

Voyeuristic Voyageur. Landscapes of Time and A Figure on the Move. Alastair Macdonald.

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Voyeuristic Voyageur

Landscapes of Time. Alastair Macdonald. St. John's: Breakwater, 1994.
63p. \$9.95.

A Figure on the Move. Alastair Macdonald. St. John's: Breakwater, 1991.
120 p. \$5.95

VALERIE LEGGE

"Prisoned/ in the strange necessity/ of wrong/ we/ need a magic./ even rough./ to set us free./ journeying to lie somewhere./ round what corner." ("Handel Mason")

IN "DOUBLE FEATURE" (*Landscapes of Time*), the speaker, watching film stars from his "life-ago boyhood", wonders, "Who are these aged voyeurs"? An awareness of the complexity of perspective and the politics of looking (what contemporary feminists and film critics call the "male gaze") is a common thread in all of Alastair Macdonald's works. As the poet observes in "Flight of the Foiled Geese" (*A Figure on the Move*), "we live/ in contexts, or dimensional frames"; through art, with its unique turning of the lens, we are able to "explode" these restricting spaces. In a meditative marriage song titled "Wedding Day", the speaker watches an old woman who in turn is watching a wedding in progress. Nearby two photographers "wait in the afternoon" to capture the happy moment for posterity. The high hopes of the young couple are somewhat undermined by the unsettling gaze of the old woman and the speaker's rather disturbing description of "Swans on the water/ ... white gliding question marks./ lovely, brutal, and lust-hungry./ in the moving, shadowed sunlight of a day/ tricked out/ with the painful beauty of summer."

Born and educated in the United Kingdom, Macdonald came to Newfoundland in 1955 to teach at Memorial University in the Department of English Language and Literature. Despite such a staid profession, he remained throughout his years of residency in Canada a "figure on the move", a cosmopolitan poet compelled to

capture what writer Michael Ondaatje calls "immaculate moment[s]", those mysterious flashes of glory or insight ("Tamara Desni" and "The Holiday") that are rarely glimpsed but, when glimpsed, must be held fiercely in memory and celebrated in song. Like the French impressionist painters to whom he so often refers, Macdonald realizes how fleeting these glimpses can be; so he aims, through image, mood and rhythm, to convey the essence of things felt as much as seen. This process is described in "Isola Bella" as "Time past ... to be caught, stilled in snapshot" and in "Art" as "a brush with insight/ [which] has been caught."

His landscapes are often urbane, sophisticated "places of passage" between two worlds, North America and Europe; and they depict the rich pageantry of a life fully lived. The poet is the tourist sitting in European cafés or strolling through medieval churches in the south of France; he is the sunbather sauntering along the French Riviera; or the learned traveller exploring gardens, monuments and palace rooms in Italy and Greece. And like the tourist-traveller with his ever-present camera, the itinerant poet collects still shots as they come into focus, then "fade-out" to be replayed at a later date. At ease in several languages, he often reaches for a foreign phrase when English fails to convey a particular nuance; in "Miniskirt", *farouche* expresses more fully than any English equivalent the awkward, sullen sexiness of a "Child./ grown to the fancied daring/ of sixteen."

"The Quality of Light" demonstrates a painter's ability to capture through elemental images sharp impressions conveying the rich emotional life of landscapes imagined, dreamed, anticipated, or passed through en route to our "farther destinies": "September moon's cold sheen/ of silver late at night/ would fall/ like summer sun/ across my bed." All senses, all impressions are "upgathered, brought along/ to the new place".

Most of Macdonald's poems perpetuate the romantic notion of the artist as a solitary figure, someone "detached and yet concerned" ("The Holiday"), deliberately, perhaps even necessarily, distanced from others. As an indulged and well-loved child in his grandparents' house, the speaker in "The Garden Seat" would play a game of watching "figures moving" toward the house; years later as an adult he simultaneously assumes the role of the moving figure and the figure watching. What is not lost in the passage of time is the purity of vision, the clarity with which, as a child, he had viewed the world. "December Twenty-Fourth" describes a snowplough as "some thunderous man o' war, wasp-yellow/ with wheels high as cliffs"; the adult speaker again has captured a child's delight at intrusive "superstructures", and a child's tendency to exaggerate size and sound.

Central in Macdonald's work are several motifs: yearnings for what American beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti calls a "gone world" and Randall Jarrell "the lost world"; the passage of time with its paradox of change and continuity; the "strange co-existence of things" ("Bypass"); the significance of things intangible which journey with us; the magic of vision and insight; childhood as a time of wonder

and innocence; the artist's essential aloneness; and humankind's search for something other than that which is.

His work includes free verse, fixed forms, popular songs, pastorals, and lyrics. The more elegiac poems require slow and mindful reading. Irregular line lengths, unexpected inversions, compoundings, juxtapositions, interlocking forms, and functional shifts impede the pace of many of his poems, compelling the reader to pause, to ponder, to weigh each word carefully. Cataloguing and compounding, celebrations of childhood and the green world of nature remind the reader of Dylan Thomas; the coining of new words, the inquiry into the "painful beauty" of the world, and sometimes strangely familiar rhythms, cadences and descriptions evoke the metaphysical poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. The phrase "dapple earth" in "Time of Year" recalls the opening line from Hopkins' "Pied Beauty": "Glory be to God for dappled things."

A Figure on the Move is in many ways a tribute and testimony to significant people in the poet's past (parents, grandparents, lovers, old companions), "those who loved us/ with such given help and hope/ as we have not perhaps known since" ("Back Again"). Now he is very mindful of the void left by their absence. At the end of "Entr'acte: Part of an Untold Old Tale" the poet leaves the reader with the poignant picture of "a boy play[ing] by himself at the sea's edge". In "Back Again" the speaker, observing old friends and acquaintances with "voyeuristic detachment", is surprised by the "images of early friends/ distanced, dim in half-silhouette/ with light". The past, once a familiar world, has disappeared and he becomes painfully aware of his own tenuous, uneasy relationship to the present: "there's no world for me here except/ with ghosts." Still the memories of that earlier life persist as the speaker yearns to return and reclaim the ghostly past. Despite passage of time and travels to faraway places, he "cannot break the pull of soil/ or skies, weathers." Awash in "remembered feeling", places revisited possess the "lasting power" to draw him back in time. Time separates, but "Memory safeguards longest" ("The Vanished"); it alone affirms connection and continuity.

A Figure on the Move (1991) is Macdonald's most mature work to date. The black and white illustrations accompanying the text remind us that the poet is also an accomplished cartoonist. More than any of the earlier collections, *A Figure on the Move* consciously observes natural passages (aging) and cycles of change (seasons, professions). As the speaker grows older, his circle of companions grows smaller and he finds himself increasingly more alone in the world. In "'Shall I Have No Company?'" like a modern-day Everyman the speaker grieves that "Of those who came that way with me/ now all are gone./ I leave alone to face/ what new beginnings may be left." This awareness stirs a longing for someone "who will be with me/ in the summer-bright or darkening lane,/ as far, as long, as they can go." In "The Playing Field" the speaker notes, "And yet we long/ sometimes, in the chill/ of the veered wind/ for that warm dreamwhile/ and the gold it spun."

Though he often yearns for a return to a simpler time, to the green and golden world of his youth, he recognizes the sense of wonder and excitement still to be found in the present; much still remains to be experienced. Life does not have to end with middle-age or the deaths of family members, old friends and lovers. In "The Fledglings" the poet notes that the old men he is watching have "lived their lives/ as they could with what/ they'd been given, watched/ it happen." But now they, like the speaker, have "come/ to here, to a new time", to these "learnings how to cope". In this poem, change is celebrated in images of release. In "New Beginnings" the speaker realizes that a change such as retirement can be liberating for he is no longer "anchored /to place and times" by the demands of work. Now, light as dandelion seed, he is set free to "be blown, about/ this space of ours."

The figure of the mother is a recurring one in these last two collections. In "Back Again" the speaker wanders through parks where young mothers "With trundled babies" push carriages; and in "From a Dream" the "sounds of my mother" are associated with the joys of his childhood home and "the greenest./ freshest growth/ of earliest spring." The "Old beliefs" and a particular "superstition" of his mother are recalled as the speaker views the monthly return of a "New Moon Through Glass".

The metaphors of roads and gardens are constant tropes. Living is often described as a journey while life itself sometimes has a tendency to become "an abandoned garden" ("Spring Planning in the Garden"). It is the role of the poet to record the moments which make the journey memorable, to search for order in the chaos, the "tangle" of the process. And always there is the niggling suspicion that design and purpose may be illusory so "we torment ourselves.../ with sensing dissonance we can't/resolve" ("Flight of the Foiled Geese"). What if life is "no more than such/ postures and moves" ("May Ball")? Then art alone has the power to penetrate if only for a moment the shadows that surround us.

Many of the poems in *A Figure on the Move* present dilemmas to which there are no easy answers. "Moving Into a Landscape" leaves us with a question: "Conditioned as we are,/ have we a need to make believe/ a core reality exists/ that we may glimpse?" And in "La Grande Route", the speaker wonders "What country [is] spread/ between" the ages of twenty-one and sixty-three? Likewise "Quiet Passage" is an extended query about the inexplicable nature of time passing. "The Solitudes" is an unusual entry. In a very concrete and contemporary way it is a dark, disturbing meditation on the empty spaces we struggle, yet "never manage, to fill."

A Figure on the Move also contains the significant "Isola Bella", a long dramatic meditation encapsulating many of the poet's major themes. It intermingles diverse voices of tour guides, tourists, art students and speaker. Again, despite being surrounded by people and activity, the speaker continues to hold himself apart: "They're all around me. People. I'm among them/ on a day like this. I'm with them, yet/ not of them." He recognizes the benefits of a life lived apart: unlike most

of his fellow-travellers, he has the freedom to move unhindered through the world, to travel light, "to move away" when the impulse comes. Unburdened by the demands of close friends and family, he is "spared the tensions, crises/ close relationships will weave as nets." Yet as the poem progresses, the speaker confesses that, though he has devoted himself to a solitary life and the role of detached observer, to a search for truth and beauty, he has, in his later years, come to regret somewhat the absence of intimacy and connection. "For those who pace the world, as some have wish/ and opportunity to do, the truth/ one day stabs in": liberty can be as oppressive as any contract with intimacy and responsibility. Similarly in "The Visits", age and experience gradually reveal to the speaker the importance of human "communion", "companionship" and stability.

What compels people to travel constantly, to explore foreign landscapes? Why our fascination with the exotic and the unknown? The speaker concludes that "We look about, make of it what we can,/ relate the unfamiliar to the known/ at home." Travel "gratifi[ies] an historic sense,/ aesthetic taste", a need "to wear around them beauty, space" but "it's also a compensating/ for a something missed in life, fulfilment/ of a different kind, some permanent/ relationship, perhaps, not found." This rather long, fragmented poem is unified by the voice of the voyeur-persona eavesdropping on private conversations, gathering impressions, recording historical information, and contemplating the significance of place and how the past continues to impact on the present: "a regionalism must remain a force/ affecting all our lives. It's where we are/ and have our being that for most remains/ the core reality." But regionalism here is something more intangible than the "local pride" of place that North American poets William Carlos Williams and Robert Kroetsch affirm in their works. Though largely somber in subject and mood, "Isola Bella" is not without moments of humour as when the speaker wryly observes: "like England's queen,/ Elizabeth the first, Napoleon seems/ to have slept too often everywhere."

Macdonald's most recent volume, *Landscapes of Time* (1994), is a collection of selected and new poems; more than half of the forty-three poems have appeared in earlier volumes. "Early Way", "Equinox", "Miniskirt", "Ambition", "Country Bus" and "Bather" all appeared in the slim *Between Something and Something* (1970), the poet's first published volume; "Ending", "Wedding Day", "Traffic", "TV News", "Bypass", "Handel Mason" and "The Field" appeared in his second volume, *Shape Enduring Mind* (1974); "west wind", "Nuits de Mai", "Vials", "Vaux-le-Vicomte", "Double Feature", "In Perpetuam Rei Memoriam", "The Greenhouse" and "Mentor" in *A Different Lens* (1981); and "Like Thy Glory, Titan" is from *Towards the Mystery* (1985). Though some of these poems have been revised ("Ending" and "Bather" contain significant revisions) while others have survived the passage of time with little or no change ("Miniskirt" and "Wedding Day"), all deserve to be included in this retrospective volume.

"Ending", first published more than two decades ago, describes the difficult process of reworking an earlier draft of a poem "never ended" but "worth finishing", and the limited success of the poet-"editor" as he tries to recover "some truth twice lost,/ first by my youth, now by the deadening years." As more precise words and phrases are selected ("import" becomes "essence"; "significance" becomes "import"; "intangible" becomes "elusive"; "eluded" becomes "evaded"; "life was vibrant" becomes "life vibrated"), as some words are omitted or shifted from the end of one line to the beginning of another, as minor changes in punctuation occur, a new poem, one with a smoother, less "ragged" rhythm, emerges. But in the process, "Some essence" is lost: "Something didn't emerge/ from words about love parted on the ragged/ page of thirty years ago." That so many of these previously published poems remain unchanged attests to the rigour with which they were initially composed.

Among the new poems in *Landscapes of Time* are "The Holiday", "Popular Song", "Witness of Passage", "Remembering My Grandmother's Birthday" and "To Anne", all of which explore familiar themes, as well as "Gentleman of the Road", a narrative poem reminiscent of Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Hand".

A Figure on the Move and *Landscapes of Time* present brief but moving glimpses of the secret life of the self; as the poet writes in "Vials",

So poems may be signatures
in sand, thread of feeling's drift,
thought, webbed in spun rhythm and sound.

But better than the diary,
like a scent or the Vinteuil phrase,
they unstop the self which was.

American writer Alice Walker says that "poems — even happy ones — emerge from an accumulation of sadness." There is a quiet sadness and some regret certainly in these last two collections, but there is also a sense that the poet, like Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe, would still insist that "amidst so much life and joy... it suited me to be alone — quite alone." And it is this state of solitude that provides Macdonald with his own special lens with which to view life's mystery and majesty.