

A visiting Scot looks at Dalhousie

by J.T. Low

My two years as Visiting Professor in the department of English are drawing to a close; but I have become so immersed in the life and work that I find it difficult to imagine it will all be a memory - a very happy memory - in just over two months from now.

People ask me: how have I liked it here - at Dal, in Halifax, in Nova Scotia, in Canada? My quick answer is that I have become so absorbed in the life that I have hardly had time to analyse my impressions clearly and methodically. I only know that I have liked it. I have found it - my wife and I have found it - pleasantly easy to fit into the cultural and social life of Dalhousie and Halifax. There is an openness about the attitude here; there is a hospitality that is quite overwhelming (and does damage to writing and research plans!) and there is very rich cultural life - in music of all kinds, in drama, in poetry recitals, conferences, talks on all subjects. At this point I think I hear a quiet voice asking: what about the university work you came to do? How did you react to that?

This is a good question that brings me to the most important aspect of my two years' sojourn here. It is of course natural for a specialist to revel in his subject; and I was fortunate, for in the two upper-level classes that I was asked to conduct I was able to pursue favourite studies - dramatic literature, especially classical and Shakespeare plays, and the novel - especially Hardy and some Scottish works. It is right and proper that a professor should deal at depth with his specialist areas; but I was also pleased to be extending into adjacent and allied areas - the French and American novel, Elizabethan poetry, modern drama. I suppose my greatest pleasure comes from teaching dramatic literature and dramatic poetry; but I have to confess my other specialism and my missionary zeal for Scottish literature. I have spoken about my two upper-level classes - drama and tragedy; but I ought to speak equally enthusiastically about my freshmen classes, my sections of English 100. With them I did an introduction-to-literature course where I had a chance to study poetry - Elizabethan, metaphysical, modern, Scottish; and where I had a chance to do work on Dickens and George Eliot and Shaw as well as on authors not so well known - Scottish authors like Robert Louis Stevenson, James Bridle, and Lewis Grassie Gibbon. I was particularly interested in the reaction of Canadian students to Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, a novel about a crofting community in the northeast of Scotland caught up in the ravages of the first world war. Personally, I think it has a claim to be regarded as a (if not **the**) great Scottish novel of the twentieth century. I have the impression that, after the first initial linguistic shock (and yet the language did not cause much difficulty) my Canadian friends developed quite a liking for the work.

After you establish a working relationship with a class, there is always the problem of handing back the first exercise graded. "Ladies and gentlemen, I sincerely hope the beautiful relationship we have built up is not about to be destroyed . . ." It is a cruel process - this grading: nobody likes to get a B when an A is expected; nobody likes to get a C where a B is anticipated as a right (or rite!) At Dalhousie I have faced the dangers (as I have had to frequently in Edinburgh) of teaching something about what Churchill, patriotically but inac-

curately, once called the British Sentence: I have dared to teach a little about punctuation and spelling and paragraphing before retreating into the fastnesses of literary commentary and appreciation. **Mirabile dictu**, my students have not only survived: they seemed to become quite interested in my comments on syntactical patterns and fine grammatical points. Canada may have suffered, as Scotland and Great Britain certainly did, from the unenlightened jettisoning of the more sensible (and essential) aspects of English grammar in schools and colleges. The solution seemed to me, not merely to eliminate the boring and unprofitable aspects of grammar-in-a-vacuum, but to try to show the relevance, fascination, and inherent power of grammar (and syntax and rhetoric) when linked with life, speech, and literature. I feel we do not make enough of the connection between grammar and glamour. The link world is gramary (magic, enchantment) "from Middle English gramary - skill in grammar, hence magic" (Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary).

May I answer a question that may be in your mind? Not a great deal of difference! There are similar problems on both sides of the Atlantic in dealing with students who have not developed a sense of language, a feeling of words, an ease in reading and writing. I have had just as many problems and just as many pleasant surprises in my teaching here as I have had in Scotland over the years. There is, however, one important difference. Canadian students seem much more interested in their own cultural scene than Scottish students are or have been up to recently. I have been impressed by Canadian literature - its development, its promise, its availability; and I am so pleased to notice that students have opportunities in colleges and universities here to study Canadian poetry, drama, and the flourishing Canadian novel and short story.

We have a very rich literature in Scotland too. It goes back to early Gaelic writing, to early works in Middle Scots by Barbour, Henryson, Dunbar; it extends through the eighteenth century (in Gaelic, Scots and English) to our own day when we too are enjoying a literary renaissance. Indeed, some people say that the greatest living poet on either side of the Atlantic is not an American, nor an Englishman, nor a Canadian, nor a Welshman, but a Scot called Hugh MacDiarmid whose real name is Christopher Murray Grieve and who wrote one of the great long poems of the twentieth century - *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. (As my impressions of Canadian life began

to sort themselves out, I myself set out to write a long poem called "**A Sober Scot looks at the Maple Leaf**", but I have not got too far with that yet!) The trouble about this great literature of the Scots (in three languages) is that the Scots themselves, up until recently at any rate, were not encouraged to study it in schools and universities. Bravo for the Canadians! They are not only studying their own literature, but have built courses on Canadian literature firmly into the structure of general literature courses.

I have admired not only these courses on Canadian literature but also the width of literary studies in general and the great opportunities offered to honours and post-graduate students at Dalhousie. I am glad to have had the chance to introduce some Scottish works, for the Scottish connections seem to me still strong here as in Antigonish and Cape Breton. Amongst the happy memories I shall be taking back to Scotland will be my

recollection of the keen interest I felt when talking about Scot Lit to gatherings at Dalhousie, Antigonish, and the N.B. Society of Halifax.

The focus during these two years has never remained narrow, however: it has constantly varied so that one has been able to form impressions of many aspects of academic, Nova Scotian, and Canadian life. The gain to one's education and experience has been immense. This is an exhilarating country to live in; and a very important part of that exhilaration comes from the student life in a place like Dalhousie. Despite the problems and difficulties all around us, there is a forward-looking tendency about life here; and the friendship and fellowship that go with it form a striking contrast to academic stuffiness that one might find elsewhere. Thanks, Dal! You have a satisfied customer in this visiting Scot!

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Magistrate. Now Scoby has been given a summons, and will appear in court March 29, 9:00 a.m. He is receiving legal counsel.

Scoby is in a vulnerable position. Under Section 10 of the Act - the tenant must give up possession of

Student aid continued from p. 1

MacAskill and according to the Chairperson, Melinda MacLean, the committee is extremely willing to discuss any aid changes with students. A committee of the Student Union, NUS and AFS are presently looking into the possibility of submitting a further, more extensive brief to this committee. The House Education committee is composed of representatives from all three political parties.

the premises upon notice to quit. Therefore, Silverman is acting within his rights. However, his underhanded methods of extracting rent increases should not pass without notice especially since no increases have yet been authorized by the Rent Review Commission. Clearly, these are the issues: first, tenants should have the right to continue peaceful occupation of the premises, without being subject to arbitrary whims of the landlord; second, rent controls are obviously not being enforced. It is an ominous conclusion that with the exclusion of university residences from the protection of the Tenancies Act, university authorities are in a position to behave in the self-interested manner; of the likes of Allan Silverman.

In a recent development the Scoby hearing has been cancelled.

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