A NOTE ON GEORGE BYRNE'S ARGUMENT THAT ORVILLE IS THE CENTRAL CHARACTER IN **BLOOD TIES**

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Early interpretations of a writer's work are likely to influence later criticism; therefore any critical article, however timely and well intended, that tends to oversimplify and thereby underestimate a younger writer's work must be rebutted. George Byrne's "The Blood Hardened and the Blood Running: The Character of Orville in *Blood Ties*"[1] does David Adams Richards' fiction just such a disservice.

Byrne's fundamental idea is that in Richards' second novel "the only hope for the community (as it is presented) lies with Orville."[2] Orville, according to Byrne, functions as "a symbolic battleground" in which positive "female forces," represented in the novel by Irene, Leah, and Cathy, contend with negative "male forces," represented by Mallory, John, and Cecil.[3] These two "antithetical forces" embody several less important thematic dichotomies, but what they amount to for Byrne are "utlimately, good and evil."[4]

While Byrne is right in pointing out the psychological complexity and symbolic dimensions of Orville's characterization, he is wrong in suggesting that Orville is special in these respects. Moreover, Byrne builds his argument for Orville's centrality on unfounded assumptions that implicitly diminish the novel. For example, he takes for granted that most of the main characters can readily be tagged "good" or "evil," which tends to deny their psychological complexity. Indeed, even his assumption that Richards' novels grow out of a clearly defined conception of good and evil is highly doubtful. Yet, still more odd, his argument seems to suppose that *Blood Ties* is intended to demonstrate how the social regeneration of the Miramichi Region can be achieved.

This last assumption is especially curious since Richards' fiction (although somewhat less so in his most recent novel *Lives of Short*

[1]*Studies in Canadian Literature*, 7, No. 1 (1982), 55-62.
[2]Byrne, p. 55.
[3]Byrne, p. 55.
[4]Byrne, p. 55.

Duration) shows so little concern with social organization. The reader'
interest and sympathy are consistently focused on private individuals,
more often than not misfits and outcasts. Public figures, be they mem-
bers of parliament, priests, school teachers, policemen, or tavern waiters,
fare badly in Richard's work. Moreover, his outsiders are not reformers
and have no conscious purpose beyond surviving and rebelling against
the dullness and mediocrity inherent in their environment.

Indeed, Richards' fiction shows little concern with the future, let
alone with formulas for social improvement. His first two novels, *The
Coming of Winter* and *Blood Ties*, are set in the recent past, and only
in *Lives of Short Duration* does he consider the influence of contem-
porary progress on his region. Here his treatment of local entrepreneurs
and community leaders is not kind. The effects these conventionally
constructive persons have on their community in general and in par-
ticular on the lives of the rebels for whom Richards reserves his greatest
compassion make his first two novels seem sunny by comparison. Not-
withstanding the potency of his realism, Richards' view of life along the
Miramichi River is autumnal and elegiac, and neither Orville MacDurmot
nor any other single character can reasonably be argued to represent
the key to local regeneration. In fact, it would be challenging indeed to
argue what Byrne simply assumes—that Richards' treatment of the
Miramichi Region even admits the possibility of its regeneration.

To be fair I should note that Byrne's article does not speculate how
Orville will work his salubrious influence on his community, and the
novel, which leaves Orville an alienated fifteen-year-old whose proudest
achievements are trapping seventeen rabbits in a season and becoming
respectably skilled at shooting songbirds out of the trees with his father's
22. calibre rifle, supplies few if any clues. However, in the absence of
further explanation from Byrne, it is hard to imagine how Orville can
prove his community's "only hope" without becoming some sort of
public figure, and public figures have so far not done well in Richards'
fiction.

On a less speculative level, Byrne's association of polarities of good
and evil in *Blood Ties* with the "antithetical forces of 'maleness' and
'femaleness' "[5] (inadequately defined) will not stand analysis. Putting
aside for the moment the question of whether Byrne discovers a clear
distinction between good and evil in the novel or imposes his own ideas
on it, his division of positive and negative qualities along sexual lines

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[5]Byrne, p. 55.

ignores too many exceptions to work. For example, Maufet MacDurmot, Orville's father, is depicted as a kind, long-suffering person with far more regard for family ties than his son. Maufet and his wife Irene are very much alike, yet Byrne makes Irene a symbol of female goodness while virtually ignoring Maufet. On the other hand, Orville's half-sister Leah has been a hell-raiser since childhood, yet Byrne incongruously classifies her with her sister Cathy and Irene as a good female. My point is not simply that Byrne's attempt to categorize Richard's characters according to their virtues and failings is imperfect but that the attempt was a mistake to begin with. When Richards develops characters at length, he does so with intelligence and sympathy regardless of their sex, their adherence to conventional codes of morality, or their potential benefit to their community. And any interpretation of Richards' novels that presumes to arrange the characters in groups of good and bad, sympathetic and unsympathetic, is not only doomed to failure but doomed also to underestimate the complexity and depth of Richards' work.

At the heart of Byrne's oversimplification is his belief that most of Richards' male characters are intended as illustrations of evil. Byrne fixes on Mallory as the epitome of evil in *Blood Ties*:

> The character Mallory, one can safely say, represents evil in the broadest [sic] sense of the word. To sum him up by calling him the devil, in the traditional sense, would not be inaccurate. He is strongly associated with disfigurement, fire, and blackness. As Lorne says: "He was in the fire . . . The fire coming up around him that way doing nothing to him. When Lorne saw him black smoke came from his mouth."[6]

Although Byrne refers to him as a character, Mallory is not actually developed as one; in fact he is the family bogy, and his diabolism is based exclusively on an account by Orville's Uncle Lorne, a secondary character with little to recommend him as a witness. Lorne is characterized as lazy, selfish, and more significant to Byrne's Mallory-is-the-devil argument, unreliable—a gossip full of convenient prejudice and self-delusion. Here, for example, is Lorne on the elderly Father Lacey:

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[6]Byrne, pp. 55-56; *Blood Ties*, pp. 72, 76. Byrne misquotes Richards in that four pages separate the second "him" and "When," which should not have been capitalized since it does not begin a sentence. The actual sentence reads, *"It was as if* when Lorne saw him black smoke *or something* came from his mouth . . ." My italicized omissions, like the four intervening pages, make it fairly clear that Mallory's diabolical qualities are the product of Lorne's imagination, Orville's fear, and Byrne's dedication to his argument.

> . . . he'll burn in hell goin out to bingo every night and spending
> every cent in the damn collection . . . and goi to those shows . . .
> Those shows there running up there in town with the girls in them
> half naked—all naked. I know. I know. A guy told me he's always
> there.[7]

Lorne is attempting to justify his wife's not helping with the church
picnic here, but having started he carries on in what Richards seems to
have intended as a brief parody of local bigotry:

> Trying to scare us into helping at the picnic. Sure he's too old, sure
> he is—but who gets the good priests around here? Not us—the
> Indians, the Indians and the French. The Indians down there on
> the reservation and we pay taxes ta keep them alive and mosta
> them never even go to church mosta them don't believe in God
> or nothin—Indians and French get the goddamn good churches
> and the priests. Look at any French town ya go to, look at it ya'll
> see churches higher and better than the one up town—ya don't
> even see the roads paved around here unless an election.[8]

And so on. The scene near the end of the novel in which Lorne, intent
upon selling his mother's house to an American couple, lies not only
to the Americans but even to Maufet about his having helped Maufet
repair the house[9] and his attempts to please the Americans by agreeing
with what he imagines to be their prejudices further detract from his
reliability as a witness to the supernatural events upon which Byrne
bases his judgement of Mallory's diabolism.

In *Blood Ties* the reader is given two extended versions of the
Mallory tale. The first comes through Orville's mind when he conjures
up the phantom Mallory in the woods, frightening himself and his sister.[10]
The second is Lorne's review at Cathy's birthday party of what by then
has become a familiar story.[11] Comparison will show how dependent
Orville's conception of Mallory is on Lorne's. Although the passage in
which Lorne retells his tale is not concentrated enough to quote here,
even a quick reading should, I think, reveal that Richards takes neither
Lorne nor his ghost story seriously. And there is no evidence beyond
Lorne's confused, defensive account of their one meeting for supposing
that Mallory is anything more than a recluse who has become a little

[7]David Adams Richards, *Blood Ties* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1976), p. 80.
[8]Richards, pp. 80-81.
[9]Richards, p. 256.
[10]Richards, pp. 71-76.
[11]Richards, pp. 195-98.

odd from lonelinesss. While it might be argued that Mallory represents the dangers of isolation, making him the central figure in a local cult of evil and maleness is to base a broad, significant, essentially derogatory generalization about *Blood Ties* on flimsy proof indeed.

Byrne's argument that typical male behavior can be associated with evil in *Blood Ties* depends heavily on symbolic links he discovers between John Delano and Cecil and the "disfigurement, fire, and blackness"[12] with which Mallory is associated in Lorne's ghost story. And for reasons I have already explained, I believe this interpretation of symbolic parallels is extremely doubtful. However, the facts of coarseness, violence, drunkenness, self-destructiveness, and the like in the lives of most of the men in *Blood Ties* are undeniable. They would, after all, be hard to avoid in any realistic depiction of working-class life along the Miramichi River. What is questionable, however, is Byrne's belief that Richards shares his own low estimate of characters who get drunk and curse. This assumption seems to have so biased Byrne's reading of the novel that he is capable of ignoring a good deal of evidence that contradicts it.

For example, Byrne asserts that John Delano is "in fact fused" with Mallory, "the local version of the embodiment of complete evil,"[13] and Orville's ineffectual repulsion of John at the close of the novel is a cornerstone of Byrne's argument for his importance as a positive force in the community:

> John can be described then as the epitome of all that is evil in the male: the drinking and cursing, the contempt for women, the general sterility of emotion. These are the dangers of the spirit of Mallory pushed to the limit. Orville's refutation of John and all that he stands for is the novel's greatest note of optimism.[14]

While Orville's actions at the end of *Blood Ties*—he really just tells John, "Get the fuck outa my house,"[15] and attacks him—could just as well be interpreted as an acceptance of local male codes of behavior as a refutation, Byrne's mistaken view of John does more to diminish the novel than his mistaken view of Orville. Byrne overlooks John's deep emotional involvement with Julie, his bereavement in the final scene for his two closest friends—Andy lost through death and Kevin

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[12]Byrne, p. 56.
[13]Byrne, p. 56.
[14]Byrne, p. 57.
[15]Richards, p. 278.

through an apparently unpromising marriage. Moreover, he ignores dozens of instances of sensitivity and spontaneous generosity. John, of course, has his faults, but he is generally handled with sympathy by Richards who goes to a great deal of trouble in his first two novels to make his complex reactions intelligible. A defence of this subtly drawn character would require an article in itself, so Richards' own comment on John will have to serve for now to deny Byrne's totally negative opinion of him:

> Once someone asked me who I associated myself with, you know, autobiographically, in *The Coming of Winter*. I said, "Kevin, but I think he is so whiney . . . I love John more." I think Kevin is extremely kind but I think there's something lacking in his backbone. John's a much more fascinating character for me than Kevin is. John's the current I was trying to get at.[16]

Although Richards mentions only *The Coming of Winter* in this quotation, the statement was made long after *Blood Ties* was published. It seems to refute Byrne's view of John without further explanation.

As with John, Byrne's treatment of Cecil fails to do his characterization justice. To Byrne, "The scars on his body are correlatives to the scars on his soul and the physical manifestation of Mallory's evil spirit (fire) is also analogous to the blackening of Cecil's soul."[17] The selectivity such a view requires is demonstrated by the way Byrne represents the passage in which Cecil and Shelby are involved in a car accident one Christmas Eve. He mentions only Cecil's initial nervous impulse as the car is going off the road to say to Shelby that they should "get out and beat that bastard."[18] He fails to mention that Cecil does not get out and beat anyone. Rather he carries the unconscious Shelby to safety on the road, puts his coat over him and his shirt under his head, leaving himself naked to the waist in a snowstorm. Byrne fails to mention Cecil fighting his way through the snow to pull a baby from the other car, even as he remembers that it may explode like the stove that scarred him. And he fails to mention that the scene ends with Cecil crying and smiling "the way Ronnie sometimes smiled when he was afraid" and the young RCMP officer vomiting, either at the dead baby Cecil has brought from the other car or at the scars on Cecil's bare chest, and

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[16]Quoted by Phil Milner, "Yoknapatawpha, N. B." *Books in Canada*, 9 (Octo., 1980), 5-6.
[17]Byrne, p. 57.
[18]Byrne, p. 57; Richards, p. 239.

Cecil hold the dead baby "as if to keep it warm until the ambulance came."[19] Not surprisingly, the more one thinks about Richards' male characters the less evil and emotionally sterile they appear.

A final instance of Byrne's misleading subjectivity in selecting representative passages deserves mention. Richards devotes some of the most moving scenes in *Blood Ties* to Leah's and Cecil's final parting.[20] Byrne avoids these scenes, which highlight Cecil's emotional depth, thus: "When Leah tells him she is leaving, he can think only that 'hurting her was the answer to what she was doing . . . hurting her that way was the answer . . .' "[21] The scene cited takes place in the middle section of the novel, approximately a year and a half before Leach actually leaves Cecil. The quotation comes from Cecil's memory of another scene in which he wants, moved by a need far superior to brute lust, to make love to his wife. Leah's response is, "Screw off now, I'm going ta bingo now."[22] Byrne's article simply does not represent the action of the novel through its quotations. Whether or not Byrne's selectivity in representing Cecil's emotional life is calculated is unimportant; what is important is that it seriously oversimplifies and underestimates Richards' handling of his male characters.

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[19]Richards, p. 243.

[20]Richards, pp. 234-36; pp. 243-44.

[21]Byrne, p. 57; *Blood Ties*, p. 136. In the novel, the passage reads, ". . . something that he was powerless to control, powerless to stop himself from hurting her as if hurting her was the answer to what she was doing—as if hurting her that way was the answer to the way she looked, to the way her legs went rigid under his hands." A much larger context than this is needed for full understanding.

[22]*Blood Ties*, p. 132.