

THE VIEW FROM CASTLE ROCK

Alice Munro

A critical paper by

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Alice Munro tells us in her Foreword that this collection of short stories grew over a decade and more as she became increasingly interested in her Laidlaw ancestors, who had migrated from Scotland to North America in the early 19th century. “I put all this material together over the years, and almost without my noticing what was happening, it began to shape itself, here and there, into something like stories”, she confides. “Some of the characters gave themselves to me in their own words, others rose out of their situations. Their words and my words, a curious re-creation of lives, in a given setting that was as truthful as our notion of the past can ever be.”

In fact, the book is divided into two very different parts. The first, “No Advantages”, contains five stories that begin in genealogy and transition into historical-fiction that trace the Laidlaws and the Hoggs and other relatives through their journeys from the old world to the new and their fortunes and misfortunes as they pursue their lives, mainly in Ontario Province, Canada. The second, “Home”, gathers together six stories that draw from an autobiographical base, evolving into something like modern fables, lessons learned as Alice herself matured from adolescence to adulthood.

Genealogy provides a rather tenuous base on which to build any family’s story of its past. In this case, the records of most people of 17th to early 19th century Scotland and especially those who worked the land as did the Laidlaws are inherently fragmentary due to the fact that most of them were illiterate and did not leave diaries of their daily lives and writings of their intimate thoughts. Their names typically appear in church vital statistics records of births, marriages and deaths. Local government maintained records of property deeds, sales and purchases. They also kept accounts of property rights disputes, civil actions, crimes and misdemeanors. But not all of these records have survived over time due to fire, war, natural disaster and decay caused by inadequate storage. Compounding these historical variables, English language spelling standards were not firmly established until the 19th century. For Example, Smith and Smythe

might be the same person listed in two different sources. Munro seems to have faced these challenges undeterred, knowing that she would be filling in the blanks with considerable inference and imaginative skill to shape a fictional but plausible narrative. She could never know with certainty her ancestor's personalities or how they actually felt picking up their lives in rural Scotland, sailing in cramped quarters over dangerous waters, and moving into a new land to begin a new life in North America. Can any of us ever know our own ancestors beyond our grandparents? Even our parents often have mysteries that we may never learn. As the old adage goes: "Tis a wise child who knows its own father."

"No Advantages", the first story of Part 1, establishes the roots of the Laidlaw family in the Ettrick Valley of the Scottish Borders, south of Lothian, the province of the national capital, Edinburgh. The title is taken directly from the 1799 Statistical Account of Scotland which states: "This parish possesses no advantages". A dismal conclusion indeed and one that seems to have resonated among its inhabitants. Munro delineates the themes she sees as shaping her ancestors and that contributed to their motivation to leave Scotland: myths, as personified in the fictive Will O'Phaup, of fairies and ghosts and a curious optimism; and, on the other hand, of severe, guilt-ridden, unforgiving Calvinism and unremitting labor; and, there is the hint of literary promise in the family through James Laidlaw's cousin, James Hogg, a poet and friend of Sir Walter Scott.

"The View from Castle Rock", the second story and the one that gives this anthology its title, relates Andrew's recollection of his father, James, taking him up Edinburgh's Castle Rock, when he was ten years old, along with several of James' drinking friends, who soon peel off along the way, to see America over the water from this high vantage point. This was, of course, essentially a spoof, but one that seems to have been meant to inspire the boy for the adventure of travel to a better life in the new world that lay ahead. Surely, drunk or sober, James knew perfectly well that America was more than 3000 miles to the west and not visible from Castle Rock since they were standing on Scotland's east coast looking north over the Firth of Forth to County Fife beyond. An inspirational gesture? Certainly an event not to be forgotten. Later, as depicted by Munro, the actual passage across the Atlantic was relatively uneventful with minor irritations inevitable when families are crowded together in cramped quarters. Yet, there is also fear for a child temporarily lost aboard ship; James' posturing; and Mary's annoyance with James' bluster; Agnes' giving birth to a girl; and her son, young James', death shortly after their arrival.

The following stories of Part 1, “Illinois”, “The Wilds of Morris Township” and “Working for a Living” follow a genealogical thread embellished by Munro’s imagined depiction of how the family came to settle in a new and strange land: William’s divergence to Joliet, Illinois, and his death there; an encounter with a squaw servant, whom they fear and mistrust; then, his wife and children being brought half-heartedly to Wingham in lower Ontario Province by his brother Andrew; and concludes with her parents, Robert, her father, who rejected the life of a farmer and became a hunter and later raised fur animals for the garment trade; and Anne, her mother, who became a successful saleswoman, living at a hotel away from home selling the furs Robert raised. Unfortunately for them, fashion changed after WWII and furs were no longer in great demand. For a while her father raised turkeys which didn’t suit him at all and finally ended up taking a low-paying job as a night watchman in a local foundry. Munro’s recollections of growing up in this family suggest that it was a cool environment, her grandmother and mother didn’t get along; there was tension and indifference between her parents.

Where in Part 1 Munro is visualizing and recreating her ancestors and her parents as she thinks they may have been in their young lives and how they eventually adapted to new ways in a new land, Part 2 is a somewhat more clinical look at her own life at several important stages. Both parts follow a logical chronological sequence, from generation to generation and from youth to middle age.

My impression is that Munro is much more comfortable writing in her own skin as she does in Part 2 than she is in projecting herself back into the past and creating the personalities of her ancestors from the genealogical fragments of evidence that have survived of their lives.

“Fathers” opens with Munro’s portraits of the fathers of two of her school mates and her own father, which she treats in a Hegelian dialectical fashion. Mr. Newcombe is a brutal man whose daughter, Dahlia, develops a homicidal hatred for him. Mr. Wainwright is a gentle man and his warmth is reflected in his daughter Frances’ ways. Alice’s father stands midway between them, strict but fair in fulfilling his parental obligations, but somewhat distantly. “Lying Under the Apple Tree” is a remembrance of a young girl’s desire to relish the sensual pleasure of stretching out on the orchard grass and looking up through the sunlight coming through the leaves and blossoms, which brings forth visions of fabulous tales to be told. It is also the recollection of an unfaithful romance by an ardent but calculating suitor who arouses in her carnal but unrequited expectations.

“The Ticket”, “Home” and “What Do You Want to Know For?” cover Munro’s first and second marriages and the awkward period in between and her parent’s later years, all melancholy tales.

The story I liked best in this series was the “Hired Girl”, because it reads true and provides the author a chance for just revenge for what she suffered that summer as a servant in a household of a socially ambitious couple. Their names alone - Mr and Mrs. Mountjoy - provide a deliciously malicious moniker for these faux Raj of the Canadian wilds. Mrs. Mountjoy’s principal pleasures are hosting lavish, bibulous parties for fellow climbers and humiliating those around her who have the misfortune to serve them. They aren’t quite as bad as Oscar Wilde’s keen observation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: “All that a host and hostess ought not to be”, but they’re close. Mr. Mountjoy isn’t quite as noxious as his partner in crime, and, in fact, offers Alice, at the end of her gulag summer a small token of his appreciation, a copy of a book he had noticed she showed an interest in but was denied by Mrs. Mountjoy: Isaak Dinesen’s *Seven Gothic Tales* which was widely read in the 1930s. Best known for *Out of Africa* and *Babette’s Feast*, both of which were made into successful films, the author wrote under several pen names. She was, in fact, a Danish noble woman, the Baroness Karen von Blixen-Finecke and she stayed much of her adult life at the family’s manor house in Denmark, after her African experience. Blixen lived into her late 70s, growing increasingly austere and handsomely medieval, the white skin, the sharp nose and the deep-set eyes. Perhaps we can infer that for Alice *Seven Gothic Tales* was an early nudge toward a career as a short story writer. Dinesen was overlooked by the Swedish Academy for a Nobel Prize in Literature, which the Academy later acknowledged was a mistake. Munro had better luck.

Alice Munro reminds us in her conclusion to the Foreword that “these are *stories*. You could say that such stories pay more attention to the truth of a life than fiction usually does. But not enough to swear on.” Perhaps that is as close as any of us can come to understanding ourselves and our genealogical past.

END

The View from Castle Rock

QUESTIONS

- 1. From reading these stories, do you think Munro is comfortable with her family and its past?**
- 2. Among the various family members described whom would you have liked to know better? And, whom would you prefer not to meet again?**
- 3. Which of these stories did you enjoy most? Why?**
- 4. Has Munro been successful in achieving a comprehensive history of her family over the period covered? Do you find that she has left out any important phases?**
- 5. In addition to family history, have you found other themes in these short stories?**

End of Questions