

Many Solitudes, One Canada

The abortive attempts of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords to bridge the constitutional divide and bring Quebec legally into the Canadian fold give *Two Solitudes* new and timely importance. Its discussion of the English-French confrontation as well as of questions of Canadian identity are illustrative given the present stalemate. However, the novel, like the authors of the Accords themselves, is so caught up in a dual French-English Canada that it forgets Canada's other "solitudes."

***Two Solitudes* by Hugh MacLennan.
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By Nicholas Breyfogle

No single word exists, within Canada itself, to designate with satisfaction to both races a native of the country. When those of the French language use the word *Canadien*, they nearly always refer to themselves. They know their English-speaking compatriots as *les Anglais*. English-speaking citizens act on the same principle. They call themselves Canadians; those of the French language French-Canadians. [From the forward].

When Hugh MacLennan first published *Two Solitudes* in 1945, this rift in nomenclature graphically symbolized the wide chasm that existed between the two peoples then considered to make up the Dominion of Canada. Despite the passing years, *Two Solitudes* continues to stand as one of the most important and most incisive works treating the questions of Canadian identity and the ethnic conflicts that lie within the fabric of Canada's makeup.

In the context of the successive failures of the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords MacLennan's novel deserves a fresh reading. Within it lies a treasure of understanding and explanation that probes deeply into the roots of the French-English confrontation and goes far to explain the contemporary animosity and intractability of the two parties. MacLennan also addresses the question of "Canadian" identity that Canadians have recently struggled to answer.

However, MacLennan's primary conception of a dual Canada—one that stands split between the rural French and

the urban, wealthy English—reflects a misconception of Canada that has taken on a contemporary political importance. The authors of Meech Lake and Charlottetown were too blinded by the dual vision, by a Canada made solely of two "solitudes," that they were unable to see the other "solitudes" that surrounded them—the indigenous peoples, other ethnicities, genders, generations, classes and regions. It was these groups, and those people who recognized the plurality of Canada, that came to haunt the accords and to block their passing.

Two Solitudes is structured around the interplay and interrelations of individual, group, and Canadian identities. The fictional format allows MacLennan, in a manner often inaccessible to the political pundit or historian, to grasp the power of the social, cultural, and religious structures that form the straightjacket of communal *mentalité*. While not personages in their own right, the communal identities of the English and French serve to channel and constrain the characters' actions. Although at times straying too far in the direction of simple stereotype, MacLennan evokes a sense of group identity that is as tangible and convincing as it is truthful.

Set initially during World War I, *Two Solitudes* traces the lives of two extended families—the Tallards and the Yardley/Methuen clan—and of Huntly McQueen, a successful and politely unscrupulous business tycoon, through the interwar period. Of French-Canadian, aristocratic background, Tallard and his

family are the novel's centerpiece. The novel traces the family's relations to the rural Quebec community of Saint-Marc in which they hold property, especially to the local priest, Father Beaubien, and to English-speaking Montreal society.

Tallard himself believes that rather than be overrun by the English, French-Canadians must begin to take control of their own destiny and a leading role in the inevitable industrialization of Quebec—an act that often means a break with hallowed traditions and practices. The French-Canadians who will truly succeed, he argues, will meet the English on their own terms—business, science, English language, and the English old school tie. He struggles to close the chasm between the French and the English but with every effort he makes he meets an opposite, often stronger, force—the “French” and “English” identities—pushing him back, reducing his efforts to futility.

Group Legends, Long Histories: The French and English

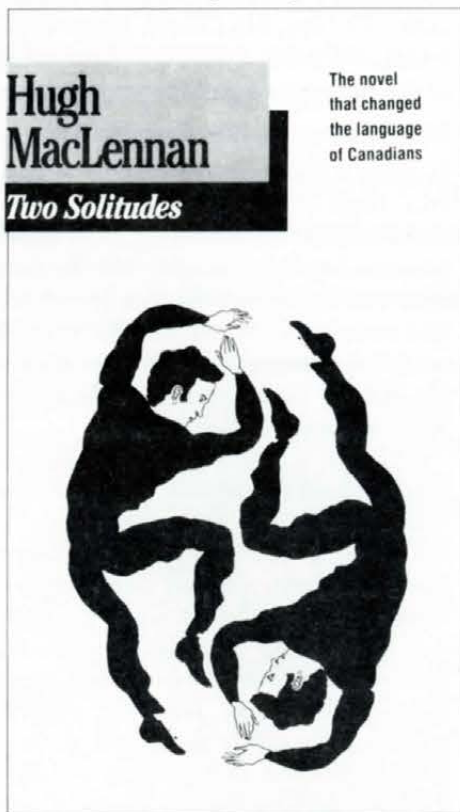
MacLennan is most evocative in his descriptions of the rural Québécois—descriptions that he builds upon the triad of church, land and people. He depicts a Quebec community that is pre-modern, self-sufficient, satisfied, and practically static. Saint-Marc is a village in which the inhabitants all know each other, in which the personal bond is all important and the giving of one's word, sufficient. The priest and the noble hold the places of most distinguished respect in the village and hold sway over the beliefs of the community.

Spirituality is deeply felt both through the organized Catholic religion and also through a quasi-animistic conviction of the power of the land and their integral connection to it. Knowledge of God, land and family are the key to an immortality and the essence of the French-Canadian soul. They are deeply connected to their family roots and are entirely cognizant that their bloodlines have for centuries saturated the same plot of land with their blood and sweat.

As for the English-Canadians, MacLennan addresses primarily the wealthy business community of Montreal. In work they strive with an almost messianic zeal to develop and build, to create, change and make money, and to amass power and influence. Like McQueen, but unlike Tallard, they do not see the trees in

the forest but rather the paper and lumber possibilities. Rather than a waterfall, they see the power for factory turbines.

In everything else they strive for stasis and to be as, or even more, English than the English are themselves. They recreate English architecture on the vast Canadian landscape, they build British



style clubs in which to meet their peers, and they develop elitist social circles around reserved dinner parties and endeavor, because of a perceived inferiority, to be even more patriotic than the British when it comes to the war.

MacLennan is equally skillful in his portrayal of the relations between English and French in Quebec. At their foundation, these are the relations of an imperial power to a colonized people. From their more or less closed communities, the French-Canadians view the English with distrust. They consider the English foreigners who have conquered French lands in Canada (decisively in 1759 at the Plains of Abraham) and subjugated the French-speaking people therein. They have brought English law and English government, have challenged the Catholic church with their Protestant practices, and, with World War I, have passed laws to enlist the flower of Quebec's youth as cannon fodder in an English war.

It is a conquest that has taken on two forms. Initially, conquest was military and political but, more recently, it has become economic—using French-Canadians as cheap labour in English owned factories. MacLennan's depiction of Quebec as an imperial holding of English Canada makes tangible the origins of the animosity that has developed between French and English. It is an animosity that combines a conflict of race, language, religion, tradition, and class and an animosity that is fed by the relations of superiority/inferiority that conquest and domination cultivate.

MacLennan considers at length the dilemma faced by imperial Quebec—a dilemma confronted by so many colonial holdings throughout the world. Their traditional way of life has come into contact with the violent forces of change that modernity and industrialization bring upon society. Tallard laments: “How could Quebec surrender to the future and still remain herself?...How could she become scientific and yet save her legend?”

But changes within their own rural communities would force French-Canadians to come to terms with the scientific, mechanized urban world. The signs of deterioration in the rural village structure were already tangible. There no longer existed sufficient work to support the entire population. Extraneous workers were being forced away from the villages and into the cities for work. As is argued in the novel, the building of a factory in rural Saint-Marc, while it would bring all sorts of change and potentially detrimental influences to the static community, would also provide the jobs necessary to keep the sons and daughters of the community at home—thereby keeping the community and its spirit intact.

The Other “Solitudes”

While MacLennan grapples primarily with English-French issues he does delve at points into a discussion of Canada's other “solitudes.” Here MacLennan begins to come to terms with the complexity of Canadian society. He portrays the other ethnicities and classes that form the patchwork of Canadian society and explores the ties that bind and separate the poor from the rich, the young from the old, and one ethnic group from another. Such analysis, however, comes only in illuminative flashes that add important texture and depth to the novel without

distracting too greatly from the main French-English struggle. Moreover, mention of the native peoples is strikingly absent.

Tallard's Irish second wife Kathleen, for example, grew up in a neighborhood that was neither the ethnically nor culturally homogeneous environment of the French speaking village or of wealthy English-speaking Montreal. She lived in an urban world of lower class immigrants of Polish, Irish, English and Jewish origin combined with transplanted French-Canadians driven for survival from the land. While all are working class people, MacLennan is quick to point out how the bonds of class are loosely tied since these groups had neither common schools, common language, common religion, nor common roots.

To Be "Canadian"

MacLennan also addresses the question of Canadian identity. He delves into issues of "Canadian-ness" which have been revived by the current constitutional debate. While MacLennan demonstrates the power of the communal legends—the looking back to respective pasts, traditions, and roots—Canadians as a whole, he intimates, exist without a "Canadian" legend. Lacking the centrifugal force of an overarching concept of national identity, Canada resembles a nucleus, a core around which a variety of bodies revolve—different, detached and yet held in their path by an often undefinable magnetic pull.

Canada is forever dwarfed by the gargantuan sense of identity and manifest destiny that saturates the southern part of the continent. As well, they are burdened by the weight of the strong identities of the two peoples who colonized it—the French and the English. The power of these three identities—both internal and external to Canada—make the "Canadian" vision of itself, by nature less dramatic and all-embracing, seem somehow lacking and unimportant.

Yet, even without a "Canadian" legend, simply by virtue of their existence on a different land with a different past, Canadians stand distinct from those around them. MacLennan mockingly berates those who would strive to clone English, French or American identities in Canada's search for its own—those who would allow external cultural dominance. "Is there anything in the United States

like the Saint Lawrence valley? For that matter, is there anything in the States like us - the collective us?" MacLennan asserts that Canada, with its mixed salad of group legends, does have an identity both strong and powerful that is, in and of itself, even more solid and aged than its American, French and English counterparts. Perhaps, MacLennan seems to be saying, the quiet, understated knowledge of distinctiveness is in fact enough.

Many Solitudes, One Constitution

In light of the recent constitutional failures, Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* deserves a careful re-reading. The novel provides important insights into the reasons why the French-English confrontation remains to be solved. Of course, much has changed since the time of writing and the world depicted by MacLennan is not always found today.

Quebec is clearly no longer simply a rural, agricultural society. It has developed industrially as well as commercially and many French-Canadians have taken part. Moreover, national consciousness among Québécois has grown in the post-war period into a political platform, demands for greater autonomy and, occasionally, terrorism. However, despite efforts on the part of the federal government to promote such projects as bilingualism, the longstanding questions and dilemmas outlined by MacLennan remain: the feelings of conquest and domination by English-Canadians, the fear of engulfment by English speaking North America, the problem of preserving traditions, language, roots and culture, and the issues of Canadian identity.

Yet, in the final analysis, *Two Solitudes*, as a work of social investigation, comes up slightly short in today's world. Canada can no longer be considered simply a bi-polar nation. For better or for worse, it is a land of many solitudes. However, few of the politicians and civil servants who framed the Meech Lake or Charlottetown Accords acknowledged this reality. They were as caught in the straightjacket of French/English identity as the characters in *Two Solitudes* themselves. In their intent and inherent in their assumptions they conceived of a Canada constructed of "two solitudes"—the problem as they saw it amounted to no more than the binding of French and English.

In place of this Canada, however,

they quickly and shockingly discovered a Canada built of multiple solitudes—of native peoples, of genders, of generations, of many ethnicities, of classes, of languages, of religions and of regions. As they strove to bridge the constitutional gap between Quebec and the rest of Canada, they discovered the gaps that also exist between the constitution and many of these other "solitudes." This fatal error, this misunderstanding of the true nature of Canada, led to the constitutional debacle in which Canada finds itself today. The authors of the Accords may not have been able to satisfy all needs and demands—and perhaps should not have tried—but an awareness of the snares that lay ahead could have mitigated the results.

In closing, however, MacLennan leaves us with a hope for the future of Canada that stands as valid today as it did when he wrote it:

In all his life, [Paul] had never seen an English-Canadian and a French-Canadian hostile to each other face to face. When they disliked, they disliked entirely in the group. And the result of these two group-legends was a Canada oddly naive, so far without any real villains, without overt cruelty or criminal memories, a country strangely innocent in its groping individual common sense, intent on doing the right thing in the way some children are...

And later, as World War II broke out:

Then, even as the two race-legends woke again remembering ancient enmities, there woke with them also the felt knowledge that together they had fought and survived one great war that they had never made and that now they had entered another; that for nearly a hundred years the nation had been spread out on the top half of the continent over the powerhouse of the United States and still was there; that even if the legends were like oil and alcohol in the same bottle, the bottle had not been broken yet. And almost grudgingly, out of the instinct to do what was necessary, the country took the first irrevocable steps toward becoming herself, knowing against her will that she was not unique but like all the others, alone with history, with science, with the future.