

## DAYS OF FUTURE PAST: TIME IN THE FICTION OF CHARLES BRUCE

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The fiction of Charles Bruce is not mentioned in the *Literary History of Canada*, though his poetry is praised; nor have contemporary critics, with the exception of John Moss,<sup>1</sup> paid much attention to Bruce's prose writings. Yet in *The Channel Shore*<sup>2</sup> (1954) the evocation of a way of life in rural Nova Scotia is as compelling and as sustained as that provided by Ernest Buckler in his more famous and justly-lauded *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952). Whereas for the Canaan family in Buckler's novel the heart of the valley territory is timeless (that is, the inhabitants lack a sense, until it is too late, of time past, passing, and to come), Bruce's Shore families feel themselves part of a pattern, "something old and continuing, a blend of today and the past and the future." Joseph and Martha Canaan feel safe when they are alone together and performing the routine tasks of farm life, but their circle of two is essentially (though unconsciously) solipsistic, and they have no sense of belonging to ritual larger than themselves; as for their son David, in his self-centered isolation he comes to abhor the familiar course of events in which he feels trapped. In contrast, Bruce's men and women, almost without exception, find that "Deliverance [is] merged with the small routines, the incidents of living" that they know have been part of the Shore way of life for generations. Audiences and critics seem to have been attracted by the dominant images of isolation and death in *The Mountain and the Valley* that contribute to the interpretation of David Canaan's struggle as heroic or even tragic.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the dark side of 20th-century existence and the corresponding reflection of much of its literature demand such a response. But in *The Channel Shore* Charles Bruce affirms, in the face of two world wars mentioned in the

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1. John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1974), pp. 166-187.

2. Charles Bruce, *The Channel Shore* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada Ltd., 1954).

3. See especially Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," in Ernest Buckler, ed. Gregory Cook (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, Ryerson, 1972) and Claude Bissell, Introduction to *The Mountain and the Valley* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1970).

novel, the vital sense of belonging to a community and drawing upon one's heritage when building upon death's inevitable intrusion. This affirmation has its basis in Bruce's vision of time, and within time the deathless pattern of human experience and example that both influences and is influenced by the quotidian.

For Charles Bruce the chronicle of human existence on the Channel Shore has neither beginning nor end: ". . . it [is] neither. It [is] past and present and future, eddying here in the flow of time." Time is not something to be denied nor mastered by the individual, but rather embraced as a medium of connection between the self and others, between one's unique, personal condition and the forces behind the dates, names, and places that contribute to such uniqueness. On the Shore no man is an island, not even the seeming outsider and master of his own destiny, Anse Gordon. The bell tolls for Anse though he does not hear it, and for James Marshall who is so angry about the past he would sever it from his present view of things, just as it tolls for those who accept themselves as a part of the maine: "You couldn't nail this feeling down to any sense of logic. One laughing glimpse or two across the darkness of a generation. But this was enough."

The novel begins with Bill Graham, who once spent a summer on the Shore, meeting Anse Gordon, who left home that same summer of 1919, in London, England in 1945. Although Anse has never been back to the Shore, his mere presence affects Bill deeply, transporting him into a territory of memory, perception, and feeling that both transcends the present moment and reveals it as just another, not the ultimate, instant on the continuum of time:

Bill had the sensation of moving at the same moment in separate areas of space and time. He found almost unbelievable the clearness with which it was coming back to him . . . the shape of it . . . It was flesh and blood, moved by its rooted hungers, by hate, fear, love and the branch and bloom of them—by caution, daring, malice, sacrifice, that formed the story with which Anse Gordon's name was forever linked.

It should be said here that the structure of *The Channel Shore* underlines its content and themes. 1954 seems to be the present that revives the past of 1919, but in Bruce's scheme of things a chronological unfolding of events in deceptive. On the surface the novel seems to contain a story told in retrospect and always moving towards an end point in 1946 (the year both Bill and Anse return to the Shore). It is true that

the middle-aged Bill and Anse have grown beyond the younger versions of themselves, but these younger versions are not presented by Bruce as entities that have meaning only in terms of reminiscence. On the Shore time past is not *over*; it is dynamic and, as such, an eternal present. The dates that denote different sections of the novel—1919, 1933-34, 1945, 1946—represent present moments that are constant contributors to, and inheritors of, other present moments in time: “. . . yesterday, today, and tomorrow as part of a continuing whole.”

The action of the summer of 1919 is centered around four major characters: Anse; his sister, Anna; his lover, Hazel McKee; and Grant Marshall. Grant's uncle James and Hazel's father, Richard, say and do comparatively little, but their respective influences are of great importance. Both Anse and Hazel feel trapped by what they see as the unchanging features of life on the Shore, though for different reasons. Hazel is desperate in the face of “the sameness that for years [has] eaten at the core of [her] mind,” though she senses in Anse's attempted domination of her something that runs counter to who and what she is in time. When she makes up her mind to spurn Anse, though she fears she is pregnant by him, “memories [come] to her . . . with a peculiar newness, so long [have] they lain unregarded behind the growing up, the immediate discontents.” Such recollections of “long ago” sustain Hazel and allow her to reach out to her father, with whom, because he represents the “long ago,” she feels “some kind of alliance . . . of closeness.” Richard McKee is a man of strength and wisdom in Bruce's cast of characters because his mind is “never empty,” but a vessel filled with “the old knowledge submerged far below the outward things of living . . . of time long past, forgotten, drawn close around him . . . Of old things new again . . .” Thus his daughter, despite her intimacy with Anse, is no figure of shame to Richard. More than anyone else, he represents Bruce's claim that “things had a way of happening on the Channel Shore . . . contrary to all the rules of living . . . a way of being accepted and absorbed into the pattern of the place. Even sin and remorse, heresy and regret and failure, were dark colours in the pattern.”

As for Anse, he wants only to participate in finite experience; with his sexual knowledge of Hazel “Discovery is complete,” and he needs to “confirm possession of her” to achieve “a lasting sense of triumph.” These terms that Bruce employs to describe Anse suggest a man who believes he can control the vagaries of life and one who is locked into an egocentric vision of existence without respect for others or their

possible effect on him. When Hazel, in her independence and interdependence (with her father, the memories and qualities of Shore life) contradicts this vision, Anse leaves the Shore, a dramatic gesture designed to restore his "private power."

Like Anse, Grant Marshall has been away in the war, but in contrast to his future nemises, Grant returns feeling "there was plenty of time" to work his land as his ancestors did theirs. However, Grant is trapped by his uncle James's "immovable, impervious" response to ancestors and his rigid interpretation of present behaviour. James Marshall is a religiously narrow man who cannot see the human connection between Grant and Anna Gordon because of the sacrilege of a Protestant-Catholic marriage. The Marshall family is described as being without that land-sea duality that makes up the experience and history of so many of the Shore inhabitants and defines their characters. James's lack of flexibility has to do with the absence in his history of "circumstances that demand continual adjustment to the never quiet pulse of the moving sea . . . the thing known to every fisherman or seaman, however unimaginative: the sense of flesh and bone shifting with that immeasurable movement, of kinship with all others whose lives are tensed or relaxed to meet it." The sea, as described here, is time made visible: James is a stranger to the depths of the Channel waters and of the forces that lie beneath his superficial view of the past. When Grant cannot escape his uncle's self-righteous influence to ask Anna to be his wife, she leaves the Shore for a visit to Halifax and is there seemingly severed from what has been and what will be by her death (she is run over by a tram as she is leaving to come home to the Shore). James fails to see the connection between her demise and that of his brother Harvey (Grant's father) twenty years before that has haunted him in ways he can only deny. James loved his brother, but cannot admit the pain of loss, so he cannot admit of love for Grant or of Grant's love for Anna in the present. He is "glad temptation [has] been removed." But Grant, in the face of painful death and his own guilt, turns to Richard McKee for sustenance; Richard, who, to James's disgust, makes his hay by hand despite the availability of a mower. In Richard's proffered memories of Harvey, Grant finds "The whole moving dream of the Shore a generation gone . . . From this day on he would know without thinking that all he did, and all he dreamed of, were woven into that." Grant realizes that although there is a girl dead, there is also a girl alive with a child (Hazel, with Anse's son). It is "the imagined voice of the Channel Shore" as well as the specific, present voices that move Grant towards brief

marriage with Hazel (she dies of illness within the year) and life-long care for Alan, *his* son despite, and because of, Anse.

Just as Bruce emphasized the links between past and present through the meeting of Anse and Bill Graham in 1945, so in further commentary on that meeting does he emphasize the way in which past, present, and future are interwoven. Bill, shaken by Anse's admission that he has not returned to the Shore since he abandoned it twenty-six years earlier, does more than simply recall his summer of 1919: he possesses "a knowledge, a familiarity, more pervasive surely than anything you could trace to a single summer. It came to him in a slow flash of recognition, definite as the inner revelation of love" (thus Bruce connects his vision of time's pervasiveness in life to the quality that is a saving grace of Shore experience—human love). Bruce creates a "timeless country"—not like that of the Canaans who dwell in the present only (that is, without time)—in that the barriers between past, present and future disappear so that planes of perception flow through *all* time and not simply in straightforward, chronological fashion. For Bill, "This was no longer a tale heard. This was life, and woven into it were living threads of his own youth, alive again . . . Out of the far past he was looking into a nearer past and a present. Both unknown to him. But alive on the Channel Shore."

In the winter of 1933-34 Alan *Marshall* is fourteen and has a younger half-sister out of the marriage of Grant to Renie Fraser. Grant's feeling for Alan is "rooted" in the past, in the time of Anna and Hazel and Anse, but because of Anse there is always a doubt about his son's feelings for him gnawing at Grant's heart. Alan, meanwhile, is also disturbed by his connection with Anse because of the "sly hints" thrown at him by the offspring of trouble-makers in the community and because of his own snippets of memory that he refuses to bury. What Alan can do that Grant cannot, and essentially because of his spiritual connection with Richard McKee, his grandfather, is accept that what is bothering him is fastened to *all* that he knows and feels of the Shore. The contents of Richard's sea-chest, practical items and snapshots from the past, make Alan "for the first time conscious of glimpsing yesterday, today, and tomorrow as part of a continuing whole. It put things in balance . . ." Thus Alan's sense of being linked to Anse is "not something isolated, but . . . related to other incidents, other brief incidents that moved with colour and life."

When Anse finally returns to the Shore in 1946, Grant is not prepared to deal with him: "He turned away from it, swept it from his

thinking . . . He had settled that . . .” Years before, however, in that winter of 1933-34, Grant had wanted to send Alan away from the Shore to protect both the boy and himself, and it was Alan who rose to meet the challenge. He spoke to Anse’s mother, Josie Gordon, and without her ever revealing things directly, Alan had his origins confirmed. Josie’s service to Alan was that she couched her history of his birth and childhood in “a story of the Channel Shore.” Thus Alan “knew that into it his own life was somehow woven, but the tenseness had gone out of him. This was the beginning of certainty.” From this point on Alan realizes that time consists of “the bright and the ugly, the familiar and the strange”; so the boy who follows his *father* Grant on the continuum of time contributes to Grant’s perception of a movement more than linear, “the whole of life as it included himself and his people, his place and the Channel Shore.”

Bill Graham and Anse return to the Shore separately and for different reasons, but almost simultaneously—Bill to rediscover the once-familiar territory and build upon what has taken place since 1919, Anse to continue to assert his isolated self despite the intervening years that further emphasize the void within him where a sense of time should be. Margaret Marshall (Alan’s half-sister) fears Anse, that he “could break the shell of the past and re-set the pattern of the present.” But in refusing to acknowledge his heritage except as he can manipulate it (including the heritage he has passed on), Anse fails to recognize the bond between Alan and Grant “deeper and more telling than the accident of the blood.” As well, Margaret and Alan have discovered a love for one another that goes beyond their previous brother-sister relationship. Each knows that they are not siblings, but for form’s sake holds to the community’s accustomed view of them. Margaret, like Hazel before her, fights against the inevitable “unfolding [of events] in an unhurried, slow-changing pattern . . . What she hoped for, perversely, was the swift stroke of drama.” And, like Hazel before her, she is therefore attracted to Anse as a “possibility of release.” Anse will be that release alright, but not as an independent force. Rather, Bruce portrays ironically Anse’s attempted control of events in time: even as he is increasingly sure of the strength of his “private power” in regard to the eventual possession of Alan, Anse moves further within the Shore pattern of things, acting out his inevitable part on a stage much larger than the one his egotistical self has designed.

The mid-August picnic has taken place on the Shore for over eighty years. As each of the central characters comes down to the beach, he

or she is involved in the relationship of time past and present. Margaret is concerned about the slow unfolding; Alan, though with knowledge on his side, has "a sense of time in precarious balance," as if a collision rather than a merging might occur; Grant senses that "somewhere in these images [of the past] there was a message for him, a clarification"; Richard McKee, recalling his meeting years before with his bride-to-be at just such a picnic, is unable to tell "whether what he heard [now] was the actual snap of canvas . . . or sound remembered"; Anse is "stirred with memory," yes, but only as it contributes to his feelings of "power . . . temptation . . . ambition"—such things are to be concentrated in a specific moment he will choose in order to control and defy the Shore.

Precisely because what unfolds between Alan and Anse is part of what has been always been unfolding on the Shore, Anse, in his rejection of the "continuing whole," fails to master the future as he wishes: "The essence of the Shore was that you couldn't foresee anything. All you could see were the following waves of time." Anse attempts to claim Alan, to insist Alan belongs to the private experience of Anse Gordon only; but Alan belongs to the Shore of which his blood father is just a part. Anse, it turns out, is only "the emptiness of fact in the face of warm and living truth," and like the fact of Alan's and Margaret's having lived together as brother and sister for over twenty years, he is absorbed into and by the truth, the flowing of time along the Shore. Alan rejects the Anse who would claim and dominate him, but he does not, in affirming the depth of his attachment to Grant, deny his blood origins. It is because he is Anse Gordon's son that he can admit to the world his love of Margaret. Bruce's community, with Anse and James Marshall no longer threats, can *in time* accept Alan and Margaret as man and wife because the future is not for any individual or group to determine: "If the people were alright, time would work it out."

In his novel Bruce focusses on a specific cape and inlet of the Channel Shore which he calls Currie Head. Although other place-names are mentioned, most of the action concerning Alan, Grant, Anse, and the rest is centered at the Head. But in his collection of connected short stories, *The Township of Time*<sup>4</sup> (1959), "the sweep of time and of mortality" includes generations of Shore inhabitants and delineation of a larger, physical territory. Places on the Shore briefly mentioned in the novel now serve as settings for individual stories: Copeland, Forester's

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4. Charles Bruce, *The Township of Time* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada Ltd., 1959).

Pond, Katen's Rocks, Findlay's Bridge; and Toronto, New York, and the American Southwest figure prominently. Bruce subtitles his text "A Chronicle" as it is a narrative of events in order of time, beginning with the courtship and marriage of Colin Forester and Lydia Willoughby in "The Sloop" (1786) and seeming to end with "Schoolhouse Hill" in 1950. But in this last story a man returns to Findlay's Bridge to find the Shore is not "a region backward and static and bounded in space and fixed in time . . . What . . . was . . . here was continuity. The continuity of birth and death and venture."

*The Township of Time* is replete with such discoveries on the part of those who are all descendants of Colin and Lydia. Bruce attempts to affirm this township as something more than fiction by supplying a genealogical chart at the end of the book and apologizing for its incomplete state. The record he provides of lives in time through the stories and with the chart is meant to be representative as well as actual: "To trace the entire proliferation of any one of them [the individuals who have inhabited the Shore], let alone the whole lot, would be to get hopelessly lost in a forest of family, with no tall pine to get you out of it." Thus Bruce does not offer his chronicle as fiction but as a "selective" account of lives in time that two *people*, not characters, named Colin and Lydia Forester "would consider . . . reasonably fair and representative." The selection process, indicated by the dates which follow each story's title, seems to fix experience chronologically and to emphasize the mortality of individuals. There are also gaps in the 164-year history, ranging from the year between "The Sloop" (1786) and "Tidewater Morning" (1787) to the twenty-one years between "Juniper" (1813) and "Cadence" (1834). But if people on the Shore are young, age, and die, they later reappear as vital ancestors for those members of future generations who recognize their kinship "in the rushing tide" of time.

None of the characters who dwell in and around Currie Head between 1919 and 1946 in Bruce's novel receive prominent mention in the short stories, though these inhabitants of the Head and the wider Shore share common ancestors and a sense of the living past. But one man who was born at the Head and spent his boyhood there is Andrew Graham, father of Bill, and he is the protagonist of "Duke Street" (1896). Sixty-two years before Andrew's meeting with his "ancient cousin" Naomi Harvey on Duke Street in Toronto, seventeen-year-old Naomi Neill encounters her school-teacher and future husband, Francis Harvey, in "Cadence" (1834). Bruce has Francis gaze ahead into time



as he tries to deal with his attraction to Naomi: "How will it be when Naomi Neill is eighty? That would be when? Sixty-three years from now. Well, sixty-two and something over . . . Eighteen-hundred and ninety-six . . . You couldn't see that far." Francis's thoughts have come from Naomi's tales of her grandfather ("old Richard McKee"!); Borne back into the past, Francis considers the future, much as an aging Colin Forester did in 1813 when he planted junipers on his land to represent his sons and watched the trees "slight and graceful, beginning . . . their long growth into Time."

Naomi Harvey in 1896 teaches the sceptical Andrew Graham (a mathematics major at university who has felt "duty-bound" to visit her) about time and his participation in its flow. Listening to her recall tales of the Shore and of her meeting with Francis, Andrew recalls that "Somewhere he has heard that to the Hebrews time is a unity. Past, present, and future merged and continuing . . . [Now] it was as if the walls of time were down." Andrew senses Naomi's need to have her own tale "live in memory," so he too looks ahead "fifty, eighty, a hundred years from now" to someone else looking back "to form in words the tenuous cadence of that story." This *someone* is Bill Graham's father, old and retired in Toronto, exactly fifty years later, but in *The Channel Shore*, who fingers the "tarnished silver stag" paperweight given him by Naomi. Speaking "with more gentleness" than his son can remember him using before, Andrew allows that a return to the Shore is something worthwhile that he himself has missed. Andrew has, apparently, given himself over to a life of books and ambition since he last saw Naomi in 1896, but her influence has lingered, especially as it was Andrew who sent Bill to the Shore for a summer in 1919 "To see the country he had sprung from." The simultaneous movement through time and from book to book of Andrew Graham and the paperweight, and the relationship between Andrew, his ancestors, and inheritors, suggests that the theme of time's unity not only binds together Bruce's individual fictions but transcends and contains them as well.

I have stated previously that *The Township of Time* seems to end with the story "Schoolhouse Hill" (1950). Here Bruce stops writing; there are no more words. In "Schoolhouse Hill" the narrator leaves the Shore (like Bill Graham, having returned after a long absence) and from the train sees the graves of his ancestors, a "patch of cradle-hills among the scattered spruce . . ." The graves and the cradle are something old and new at the same time; not fine and private end-places, but part of the "continuing whole" Bruce has emphasized so often. The

term that the narrator employs to make clear the symbolic quality of the graves, which on the surface are all that remains of Channel Shore experience, might prompt the perceptive reader to consider Bruce's words in his Chronicle and novel as such "cradle-hills." Like the graves, words *about*, *in*, and *of* time are "Not runes on ancient stone, left for the speculation and conjecture of later learning, not precise records in the stilted language of the antiquarians, between the covers of books, but cramped lines in a scribbler, the slow labour of a childish hand, a signature in the earth."

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