

## Gordon Pinsent: A True Newfoundlander

There will in the future, no doubt, be dozens of sociological analyses documenting Newfoundland's painful transition from its proud isolation to its current uneasy submission to confederation. But if people in the future want to know what the change felt like, how it fractured family life, the frustration it created, the intimate details of life patterns uprooted, they will turn to the plays of Michael Cook and to the novels of Gordon Pinsent. In *The Rowdyman* (see *IFR*, 1 [1974], 152-153) Will Cole had the resilient force of a wild bird in an endangered species. In Pinsent's new novel, *John and the Missus* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1974), there is the same mixture of elegiac tone and roistering vitality.

This is the story of John Munn the community's workaday and social core in Sop's Cove—a man unwilling to admit that his town is played out. This is a town of "Gentlemen from the olden times. From young grandfathers to pops to nephews and uncles, godfathers, cousins and sons. Old sons and young ones, but all it seemed from former times. And not one drifter in the crowd" (p. 3). Sidelined by an accident in the town's mine John is no longer able to hold the community together. Rather than face the truth about his disintegrating community he is willing to beat people who treacherously think of abandoning the town. In his confusion he sees not only his family coming apart at the seams but the whole vitality and cultural identity of Newfoundland leaking away.

Pinsent has a gift for perceiving, celebrating, and communicating vitality. John Munn like Will Cole has a firm grasp on a central value—an enjoyment of life and a determination to drain the cup to its lees. Pinsent believes in the heroism of ordinary existence. Pinsent presents men who are "the salt of the earth" and makes of the metaphor something that is vibrant and convincing rather than a cliché. A city sophisticate may find this sentimental or romantic, mere foolishness, as the Newfoundlanders themselves see it, but Pinsent mines his material for veins of feeling where people in their own terms achieve a rich and meaningful contact. John Munn was a man who would "be there when your ceiling came down, or when your love needed proof of time and space. Not the greatest hurricane would change his course, but if it did, he'd sport the broadest wings. One more like him at his best would just about do it. How many could you be sure of, who smile when they mean to smile, and tell the truth from ignorance of no other way to tell it" (p. 22). This is a world in which a drunken man coming to pay his respects to the dead is caught piddling in the snow at the doorstep by the widow, a place in which a guest accidentally squashes a wedding cake by sitting on it. It has that easy mixture of the serious and the ridiculous that one finds in Roch Carrier's work or in the films of Claude Jutra. But it is also a place in which John Munn, the town's linchpin has been sufficiently knocked out of place to unloosen the whole community. The mineowners attracted by the drought of good times will soon close the place down. The fabled tales of the good times of the past, the conviction that you are in the only place that matters, have no longer enough power to lock the young to the community.

An enormous amount of good literature has been based on family life, wakes, weddings, the ebb and flow of everyday life. Pinsent pilots his novel down this main stream. There are not many Canadian writers who can handle so well the deft transition from the comic to the serious, use the vigor and fun of life to set in relief its pathos. He can present superbly the heart clutching moments of disaster at the mine and the way terror gives place to relief and then slides

immediately into giddy, irreverent joking. What is most distinctive about the world he creates is the extraordinary oscillation of emotions—from love, to hate, to violence, to tenderness, all within a few paragraphs. This flow in the narrative rhythm uses the fast cutting technique of film, the fade in and out, the flashback, so that we absorb the complex strains of this style of life without any need to separate and analyze them. There are times when the switching on and off of the various streams of consciousness of the characters makes one feel that James Joyce has a lot to answer for. Yet if much of it fails to illuminate our deeper understanding of the characters it does transmit the real kaleidoscopic unpredictability of life—the drift from joke to violence, to religious probing, to the need for a beer, in rapid succession.

As in the writing of Sygne the attempt to capture the poetic stream of the dialect occasionally becomes strained. The language tends to get displayed and overworked at times. The self-consciousness of sentences such as “That day seemed to drag along like a soaking wet towel pulled from a bucket of water” (p. 8) jars us periodically. There are times when the narrative line sags when Pinsent seems to indulge his love for colorful scenes without advancing his central concern.

In spite of all its considerable riches the book seems to me to have certain fundamental limitations. The story seems initially to promise more than it delivers. It penetrates the central characters John and the Missus, Matt, the son, and his wife, Faith, to a certain level and then goes no further. Despite the fact that we are inside the characters' heads for a considerable part of the novel the major relationships never come into clear focus. John Munn, realizing that he cannot hold out against the disintegrating forces desecrates his life, his friends, roots up his house, and eventually destroys himself. It seems for a while as if we are dealing with a tragedy of considerable proportions, but in the end the story seems to settle for something on a smaller scale. As so often in modern literature we seem to be driving towards tragic grandeur and end up mired in pathos. Perhaps Pinsent is simply being true to his culture—in this world everything gets cut down to size. John Munn stumbles drunkenly to his death and another community fades away. The ending is low-keyed—people look forward to another wake, there is a wry refusal to magnify the sense of loss. Pinsent has demonstrated brilliantly that what is disappearing is not all foolishness, but he would not, I suppose, be a true Newfoundlander if he didn't give a philosophical shrug and wonder whether there was enough home brew laid in for the wake.

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### Cortázar's *Ultimo Round*: A Bi-Level Literary-Pictorial Experience

Julio Cortázar's *Ultimo round*, which first appeared in 1969, is a good example of audience-participation art. In *Rayuela* he had already suggested that the reader choose his own order for approaching the chapters, but *Ultimo round* represents a further step, in that it is now *impossible* for the reader to proceed in a conventional manner. Upon opening the book the reader notes that there are two sets of pages within the binding, and he must immediately decide which of