

"Nova Scotia is my Dwelen Pias": The Life and Work of Thomas Raddall

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cision making which affected workers most directly.²⁷

Studies in these areas will further considerably the search for a new synthesis of Canadian history. The long-overdue insertion of a class analysis into Canadian historical writing already promises overviews which transcend the refreshing and liberating pluralism of the 1960s calls for attention to region, ethnicity and class. It should be increasingly clear, however, that these so-called "limited identities" are neither "limited" nor analytically separable. No historical notion of class (and there can be no other useful notion) can fail to incorporate ethnicity and place. Ramsay Cook's recent worry that the new "Golden Age" was already ending seems quite premature. Working class studies in the next few years will help transform qualitatively our view of the Canadian past.

GREGORY S. KEALEY

27 For a discussion of this and other important issues in working class studies, see David Montgomery, "Gutman's Nineteenth-Century America: A Review Essay", forthcoming. *Labour History*. For an attempt to discuss these issues in the Canadian context, see my "The Orange Order in Toronto: Religious Riot and the Working Class" in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrion, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 13 - 34 and the final three chapters of my dissertation, *op. cit.*

"Nova Scotia is My Dwelen Plas": The Life and Work of Thomas Raddall

When, in 1968, Thomas Raddall, then aged 65, unhesitatingly refused an invitation to become lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia, one major undertaking still remained to him — the composing of his memoirs. He was setting himself a formidable task, for autobiography is one literary form that is nearly always read with as much suspicion as anticipation. While we all know how frequently, and with what uncertainty, we tend to re-order our memories and opinions of ourselves, we unreasonably demand of the autobiographer extraordinary powers of recollection, self-knowledge, and fair-mindedness. In fact, we expect less. After all — we wonder — how far is the narrator to be trusted in what he says? How important to our fullest understanding of him is all that he leaves unsaid? Is his tale more self-serving than it is illuminating? And of those individuals most inclined to present the public with the stories of their own lives, is there anyone — apart, perhaps, from the politician or the general — who views himself with more self-esteem than a writer? Indeed, few generals or politicians enjoy as well-honed a bent for internecine climbing, so consuming an appetite for acclaim and rank. And when, late in the day, the opportunity arises to pay off old scores, the writer is likely to visit his enemies, alive and dead, with a malignity so pure, so direct, that it might be the envy of a Sicilian bandit. Furthermore, the writer lives by invention; with him, factual evidence will usually succumb to the temptations of metamorphosis. In his

most recent novel, Robertson Davies has a character say: “But what’s an autobiography? Surely it’s a romance of which one is oneself the hero. Otherwise why write the thing?”¹ The fellow has a point, of course; nevertheless, it is one likely to reinforce doubts already held about the dependability of a story-teller’s autobiography.

Happily, most such forebodings are found to be groundless as one reads Thomas H. Raddall’s *In My Time: A Memoir* (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1976). The author originally composed his memoirs — which are largely compiled from diaries he kept from the time he went to sea as a boy — “not for publication but to accompany my papers for the information of future students” (p. 362). Before long, however, he was persuaded to publish them. As this former seafarer, wireless operator, Sable Islander, bookkeeper, amateur anthropologist, soldier, journalist, professional novelist, and student of history brings his personal narrative to a close, he comments: “My life has not been dull and I trust that this account of it has not been, either” (p. 364). One concurs. Raddall’s autobiography, while not always as revealing, or as balanced in its form as one might wish, is certainly pleasurable reading; and there can be no doubt — which is ironic, considering his reputation among the *literati* — that his passage has been less conventional, more truly independent than have been the careers of all but a very few Canadian writers in this century.

Raddall was born a Man of Kent in the married quarters of the British Army School of Musketry at Hythe in 1903, where his father, a warrant-officer in The Royal Marines, was an instructor. Raddall “learned to walk in the barrack square” (p. 13). Visible along the Channel shore stood decaying Martello towers, erected a century before against the invasion threats of the Corsican Tyrant, and Raddall tells how “As a small boy in Hythe my mind was filled with soldiers and the sounds of war” (p. 19). Drums and fifes, pipe-clay and scarlet, cordite on the air — the orderly, well-intentioned swagger of Empire — made indelible impressions upon Raddall, as would be shown years later in his view of North American history and in the imaginative world of his fiction. His father was no common roaring sergeant, but a man of shrewd intelligence and foresight, and one ambitious for the well-being of his family. In 1913 he welcomed the opportunity to become an instructor with the Canadian Army, and in May of that year the Raddalls crossed the Atlantic to his new posting in Halifax. In 1918 Lt.-Col. Thomas Raddall died leading his battalion of The Winnipeg Rifles into battle at Amiens. The judicious yet affectionate portrait of this military man is one of the finest things in the book. Fine also is the evocation of Halifax during the war years; especially unforgettable in its personal immediacy is Raddall’s precise, dramatic description of the 1917 Explosion. This catastrophe and his father’s death in battle — “In spite of all the prayers at home!” — caused

¹ Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders* (Toronto, 1975), p. 289.

Raddall to reject religious faith: "It was better to face things on your own feet and with eyes wide open, watchful for trouble and maybe a bit of luck here and there along the way" (p. 44). Too poor to go to university, he became a wireless operator and from 1919 to 1922 served on the Partridge Island, Pictou, Sable Island, and Camperdown stations and aboard three ships. With an eye to his future, he resigned from the Marconi service, attended a business college, qualified as a bookkeeper, and took a job with a lumber company on the Mersey River. Thus in 1923 began his long, intimate, and rewarding association with Liverpool and Queen's County, Nova Scotia.

The years between 1923 and 1940 saw the making of Raddall and are vividly recalled. In that Nova Scotia backwater, his efforts to write and to publish took shape and prospered. By the end of this period his first book of fiction had appeared, with an introduction by Lord Tweedsmuir, and his stories were known to readers of *Blackwood's*, *Maclean's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Here concomitantly developed his abiding interest in the history of his Province and, to a lesser degree, of the Dominion, and we learn how and why he learned all he did about the Micmacs, pre-Loyalist settlers, Loyalists, privateering, and the economic diseases which befell Canada's Atlantic littoral following the age of sail; here also is the account of his unearthing of that splendid document, the diary of Simeon Perkins. These years, seemingly the fullest of Raddall's life, aroused his interest in moose-hunting and fishing, logging, rum-running, sex, the machinations of business, and backwoods politics. His character solidified: he speaks of the granite determination with which he compartmentalised his days and nights into job, writing, and an often troubled marriage. When the War came, he served as an officer in The West Novas, worked as a journalist and as a script-writer for radio, affirmed his stature as a novelist, and won the earliest of the many honours that would be bestowed upon him:

Despite a war, the years from 1935 to 1950 were the happiest of my life. In that period I achieved my dream of becoming a widely read and approved Canadian author, beginning with short stories, going on to novels, and reaching something like world notice with *The Nymph and the Lamp* . . . Then, too, I was charged with energy and getting a huge enjoyment whether at work or play (p. 338).

The remainder of Raddall's memoir — it reaches to 1975 — is not as appealing. Failing health, domestic anxieties, deaths of friends and relatives took their toll upon his spirit. The final third of *In My Time* focuses primarily on Raddall's uneasy, sometimes rancorous relations with publishers, other writers, and academics. In 1953 Jack McClelland confidently told Raddall that he was Canada's outstanding, and best-selling, author. But with the 1960s came a transformation in the country's sensibility, changing tastes among the reading audience, and the rise to prominence of a pride of new, fashionable, less conventional novelists. West of the Maritimes, Raddall's reputation perished; there, when not a forgotten man, he was regarded as a minor talent, as a mere 'popular' historical novelist. Raddall

never acknowledges as much, and on the memoir's final page says: "my books have sold to date about 2,500,000 copies in various languages . . . I never got rich, but I was able to educate my children, to travel a bit, and to enjoy my life as much as any man can" (p. 364).

Whatever reservations the reader may finally have about the book, one is moved to admiration by the thorough documentation, the unswerving candour where abrasive matters are concerned, and a prose style that is strong, lucid, and serviceable. The author's ingenuous portrait of his own character and temperament — of a disposition as much elegiac as severely and ambitiously practical — convinces the reader that he has come to know Thomas Raddall well indeed. Listen to this voice:

In my seafaring, and later in Milton, I was seeing things and people and a way of life that was passing rapidly, for the 1914-18 war and its tremendous effects were changing everything. At sea I had seen the last of the square-rigged sailing ships. I saw the last real log drive come down the Mersey River and the closing of the last water-driven sawmills. Although I was only in my teens and twenties when these things were passing I felt a pang, for they seemed to me full of the romance of another time (p. 154).

Halifax was never the same to me after 1946. In one way or another nearly all of my friends there departed, taking with them the lively and stimulating atmosphere I had enjoyed so much. From my private lair on the South Shore, at long and longer intervals, I made fleeting visits. As the years went by I saw most of the familiar city demolished to make way for tall gleaming monstrosities of ferro-concrete. They reminded me of the gleaming fungus growths that spring up and flourish on a fallen tree in the forest (p. 245).

Mere nostalgia? — the commonplace complaints of a reactionary whose best years are over? Not so. Not at all. Raddall, it is worth emphasising, was in his prime before Nova Scotia became Americanised. His Canada was that of the Red Ensign, of the last decades when connections with Great Britain mattered to much of this country and kept it distinct from the United States. And although modernity — 'progress' — was then in the offing and is now full-blown, one is sharply reminded by this book that Nova Scotia then possessed a heterogeneity and a strength of character it has since largely lost. Raddall's reminiscences of his life at sea and on Sable Island are fascinating; but so are those he gives us of a vanished Halifax: ". . . I had talked and (much more important) listened to the folk who lived there — stevedores, wharfingers, junkshop keepers, bootleggers, whores, thieves, old seamen down on their luck, boardinghouse keepers — in fact all of the human medley to be found only on Water Street, of which the office and shop workers and churchgoers of the port knew nothing whatever" (p. 96). Ordinary people such as these, and the loggers, guides, and Indians who were his friends on the South Shore, had often led extraordinary lives, and

Raddall's closeness to them contributed significantly to the life of his fiction — and to his masterful *Halifax, Warden of the North*. Once, he was shown a South Shore privateer's book of sailing directions for the Caribbean that held this inscription:

Francis Kempton is my nam
Seaman is my stashon
Nova Scotia is my dwelen plas
And Inland is my nashon. (p. 233)

The sentiments expressed are not far removed from those felt by Raddall.

A robust nostalgia grounded in historical curiosity was clearly a dominant trait and quality of Raddall. But he was also, as he openly shows us, stubborn, self-righteous, and unforgiving in his verdicts on persons and institutions that displeased him. Consider this sketch of one of Fredericton's Famous Sons:

To my mind Charles G.D. Roberts, the acknowledged dean of Canadian literature at this time, was an amusing poseur. His early verse was good, and so were some of his nature stories, but his other writing was mostly rubbish. He had lived abroad for many years, supposedly on the largesse of moneyed women, and returned to Canada at the age of sixty-five when wealthy ladies were no longer interested in his verses or whatever else it was that pleased them in his younger years. Since his return . . . he had sponged on his friends and acquaintances until finally they got him a monthly allowance from a newly raised fund for indigent Canadian writers (p. 182).

We also find equally scathing and, more often than not, amusing vignettes of the following: CBC film crews, the Canadian Authors Association, "Grey Owl", publishers and the publicity tours they lay on for their authors, reviewers, *Maclean's Magazine*, and assorted academics. The trouble is that in places Raddall's tone, his deepwater choler, may cause him to be taken less seriously than he wished, even when his target is as deserving a one as the Canada Council:

. . . I was dismayed to see the result where writers were concerned. The ease of getting a Canada Council grant drew a swarm of greedy free-loaders, including professionals well able to finance themselves, a flock of shallow cadgers eager to enjoy a year or two in London or Paris . . . most of them without talent or energy enough to write an interesting postcard, let alone a readable book. I suppose one should forget about those and think only of the talented writers who do need help and get it; but when I look back at some of the names on the Canada Council grant lists, I can't avoid the sensation in my stomach which, on my first voyage, made me run to the lee rail (p. 285).

Given the nature of Raddall's boyhood and the years he afterwards spent in solitary labour learning his craft, it is easy to sympathise with his jaundiced attitude toward literary mandarins in Upper Canada, New York, and Boston. Yet it is truly unfortunate that so much of the latter half of *In My Time* is devoted to reports of battles long ago with Doubleday, Little, Brown, and the Toronto

sahibs. For the reader who comes to this autobiography hoping — indeed, expecting — to learn about Raddall's conception of our history, or about his insights concerning characterization or the structuring of a novel, meets with disappointment. There is hardly any such articulation. Who are the historians he most admires? Why? How does he account for his inspired creation of Isabel Jardine, the protagonist of one of this country's outstanding novels, *The Nymph and the Lamp*? We are not to know. Presumably — and there is internal evidence to support this judgment — Raddall, for all his creative giftedness, harbours a very Canadian reluctance to discuss ideas or the arts unaffectedly. And no doubt such ingrained misgivings were stiffened over the years by the offhanded or scornful responses by reviewers to his historical novels in Montreal, Toronto, and points west. That American novelist and man of letters, Gore Vidal, has said:

I am predisposed to like the novel dealing with history and find it hard to understand why this valuable genre should be so much disdained. After all, every realistic novel is historical. But somehow, describing what happened last summer at Rutgers is for our solemn writers a serious subject, while to re-create Alexander the Great is simply frivolous.²

No Canadian critic of standing has yet shown such discernment, and nowadays Raddall is dismissed by those who shape literary taste for being only a writer of "escape fiction". There is no space here to mount a literary defence of Raddall, other than to state that he is Canada's foremost historical novelist. *Roger Sudden*, *His Majesty's Yankees*, *Pride's Fancy*, and *The Governor's Lady* may not be as excellent examples of the genre as are Vidal's *Burr*, or Kenneth Roberts' *Northwest Passage* or *Oliver Wiswell*, or Conrad Richter's superb trilogy *The Trees*, *The Fields*, and *The Town*, but they are novels of sound, often meticulous historical research and imaginative vigour.

If, however, one is not susceptible to the merits of the historical novel and, pejoratively, fixes Raddall in the unfashionable company of Scott, Stevenson, Kipling, Buchan, and Roberts, it is still necessary to bear in mind two things. Raddall wanted to live by his writing and, unlike nearly all Canadians who have shared the ambition, he succeeded. He was a professional writer; and he never asked for, never received, money from government or other sources. He wrote fiction with the purpose of selling it, an aim which was not in his case synonymous with what is so often described by English professors and the *avant-garde* as artistic prostitution. One would also do well to remember other, even more enduring accomplishments: his authoritative chronicle of Halifax; his acute and spirited popular study of Canada from 1763 to 1850, *The Path of Destiny*; the classics among his short stories; and, of course, *The Nymph and the*

² Gore Vidal, *Matters of Fact and of Fiction: Essays 1973-1976* (New York, 1977), p. 18.

Lamp. Raddall won Governor General's Awards on three occasions, twice for non-fiction (for the two books of history just mentioned) and once for fiction. Other honours came his way, among them the offer of official eminence in his home Province.

The arduous development of the man as writer, the negotiations with editors and publishers, the eventual awards, the fulfilled career — all this will no doubt be of use to those future students Raddall had in mind. However, these apparently crucial pieces of information constitute what is predictable in the memoir. What is distinctive, what makes this autobiography engrossing, is that it shows us how active, how crowded, how protean one man's life can be. Thomas Raddall wrote books that are a contribution to the culture of Canada. But he was also an expert marine telegrapher; he knew storms at sea between Cape Race and Ireland; he fought with his fists on Sable Island, and lost his virginity at a Queen's County corn boil; he could handle a canoe or build a fire in the rain, learned the art of calling moose, and commanded men in time of war. The story of his own life is as captivating as any in his fiction.

ROBERT COCKBURN

Survival — New Views on Francophone Minorities in Canada

In the late 1960s, René Levesque shocked Canadians by repudiating Quebec's supposed responsibility for the cultural welfare of the francophone minorities in the other provinces. While Levesque's disinterest was in keeping with Quebec's historic position, he was one of the first to argue openly that it was not worth sacrificing Quebec's quest for independence for the sake of an ideal which envisioned a country built upon absolute equality between its two founding peoples and which foresaw the cultural survival of these scattered groups. Levesque wrote that "this slow moving idealism enters the race like a utopian tortoise trudging along after the hare of galloping assimilation. But unlike the hare in the fable, this one is already winning . . ."¹ Anguished cries from Quebec's cultural hinterlands were immediately heard. Acadians in New Brunswick, Franco-Ontarians, French Canadians in western Canada all provided concrete evidence to repudiate Levesque. Their spokesmen, as well as those from Canada's academic communities, all protested that groups which had already survived countless vicissitudes would not now be overwhelmed by assimilative pressures. Articles in Mason Wade's *Cana-*

1 René Levesque, *An Option For Quebec* (Toronto, 1968), p. 84.