

MCLENNAN'S ATHANASE TALLARD: ROBERT OWEN IN SAINT-MARC

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The dominant theme of *Two Solitudes* underlies even that work's opening description of the Ottawa River as it "flows out of Protestant Ontario into Catholic Quebec."¹ However, another of the novel's themes, concerning the demise of an archaic social order, while subsumed by the larger theme of French-English relations, is also anticipated in this opening passage:

From the Ontario border down to the beginning of the estuary, the farmland runs in two delicate bands along the shores, with roads like a pair of village main streets a thousand miles long, each parallel to the river. All the good land was broken long ago, occupied and divided among seigneurs and their sons, and then among tenants and their sons. Bleak wooden fences separate each strip of farm from its neighbour, running straight as rulers set at right angles to the river to form long narrow rectangles pointing inland. The ploughed land looks like the course of a gigantic and empty steeplechase where all motion has been frozen (p. 1).

Saint-Marc parish, the setting for most of the novel's first half, embodies in small this "eternal pattern of Quebec" (p. 78). We are introduced first to Father Beaubien, the parish priest and a figure in every way representative of old Quebec and its deeply ingrained conservatism: "His mind moving slowly, cautiously as always, the priest visioned the whole of French-Canada as a seed-bed for God, a seminary of French parishes speaking the plain old French of their Norman forefathers, continuing the battle of the Counter-Reformation" (p. 6). Father Beaubien's image of the "seed-bed" is important, for it emphasizes the agrarian character of Saint-Marc which complements religion in the vision of a pre-Reformation feudal society to which the priest tenaciously clings. Indeed, the three main features of this "eternal pattern" are "the Church, the people, and the land" (p. 28), fundamental and permanent, timeless and unchanging.

1. Hugh MacLennan, *Two Solitudes* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978). All further page references will be to this edition.

Unfortunately, history is not static. Poised against Saint-Marc's way of life are English Canadian magnates—"Presbyterian to a man" (p. 104)—like Huntly McQueen, who visits Saint-Marc in chapter three at the invitation of Athanase Tallard, a member of parliament and the wealthiest land-owner in the parish. Impressed by the potential power of a waterfall on the river just below Saint-Marc, McQueen envisages a factory there. The resulting conflict is obvious enough. To the traditionalists like Father Beaubien and Marius Tallard, Athanase's fiercely anti-English son, a factory would be the ruination of Saint-Marc. They see, correctly as it turns out, "chimneys spilling black smoke over the fields, the village cluttered with new, raw, cheap houses and cheap people imported for labour" (p. 44). To McQueen such developments are inevitable, even desirable, and in any case "no one with sense should ever try to swim against the current . . . And the current is unmistakable" (p. 74).

However, a third view is present in the novel, which offers at least the possibility of compromise. Athanase Tallard is in many ways a man divided. To say, as Robert H. Cockburn has, that he "aligns himself with the wider world of national responsibility while Beaubien stands for narrow provincialism"² is to simplify both the issue and the man. Athanase is descended from the seigneurs of the early French colonization. Still living in his family's old seignior house, and a wealthy man by Saint-Marc's standards, he retains something of the authority of a feudal lord in the parish. Moreover, he is deeply conscious of this traditional role:

He never mingled with the villagers man to man, and it would have been resented had he tried to do so. Yet whenever he was with them on their own ground a special kind of friendliness established itself, it was as though they recognized each other and confirmed the fact that they were separate branches of the same tree (p. 21).

The organic metaphor of the tree, similar in kind to Father Beaubien's "seed-bed," indicates a land-based and essentially feudal conception of society.³ But there is another, seemingly contradictory, side to Athanase which eventually sets him at odds with Saint-Marc. Along with his

2. *The Novels of Hugh MacLennan* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1969), p. 49.

3. For a discussion of such essentially "conservative" metaphors, see James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963).

seigniorial heritage, he has inherited the traditionally "anti-clerical" bias of the Tallards (p. 8). Intolerant of the authority of God and Church, he worships only "the authority of the mind, of the logical idea" (p. 143). Thus he is very much a son of the Enlightenment, a "free-thinker," in the words of his son Marius (p. 35), and in his study hang prints of Voltaire and Rousseau (p. 84). However, although Athanase recognizes that the "old age of faith and the soil" must give way to science (p. 79), his conservative side is apprehensive of the consequences. To McQueen's complacent remark that "The feudal system may be profitable, Tallrd. But a powe dam would be a lot more so," he cautiously responds: "Are you thinking Saint-Marc should be turned into a factory town? Is that your notion of progress?" (p. 16). Quebec's dilemma, as Athanase well knows, lies in this: "How could she become scientific and yet save her legend?" (p. 79).

This same dilemma, of course, has repeated itself throughout history. In an article when appeared in the *Dalhousie Review* of 1935-36, MacLennan described the evolution of Patriarchal Rome into a Republic, a process which doomed an "erstwhile feudal society."⁴ Underlying this article's argument, significantly, is the Spenglerian thesis that the historian can "utilize history to explain his own time."⁵ Thinking of history in such terms, then, MacLennan surely could not avoid contemplating the more proximate comparison of Saint-Marc with Europe of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Indeed, if Father Beaubien implicitly associates the free-thinking Athanase with the Enlightenment rationalism which culminated in the French Revolution (p. 6), he also identifies him with "the forces of materialism" which threaten Saint-Marc (p. 138), and which had supplanted old agrarian Europe over a century before. But, as we have seen, Athanase is not the uncompromising exponent of the Industrial Revolution that the priest believes him to be. Although he is exasperated by the narrow provincialism of his people, Athanase is nevertheless deeply conscious of the "collective instinct" which so strongly binds them (p. 22), making them "loyal to their race as to a family unit" (p. 77). Even the factory proposed by Huntly McQueen, however inevitable in the long run, must allow for and somehow preserve this close-knit bond.

It is interesting to note that about one hundred years earlier, in nineteenth-century Britain, a well-known entrepreneur and industrialist

4. "Roman History and To-Day," *Dalhousie Review*, XV (1935-36), 73.

5. *Ibid.*, 67.

held views remarkably similar to those of Athanase Tallard. A factory owner himself, Robert Owen nevertheless deplored the “jarring interests” arising from *laissez-faire* economics which he felt were “on the extreme point of severing all the old connexions of society.”⁶ New Lanark, his famous factory-village situated by the falls of the river Clyde in Scotland, was an attempt to adapt the paternalist rural tradition of feudalism to urban industrial society. Founded on the feudal concept of a reciprocity of obligation between men rather than on economic interest, Owen’s experiment strove to retain the closely-knit unit of the old agricultural community. The factory-village envisaged by Athanase coincides with Owen’s in both its general conception and in its particulars. New Lanark provided housing for the workers, a public kitchen, a communal dining-room, exercise room, school, nursery, lecture-room and church—all directed towards the social good. Athanase is similarly determined to realize, in Saint-Marc, more than a profit:

This was going to be one time . . . when industry was going to be made to mean something more. He knew what he wanted here: the factory would become the foundation of the parish, lifting the living standards, wiping out debts, keeping the people in their homes where they had been born, giving everyone a chance. It would enable them to have a model school that could provide modern scientific training. Then they would have a hospital, a public library, a playground, finally a theatre as the parish grew into a town. It would be a revolution, and he would be the one to plan and control it (pp. 100-101).

The conception is essentially feudal, with the factory owner assuming the paternal role of manor lord and all the duties towards his feudal charges attendant on that role. At the same time, it is very much a product of an Enlightenment faith in reason. For Owen, his model factory village was to be the means whereby his workers would be educated into rationality,⁷ and a similar notion lies behind Athanase’s belief that a modern scientific education is the answer for French Canada. Moreover, it is this naive belief, that “ideas are the things that change the whole world” (p. 200), which ultimately defeats the vision. Reality, stubbornly refusing to fit the “general pattern,” falls well short

6. Robert Owen, *A New View of Society and Report to the County of New Lanark*, ed. V.A.C. Gatrell (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 220.

7. See Harold Silver, “Owen’s Reputation as an Educationalist” in *Robert Owen: Prophet of the Poor*, ed. Sidney Pollard and John Salt (London: Macmillan, 1971).

of the abstract ideal which, in his mind's eye, Athanase has seen "standing in clean lines before him" (p. 99).

Whether Athanase Tallard is based specifically on Robert Owen must remain largely a matter for speculation. So far as I am aware, there is no mention of either Owen or of his theories anywhere in MacLennan's writings—although, of course, Owen is a notable figure in British social history and influential theorists like Engels recognized a debt to him.⁸ The founder of New Lanark was more fortunate than Athanase in having actually realized his factory-village, even if its success was limited. As Father Beaubien has foreseen, Siant-Marc becomes a vicious industrial town. Still, the historical analogue sheds valuable light on the character of Athanase Tallard and on his role in MacLennan's novel. Owen, it has been said, was a matter who neither achieved great practical success nor created an original system of thought. His contribution lay in his humanity and in his belief that every man, regardless of his state, had a right to a "full humanity."⁹ Certainly there could be no more apt description of what Athanase Tallard represents in *Two Solitudes*.

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8. *Ibid.*, p. x.

9. *Ibid.*