Angel*, and as it does in front of Morag's dwelling, near McConnell's Landing in *The Diviners*.

\* \* \*

My wife Ret and I were to visit Margaret in Lakefield during Thanksgiving week 1986. She had added a request to her invitation, "Find Borland"—our dear friend Jack Cameron Borland—from college days and the first love of her adult life. I had been out of touch for 30 years but found him; he joined us at the brick house. We hadn't been together for almost 40 years. He didn't know "Margaret"; he called her "Peg" as he always had and she called him "Borland." Johnnie Walker kept us company, and we talked about old times as though we hadn't seen each other for a week. Margaret recalled a song that Borland's mother

used to sing; she sang it for us, with us—"Will ye no come back again?" We did, Borland and I, early in January 1987, this time to hear "The Flowers of the Forest." It filled the nave like thunder.

#### NOTES

1. Margaret Laurence—Al Purdy: *A Friendship in Letters, Selected Correspondence*, ed. John Lennox (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993), p. 103.

2. Margaret Laurence, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1963), p. 1.

3. Interview with Professor and Mrs. Andrzejewski, London, 1989. Professor Andrzejewski stated that he thought her Indian background was responsible for her keen interest in Somali native practices. That was not the only occasion Margaret claimed "Indian" identity or on which it was attributed to her.

4. *This Side Jordan* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960); "Uncertain Flowering," *Story: The Magazine of the Short Story in Book Form* 4 (1953): 9-34; "Drummer of All the World," *Queen's Quarterly* 62 (Winter 1956): 487-504; "The Merchant of Heaven," *Prism International* 1 (September 1959): 52-74; "The Perfume Sea," *Winter's Tales* 6, ed. A. D. Maclean (London: Macmillan, 1960): 83-120; "Godman's Master," *Prism International* 3 (Spring 1960): 46-64; "A Gourdful of Glory," *Tamarack Review* (Autumn 1960): 5-20; "The Spell of the Distant Drum," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 5 May 1962, 24-25; "The Rain-Child," *Winter's Tales* 8, ed. A.D. Maclean (New York: St. Martin's, 1962): pp. 105-42.

5. Margaret Laurence to Adele Wiseman, 22 January 1961. Wiseman Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Scott Library, York University, Canada. See also *Selected Letters of Margaret Laurence and Adele Wiseman*, ed. John Lennox and Ruth Panofsky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 129.

6. M. Laurence, "In Pursuit of My Past on the Road From the Isles," *Maclean's*, 2 May 1966.

7. Laurence to Wiseman, 19 March 1965, Wiseman Papers (note 5 above). The essay was published as "The Poem and the Spear" in Margaret Laurence, *Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), pp. 44-76.

8. M. Laurence, "The Poem and the Spear" (note 7 above), p. 74.

9. M. Laurence, "In Pursuit of My Past" (note 6 above): 26g.

10. M. Laurence, "The Poem and the Spear" (note 7 above).

11. Laurence to Wiseman, 24 March and 29 May 1966, Wiseman Papers (note 5 above).

12. Laurence to Wiseman, 4 May 1968, *Selected Letters* (note 5 above), p. 243.

13. Laurence to Purdy, 17 July 1968, Purdy Archives, Queen's University Library, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

14. *Ibid.*, 4 September 1968.

15. Laurence to Wiseman, 26 November 1968, *Selected Letters* (note 5 above), pp. 277-78.

16. Laurence to Purdy, 9 December 1968, *A Friendship in Letters* (note 1 above), p. 108.

17. M. Laurence, *A Bird in the House: Stories* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1970).

18. Laurence to Purdy, 10 March 1969, Purdy Archives (note 13 above).

19. *Ibid.*, 5 March 1969.

20. For a contemplation on this seemingly Canadian obsession, see Northrop Frye, who wrote in 1956, "It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes that confront that identity. It is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" See his "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada," *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian*

*Imagination* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971) p. 219.

21. Laurence wrote virtually the same pair of responses to Adele Wiseman and Al Purdy. The first quotation is from her letter to Purdy, 24 May 1969, *A Friendship in Letters* (note 1 above). The second from her letter of 10 June 1969 to Adele. See also letters of 25 May and 27 May 1969 to Wiseman and 6 June 1969 to Purdy.

22. M. Laurence, *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989), p. 198.

23. "Tonnerre" means "thunder" in French. The voice of God is said to be audible in thunder, and T.S. Eliot thus calls the last section of his *The Waste Land* "What the Thunder said."

24. M. Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974).

25. M. Laurence, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (note 2 above), p. 1.

26. M. Laurence, *The Diviners* (note 23 above), p. 248.

27. M. Laurence, *Dance on Earth* (note 22 above), pp. 205-6, 209-10.

28. M. Laurence, *Olden Days Coat* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), pp. 2-3, 11.