



David Mansvelt: Dal Photo

Still writing at 81 Hugh MacLennan

"All you need is a reasonably clear head to write fiction."

By David Mansvelt

Like many Nova Scotian junior high school students, I first encountered Hugh MacLennan through reading his novel set in Halifax during the Explosion, *Barometer Rising*. Later, I bought a copy of *Two Solitudes*, in part because the back cover claimed that "No Canadian has come closer to the elusive Great Canadian Novel than Hugh MacLennan".

So it was with anxiety and excitement that I joined the queue at the bottom of the stairs

of an English Department house where he had an office as writer-in-residence for the month of October. I soon found my fears were unfounded. He ushered me into his smoke-filled office, smiled, shook my hand firmly and started asking me questions. Come to think of it, I never did have an interview with him. I even forgot to take notes. We traded our family histories, discussed issues from Free Trade to Israel and I enjoyed him so much I returned several times to chat and listen (and to fill my blank pages with some quotations!).

I discovered that he felt so at home because Halifax and Dalhousie are his homes. As a young boy he remembered soldiers marching past his school on Tower Road and collecting "Warships of the World" cards from their cigarette packages, competing with Charles Ritchie, who later became a noted diplomat and diarist, for the largest collection. He still has vivid and horrific memories of the Halifax Explosion though he was only ten years old.

His sense of his past and of world history are foundational for his writing. "No literature comes out of a void," he says. "It comes out of human background. Fiction writing is the distillation of a great deal of experience and sense impression. You write a novel, if you have any sense, not for money but to clear things up in your mind."

To develop his inquisitive

mind, he studied classics, history and philosophy ("English is a holiday from the tough stuff") at Dalhousie, earning a Rhodes scholarship for his efforts. His preparation for Oxford wasn't all academic though. For the past ten years, he had slept in a tent in his backyard year-round because "Our house was too warm. The Americans were always cold there, but I found it just right."

Returning to Dalhousie, he tried to get a job but "they wouldn't take me", and so he went to McGill instead. He holds no grudges, though. In fact, he sometimes sounded like a PR man for Dalhousie, calling it "the most magnificent campus" and "the best university" in Canada, adding "we've got some brilliant people here", referring to the faculty. He speaks as highly of Halifax, "the finest city in Canada", and of Canada too, "which is handling the new world of the

future better than any country I know."

In an address to university teachers of English, he stressed that the racism of the colonial era is being challenged successfully and rightfully in this century with the emergence of Asian and Third World nations. "The great historical fact of the 20th century is this: God, whoever He is, is not racist." Trudeau recognized racism is a contradiction, said MacLennan, and so opened Canada's gates to the world and to the enlightened future. "Canada will no longer be known as a white country. Only one in three people I meet on St. Catherine Street are born in Canada. And the immigrants work hard, work together and are sending their children to university."

Looking to the future of Canadian literature, MacLennan says it is forming itself "rapidly and powerfully" but when asked about his role in its formation, he is more cautious. One student asked how he became a successful writer. MacLennan responded rhetorically, "Am I a successful writer?" He interrupted another student who inferred that he wrote about the "Canadian identity" and said, "No, I don't. I write about people." He describes *Barometer Rising*, which took him two years to write, as "a simple book". Of the nine novels he wrote, two were never published. "Thank God they weren't," he says.

His manner of writing is cautious as well. Pointing to an old manual typewriter beside him, he says anything faster is too fast for him. "If the machine is too fast you'll write too much," he says. "One bad sentence is all it takes to destroy your credibility." The writer can also get in the way, he says. "You've got to let the characters write the story. The writer musn't get in the way of the characters. All you need is a reasonably clear head to write fiction."

At 81, MacLennan is writing his memoirs, claiming that "it's all I'm good for now." But again he is too humble. With his quick mind and strong opinions, he is also good for philosophical caricature. Some samples: "Trudeau is a great man — half genius, half blank — but a very bad judge of women." "Sartre? Forget about him — a crazy megalomaniac." "Ed Broadbent's a nice fellow, but . . ." "Mulroney wants to be the second George Washington."

And Hugh MacLennan? Ah. . . Another magical smile, a handshake. And a "God bless you!"

Queen of Cajun kindles les coeurs acadiens

By Michele Thibeau

Zydeco, the Cajun word for "let's boogie" describes perfectly what the audience did Thursday night when Queen Ida and her Bon Temps Zydeco Band played the Cohn.

The instruments featured in the performance were, of course, the accordian, played by Queen Ida and by her son, the fiddle played expertly by the only other female in the group and the washboard with spoons played by Queen Ida's brother, along with various other shaker-like instruments. And of course there were drums, rhythm guitar and bass thrown in too.

This melange of instruments proved to sound quite good together. Zydeco music, which is heard from birth on in places like Louisiana (Cajun country), stems from the sounds of Cape Breton Fiddle music. The main differences between the two are the use of the accordian and the blues and jazz influences of the U.S. The music evolved down south after the arrival of the Acadians, who were expelled from Cape Breton in 1755 by the British.

Queen Ida, along with playing and singing her heart out,

encouraged everyone to "wiggle in their seats at least" to the music since there was no place to dance. She also got the audience involved in singing a few minor parts near the end of the almost 3 hour show.

Even though she is from the U.S., she believes that Louisiana is a little world of its own which the rest of the country does not understand, so she played the "Cajun Anthem" for us.

Queen Ida asked if there were any French people in the audience and after getting a big response she proceeded to say a special hello to us. The reason for the great number of French people is that her style of zydeco music is sung in both languages — sometimes well mixed. Queen Ida herself says that the energy and the music itself are what the feelings come from and that language barriers pose no problems.

It certainly was a live show, with something that everyone could at the very least tap their toes to, if not hop in their seats to (as one young man behind me did!) The whole place was clapping and stomping their hands and feet to the zydeco music that this incredibly energetic band finally brought to town.



Queen Ida: Zydeco is Cajun for "let's boogie!"

Photo: Courtesy Traditional Arts Services