

COMING OF WINTER, COMING OF AGE:
THE AUTUMNAL VISION OF DAVID ADAMS
RICHARDS' FIRST NOVEL

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David Adams Richards' early fiction deserves re-evaluation. Richards was one of a surprising number of promising Canadian fiction writers to gain critical attention in the first decade of the country's second century. At first considered one of the less impressive, he is one of the few who have not only fulfilled their initial promise but surpassed it. His output has been steady: in addition to experiments with verse drama, he has produced three novels and a collection of short stories in less than ten years. But more important than quantity, both the thematic scope of his work and his mastery of technique have increased markedly with each of his longer works.

It must be understood, however, that saying Richards' work has improved substantially need not imply that his first novel, *The Coming of Winter* (1974), is inconsequential. Both *Blood Ties* (1976) and the admirably complex and powerful *Lives of Short Duration* (1981) take place in the fictional world established in *The Coming of Winter*. And although his later novels show progressive refinement and increasing daring in technique, no marked break with the method of his first novel is discernible. Finally, considered in the light of Richards' later work, *The Coming of Winter* can be seen to yield a great deal that contemporary evaluations overlooked.

Although most reviewers found more to praise in Richards' first novel than to object to, they generally felt it necessary to qualify their praise. Most saw his perceptions of the world as both callow (Richards was only twenty-three at the time) and narrow. Most also approached *The Coming of Winter* as thematically limited realism—the work of a somewhat naive, albeit talented, observer of a regional setting who dealt mainly in surfaces. This initial tendency to place Richards in the important Canadian tradition of regional realism was natural in view of his talent for capturing the details of life in his region, yet it is unfortunate that Richards' success in depicting the surfaces of his characters' restricted lives should have caused so many critics to miss the psycho-

logical and symbolic depth beneath these surfaces. No only is *The Coming of Winter* a far more impressive artistic achievement than even its early admirers allowed; it also, as Richards' first and most accessible novel, provides a valuable introduction to his growing canon.

Set in and around the town of Newcastle in northeastern New Brunswick, *The Coming of Winter* deals on its surface with two weeks in the life of an unexceptional young man named Kevin Dulse. Kevin turns twenty-one; he shoots a cow while hunting deer and is caught by the owner; he gets married; he suffers chemical burns in the dead-end job to which the responsibility of marriage will condemn him; he loses one of his two closest friends in a car accident and permanently alienates the other; he has a car accident of his own while bidding a drunken farewell to bachelorhood and the freedom of youth. In summary this seems an eventful two weeks, but critics generally have considered the novel uneventful, stressing its bleakness, its hopelessness, its lack of drama. The prevailing view is that Richards' primary aim is social criticism of his native region and that he accomplishes this end by depicting it as a soul-killing cultural backwater. While his success in depicting the limitations of the Miramichi Region is generally admitted, most critics suggest that his art is limited by his subject matter and intention.

So it is that the brilliance of the surface obscures the depth beneath. Like Richards' later novels, *The Coming of Winter* conveys its meaning on two levels—one realistic, one symbolic. On the one hand is the social reality, which critics have rightly viewed as negative; on the other is a spiritual reality, which critics have largely ignored. Concentrating on the realistic surface of Richards' work naturally encourages the idea that he views his region negatively because at this level he does. However, Richards is more concerned with his characters' feelings, with a spiritual intensity that runs counter to the soul-killing social circumstances that make up the surface of their lives. Capturing this inner life is made difficult by the kind of characters in which it occurs. Though psychologically complex, Richards' characters are far more emotional than intellectual; they are inarticulate and not given to self-analysis, and therefore he represents their inner lives symbolically rather than directly. His main characters tend to be poetic thinkers; much of their depth stems from a response to nature and natural cycles, which works at a level more fundamental than their command of language can capture. As Richards recently expressed the relationship of his people to their region, "our triumph and tragedy is living in a land that contains so

much power."¹ He is fascinated by characters who, partly from heredity and partly from a response to the natural "power" of their region, become misfits, incapable of accepting the mediocrity of conventionally respectable social norms. Because the intensity of their inner being is in large part a response to nature, Richards commonly represents it in terms of natural images and cycles.

While Richards normally does not concentrate on building dramatic tension between characters, his work is enriched by the continuous dialectic between spirit and convention. What the dialectic finally comes down to is inner life and inner death, but his different works explore various aspects of that basic dialectic through a variety of symbolic representations. In *The Coming of Winter* the prevailing symbol is the coming of winter as a representation of the passage from youth to conventional maturity, which, it is implied, involves at least partial submission to spiritual defeat. Certainly social criticism is inherent in this, but the social criticism is not the main point; it is the essentially spiritual resistance to social pressures that matters most to Richards.

The basic dialectic between the forces of life and the forces denying life evolves complexly from work to work, and its evolution is represented in a variety of symbolic pairings far beyond the scope of a single article. However, the symbolism associated with the coming of winter in this first novel will serve well as an introduction.

It is worth noting that Richards' symbolic association of winter and aging did not originate with *The Coming of Winter*. His fascination with the repulsive aspects of aging is linked with an autumnal setting in *Small Heroics*, a little known book of poems that appeared in the New Brunswick Chapbook series in 1972. The poems are filled with the barrenness of autumn, the killing frost of winter, and the decay of old age, and *Small Heroics* presents at least as bleak a view of life as the novel that followed. Also apparent in these poems is a contrast between society's submission to the emotionally sterile autumnal world and a wilder spirit sustained in nature; this contrast prefigures the conflict in the novels between respectable society and the wild, rebellious social outcasts for whom Richards reserves a special fund of sympathy. *Small Heroics* suggests the fundamental importance in Richards' work of the misfits whose defiance of conventional respectability is also a defiance of the spiritual stultification that this conventional approach to life promotes.

¹David Adams Richards, "Northern New Brunswick—A Personal Reflection," *U.N.B. Perspectives*, December, 1983, p. 4.

In *Small Heroics* the atmosphere of human and autumnal decay dominates; defiance of the prevailing mood erupts only occasionally. However, in *The Coming of Winter* the awareness of resistance is more sustained. Although Kevin Dulse is unable to resist the patterns of behavior imposed upon him by his society, he is by no means unconscious of what he is losing by giving in, and his subjective reactions to events play a large part in defining the dialectic between youth and age. Kevin's antagonistic feelings toward older people around him are evident from the outset, even before his friends become involved in the action. When he is caught with the dead cow, he associates his adversaries with age. He sees "the old farmer stepping calmly and stiffly toward him"; the cow is "the stupid old cow."² Afterward he feels "happy, excited, nervous"; the wildness of the woods inspires him to confront the staid adult world with his act of rebellion:

He smelt the blood and huntsclothes and he felt it was proper that he did for it gave him a wildness and a roughness, an uncontrollable energy. He wished to tell everyone what he had done. He wished to confront a stranger, a middle-aged man or woman and say: "I was out hunting today, you know, and in this field I met a cow—." Yes, he wished to say it but couldn't so he decided instead to go to the tavern where friends of his would be. (p. 12)

This retreat to the tavern or just to getting drunk is typical in the more spirited characters throughout Richards' fiction. Drunkenness is the last line of defence against a society that in its dominant, proper form is so narrow and repressive that, as Richards put it later, "it would take an imbecile or a lunatic not to become a drunk before he was twenty."³ But ironically this defence is no defence: it is as traditional, as much a part of the social order, as the boredom and complacency out of which it grows, and the young people who attempt to escape the adult world in the tavern find that it has preceded them. On the tavern doorstep Kevin notes "the dirt and gobs of spit from the diseased throats of old men."⁴ The waiters are repressive; those truly at home there are the life-defeated veterans, who sit quietly in dim corners talking of bygone wars.

Kevin's obsession with the repulsive aspects of age and his pent up antagonism toward older people reflect his fear of what his own future will make him. Yet, essentially tractable by nature, he pursues

²David Adams Richards, *The Coming of Winter* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1974), p. 11.

³David Adams Richards, *Lives of Short Duration* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1981), p. 114.

⁴*The Coming of Winter*, p. 13.

his future almost fatalistically; although he sees the problems inherent in typical patterns of local life, he cannot resist them.

Kevin's parents, especially his father, show that his apprehensions about assuming the responsibilities of married life are justified. Clinton Dulse had tried in his day to rebel against the restricted life in which his early marriage had trapped him, but by the time of the novel's action he has been broken, and in stunned acceptance is merely waiting out the rest of his life:

He was 56 years old now and fished no longer, owning a small store and operating a school bus for support. He was tall and brown-faced and walked with a crooked sway. He was never loud in any way as if experience had taught him not to be and he rarely spoke either to argue nor to laugh. He never drank now though he used to and he never bothered with his wife now though he used to beat her. (p. 46)

But it was not hatred. He had not beaten his wife in hatred. It was rather an acute understanding at that boyhood age that everything was so hopelessly lost—that he would die never leaving the river to which he had been born. (p. 49)

He never went to war. He had wanted to so desperately that he sometimes cried because he felt that in it was his one chance. He had two cousins who were lost at sea and at times he wished he were one of them. But the war ended and Kevin was born and one night he found himself an old man with his wife coming in to where he was and sitting beside him agitated, and though she was only 36 and still had her slimness, she was also old. (p. 50)

Given the dismal object lesson provided by his parents, Kevin should, it would seem, know better than to settle down to an unenthusiastic marriage at twenty-one, but Kevin is himself an illustration of another lesson: that succeeding generations in places like the Miramichi Region tend to repeat mistakes rather than learning from those who came before: few can resist indefinitely the ingrained cycles shaping their lives.

While Kevin's parents represent his future, they lack the vitality to influence him greatly to accept it or resist it. Far more influential are his friend John Delano and his fiancée Pamela, who also have an important symbolic function. At the symbolic level, Kevin serves Richards as an Everyman figure upon whom personified forces act; more clearly than any other characters, Kevin's best friend and best man John Delano and his fiancée Pamela personify these antithetical forces.

It is worth noting that, while Kevin is undeniably the center of the action in *The Coming of Winter*, Richards has said that he is not the

most interesting character. According to Richards, Kevin lacks "backbone," and the current he was trying to get at was John.⁵ While Kevin is a representative youth more or less submissively acted upon by the forces of complacency and the narrowness that Richards deplors in his region, John, more clearly than any character before the Terri boys of *Lives of Short Duration* (1981), embodies the spirit of resistance that runs counter to the deadly monotony of respectable adult life. Only by underestimating the importance of John can the common critical approach to *The Coming of Winter* as latter-day rural naturalism be made to seem appropriate.

Notwithstanding his sympathy with John, Richards is fair in dealing with the two sides. John is rowdy, drunken, and self-destructive, and, along with problems peculiar to his rural New Brunswick environment, he embodies many of the contradictions and confusions typical of troubled North American youth in the late 1960s. His gifts are far from obvious, and they have generally been missed by critics. Pamela, on the other hand, is responsible and has almost too few vices; she is respectable by small-town standards and superficially seems a more attractive character than her deeply troubled adversary.

Nevertheless, Pamela is very much a part of a course in life that represents the death of the soul. It is not without symbolic significance that Kevin associates Pamela's work as a nurse with death and dying:

... Pamela was never embarrassed.

He did not know what she did exactly. She was a nurse but he never understood exactly what she did. She told him things, she frightened him; she told him of all the people who were frail and old looking and died there every day. "You never know when you're going to be taken." That was the expression she often used. He questioned her about it, understanding that she loved to be questioned, especially about her work.

She had seen all sorts of things happen, she said, people dropping off like flies all around her, blood transfusions and women with their insides taken out so they wouldn't bleed to death. She said that that was a very common thing. She said though that most of the people who died were old people who had strokes, and that some of the old men didn't even know where they were half the time...⁶

At times Pamela treats Kevin more like a patient or a child than a man to whom she will soon be married. Oddly, since she cannot be much

⁵Quoted by Phil Milner, "Yoknapatawpha, N.B.," *Books in Canada*, October, 1980, pp. 5-6.

⁶*The Coming of Winter*, p. 53.

older than he is, the wildness of youth is totally foreign to her nature; yet she is very much aware of it in Kevin and his friends and regards it as something to be suppressed. As the following exchange between Pamela and Kevin shows, her general objection to irresponsibility and high spirits makes John her natural enemy:

“John, John always John, what the fuck you got against him anyway?”

She glared at him and would not speak. For a long time they were silent again. *Slut*, he would call her. *Slut*.

“So it’s probably the last time I’ll be around with them after I’m married, after you get your claws into me!”

“Claws!” she said, looking over to him again, her voice rising.

“Claws, what in hell do you want to do—be seventeen all your life? Those guys are acting now just the same as they acted then—and in ten years if they’re still alive they’ll be acting the same damn way. They’ll never change no matter what happens, fires or floods, they’ll still be hanging around the streets searching for money to buy wine. You have to grow up—those days are over. Some time you have to!” she said.

. . . “Why do they have to change—what’s the big big reason!”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because there’s no reason to do what they do—that’s why.” (pp. 207-208)

There is not a debate; no one can win. Rather it is a demonstration of the gulf separating the views of life held by the future couple. Pamela’s world is not Kevin’s world, but he will soon have to live in her world because he lacks the “backbone,” as Richards put it, to sustain his own.

John, on the other hand, is more tenacious in holding on to the youthful cult of irresponsibility. Although he too is confused about what he should do with his life, his perception of what is involved in choices are keener, if more pessimistic, than Kevin’s. John will burn out fighting the undefeatable—time—year by year or hour by hour. Even as a child he is the last to relinquish the excitement of the night: as he walks aimlessly round the town after his friend Andy’s funeral, he remembers sleeping on the street in summer “not wishing to face his parents nor wishing to give up the good night which his friends had given up hours before” (p. 110). He is still the last to give in.

Marriage—to John letting the good nights go—seems absurd, repulsive, a betrayal almost unnatural: “Marriage! It came through his mind like a storm, as if the word in itself had something disgusting to

it" (p. 124). The prospect brings images of autumn and age, the novel's main symbolic undercurrent, to his mind:

The sky had grown white with small cold clouds changing the colour of the trees. It was like Armistice Day now with the smell of the bare white interior of the Armouries, the uniforms of the old legionnaires polished and shining, walking over the barren grounds. The shouts from the officers in the park, the air November-clean with the shouts. And he, too, polished and spit-clean walking with them in his cadet uniform. It was like that, the beginning of winter, the useless saluting and silences for the dead, the smell of rum from the old men placing wreaths, their faces flushed red with small veins, placing wreaths with a dignity that lasted only as long as the saluting and the ordering and the shouts, shaking each others hand. He was never going to grow that old—50 only, or 45—that gave him enough time to do whatever he wanted—that was a long way away, a long time yet. Never marriage either. He began to think of it again, of how Kevin was so pleased to tell him, so pleased! Kevin would grow into a useless fat old man placing wreaths. It was so obvious that he began to laugh at it. "Oh no," he kept thinking to himself, "oh no, what an asshole." Where would they live—here? Yes, probably, and what would Kevin be allowed to do—out once every two weeks! Yes. His face turned sour as he thought, and as he thought he spit, spitting into the same small pools of spit those men had left behind, and all the while glancing at the clock. (p. 125)

Even more than Kevin, John is obsessed with the passage of time and the patterns of life that lead toward emotional sterility of age. The fundamental difference between them is that John is a more active character. He cannot of course postpone growing old indefinitely, but he will not give in without resistance.

Kevin's marriage cannot be viewed as a defeat for John. He serves as Kevin's best man with the same grim control with which he carried Andy's coffin the week before, but self-control is not an indication of submission. At the novel's close, John has the last word. As a symbolic parting shot, John leads Kevin's other former friends to place a live pig in the car Kevin and Pamela are to leave in. Kevin alone understands the symbolism beyond the prank: "They had given a pig because he would call her slut. He would call her that and it was him. It was him!" (p. 258) Similarly, only Kevin catches the biblical implication of betrayal in the thirty dollars they collect.

Although Pamela achieves her purpose in marrying Kevin, John has the last word. And although he is absent, his message dominates

the close of the novel. Significantly dressed in the mill clothes to which his marriage has condemned him, Kevin leaves the marriage celebration to join his father, called repeatedly the "old man" in the last pages, and starts down a road which, in the bleak imagery associated with it, suggests the road of life he has ahead of him:

His old man hunched over the car working at it now. He picked up the tobacco lying there and shoved it into his pocket. Then he went out the door. The wind tossing into him and the sun glancing just above the trees. He went out to the road and began to walk it, walking slowly with his head to the side, spitting away from the wind the dried taste inside him. He wouldn't have minded except for that—the voice of the thing squealing. Below him the water white and dull. The voice of the thing squealing that way, the smell of its excrement on the air. But it would be frozen soon, the water and the earth. The empty thudding of his boots along the ground now, the roadway stretching almost black, and he turning and spitting now and then, the dried taste inside. (p. 259)

Winter has arrived for Kevin Dulse; at twenty-one his story is complete.

In Richards' later work aging continues to hang like a spectre in the background of the action. Annie, the senile grandmother in his second novel *Blood Ties*, exists as both a burden and an object of fear for the young characters. Leah in the same novel can become angry because she perceives herself to be "old now, 27 now."⁷ John Delano plays a significant role in this novel too, and his views of life's transience are again explored. In *Dancers at Night* (1978), a collection of short stories, "Ramsay Taylor" is the story of an aging guide of legendary skill who gets into trouble taking novices through spring rapids; as he floats downstream with the overturned canoe he accuses "himself of everything, but mostly importantly, of being old."⁸ In the same collection, "A Rural Place" combines an intransigent old woman's escape from a home for the aged with a young rebel's efforts to gain acceptance as an adult from the crew he works with. The woman's story anticipates Old Simon Terr's decision in *Lives of Short Duration* to escape from hospital and die in the woods where he has spent his working life— independent of social institutions to the end. The title of this last novel leaves no doubt about the continuing importance in Richards' work of the concern with time, transience and generations first explored in *The Coming of Winter*.

⁷David Adams Richards, *Blood Ties* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1976), p. 229.

⁸David Adams Richards, *Dancers at Night* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1978), p. 41.

In Richards' later work, however, the distinction between youth and age becomes less marked. Older characters are explored more sympathetically and at greater length, and their spiritual vitality is acknowledged. As Richards' conception of his fictional Miramichi world evolves, matures, and grows more complex, his earliest symbolic representation of the fundamental dialectic between spiritual life and death becomes inappropriately simple. Nevertheless, as Richards' first and least challenging novel, *The Coming of Winter* establishes the device of using symbolic dialectics to reflect the thematic implications of the action. It also introduces in its most accessible form the basic tension between inner intensity and external barrenness. Recognition of the fundamental importance of these aspects of Richards' first novel is prerequisite to appreciating the richness and complexity of his later work.