

Coming of Age in New Zealand:
Buster O'Leary Among *STC*,
Rhett Butler, *Hell's Angels*, and Others

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AT PARTICULAR POINTS in the related development of their histories and literatures, colonial cultures in the process of becoming ex-colonial — Canada or New Zealand, for example — tend to look in on themselves, asking a question something like Northrop Frye's Canadian conundrum, "Where is Here?"¹ The socio-literary answers, given this kind of question, come in the form of cultural watchwords, long views, broad social visions — MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*, Pearson's "Fretful Sleepers," to name two obvious cases.² Reading MacLennan's novel or Pearson's *Coal Flat*, we recognize that the chief strength of both books lies in their articulation of a framing conception, an overview of a time and place.³ We may also recognize that the characters in these novels are less memorable than the visions they are made to articulate. "Where is Here?" seems to ring too insistently, and so too the various answers; the sounds of characters thinking or speaking to each other in their own voices are dimmed beneath the weightier tones of more pressing authorial pronouncements.

To ask "where is here" was and continues to be urgent and necessary. But as answers have proliferated, as the territory has become more familiar in that we recognize this question and some of its answers, both Canadian and New Zealand literature seem also to have begun to respond to other questions, such as "who is here, and what does he sound like?" Again, the responses have been various: in Canada, Margaret Laurence's work represents, among other things, a series of successes in setting characters' voices in place (rather than conveying a sense of place in which characters might be). It is this sense of *being* informing,

or indeed creating a sense of *place* that lies behind Laurence's selection of a passage from Al Purdy's "Roblin's Mills (2)" as her epigraph for *The Diviners*: "but they had their being once / and left a place to stand on."⁴ The broader social vision, the larger cultural overviews have receded to form a familiar (if still dim) background, the beginnings of a tradition — against which characters have begun to stand out and voices have begun to resonate. But "what he or she sounds like" is still in part a result of where characters perceive themselves to be — except that their developing sense of place ("where" becoming "here") has begun to produce more sophisticated (and ironic) sets of perceptions of the original answers. When the struggles of colony breaking from empire begin to form a tradition as well as a contemporary struggle, they become in themselves a rich idiom, a series of attitudes which a character at once self-conscious and self-aware can reflect, enact, internalize, proclaim — always searching, beyond the multiple ironies he creates as he plays seriously with the clash of idioms, for a language truly his own. It is in this context that New Zealand writer Maurice Duggan's finest short story, "Along Rideout Road That Summer," deserves careful attention, because this is a story which creates its most powerful effects through its explorations of an adolescent character's forays with language in his adventuring towards identity — conceived of as an idiom, a voice, a way of speaking.⁵ The cultural implications of this intensely idiomatic conception of a character's adolescent identity crisis, I would like to show, mark a significant reference point in the development of a literary tradition's perception — and articulation — of what colonial, ex-colonial, and neo-colonial voices have to say and what they sound like; and these are the voices we hear resonating through the idioms at war with themselves in "Along Rideout Road That Summer."

Duggan's story delights us with language before it does anything else. Speaking to us in a carnival of idioms, Buster O'Leary is by turn self-conscious and self-aware, derisive and evocative, ironic and straightforward as he tries to find his own voice in among the many-tongued, multicultural, pop-traditional idioms he speaks. O'Leary looks back on O'Leary the (slightly) younger,

reliving, rethinking, re-voicing the not-so-distant past which informs his present telling moment. This moment is always his own: never are we asked to consider disembodied issues, statements separated from speakers, to listen to narrators who overstep the bounds of their own stories. Language flexes, recoils, and reflexes as the literary imagination tilts at the literal world, adolescence dances around adulthood, children grapple with parents, colony with empire — all this through the inflections of a boy-man’s voice convincingly talking its way to its own timbre. Like any good speaker, Buster has a finely-honed sense of audience: formal, literary, ironic, “bookish” Buster addresses himself to “madam” and “gentlemen”; plain-talking Buster, Fanny’s tough lover, tractor-rider, jaws with “mate” and “mac.” Throughout, polyglot “I” speaks to “you,” a reader asked to listen in many keys to a speaker who delights in transforming his audience to suit his occasion, shifting idiomatic streams in mid-voice.

From the opening sentence, we realize that Buster is more than a conventional first-person narrator confessing or professing himself:

’d walked the length of Rideout Road the night before, following the noise of the river in the darkness, tumbling over ruts and stones, my progress, if you’d call it that, challenged by farmers’ dogs and observed by the faintly luminous eyes of wandering stock, steers, cows, stud-bulls or milk-white unicorns, or, better, a full quartet of apocalyptic horses browsing the marsh.⁶

His imagination, playing over his literal journey, is not content to simply (if self-consciously) rename it a “progress”; the renaming itself is called into question, and the audience is invited to consider the implications of memory recalling experience by renaming or recreating it within a classical literary tradition. Yet it is the prosaic, literal world that calls to the imagination, and not the other way around: steers and cows and stud-bulls are transformed by imagination’s “or” into alternative classical creatures. The opening past-perfect “’d” signals an older Buster looking back through memory and seeing himself as “almost happy” (55), preparing us for his final assessment of his own state of mind, still tentative, on the way out of his own story: “I felt

almost happy. Almost" (73). Living as he does in his own mind as much as outside of it, "almost" is as close as Buster gets to direct, unqualified, unanalyzed expressions of feeling. An adolescent in an adolescent culture, he's beyond childhood's easy unities of self and world, but not yet sure enough of himself to express or assert feelings he's not even certain are quite his own. So he's "almost happy" in memory, looking back on his departure from his parents' home; "yes, almost happy" driving tractor on Puti Hohepa's farm (55); "almost happy, shouting 'Kubla Khan', a bookish lad" (55-56). Not quite free from his parents, he's "almost happy" with Fanny as the two of them watch his parents drive by "like burnished doom" (60). Again, during the crucial confrontation between his father, Puti Hohepa, Fanny, and himself (60-67), he is moved "almost to tears, almost" by the separation he feels from his father (64). Buster is almost a man in a country almost itself — a country in which literal landscape is almost breaking free from twice-removed literary allusions and colonial contexts.

Adolescence's self-conscious uncertainties are compounded by this adolescent narrator's brand of "bookishness," which has him riding tractor over Puti Hohepa's fields and shouting "Kubla Khan." O'Leary's problem, he tells us, is one of "connexion" between his cultural inheritance and his own more immediate experience. We are also told — this is one point that Buster *is* certain about — that his story is not one of "the trashy clamour of boy meeting girl" (56). But Buster is not always that certain: he almost succeeds in convincing himself that the "trashy clamour" is the real thing, an illusion which he disabuses himself of in the process of telling his story. Try as he might, Buster cannot connect "old STC" with the present, "Kubla Khan's" damsel and her dulcimer with Fanny Hohepa strumming her ukulele. His imagination, steeped in a literary tradition from another time and place, must make connections via those traditions — even though he perceives that the traditions radically distort his actual experience. Buster also perceives that this problem of "connexion" has become not only a central, critical issue to be grappled with in all high seriousness, but also an issue to be treated ironically, an issue which *in itself* has become part of a

tradition. So in a mock-deferential, academically austere idiom, he addresses his audience of gentlemen:

Let us then be clear and don't for a moment, gentlemen, imagine that I venture the gross unfairness, the patent absurdity, the rank injustice (your turn) of blaming him [STC] for spoiling the pasture or fouling the native air. It's just that there was this problem in my head, this profound, cultural problem affecting dramatically the very nature of my inheritance, nines into sevens in this lovely smiling land. His was the genius as his was the expression which the vast educational brouhaha invited me to praise and emulate, tranquilizers ingested in maturity, the voice of the ring-dove, look up though your feet be in the clay. And read on. (56)

Buster's tone of voice conveys the felt conflict: the problem is and is not a "profound, cultural problem"; New Zealand is and is not a colony; Buster is and is not an adolescent, speaking in (and to) a country which has and has not wrested itself free from its own "vast educational brouhaha." Buster is both O'Leary looking back at himself and that younger self, which is the meaning of Duggan's narrative framework. O'Leary's recognition of his own ambivalence results in the authentic tonal mix of derisive, angry irony and heartfelt, baffled pleading in his voice. An aggrieved adolescent, Buster must have his say; he must also have an audience. Parents, culture, readers must listen, must "read on."

Reading on, we discover that Buster's problem of connexion recurs: it is not only old STC "spoiling the pasture." American culture contributes its idioms, too: Buster O'Leary becomes Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind*. If, as he says, he's not "destined to debate" cultural matters with Fanny Hohepa, it's because "frankly [he] could see that she couldn't give a damn" (56). This is not simply innocent cliché-stealing; it's more than funny that classical American movie-talk should be on the tip of O'Leary's tongue. A real problem shows through the play on idioms: how *can* Buster possibly talk with Fanny? How *should* he perceive her? What *are* the possibilities for real connection between Buster and Fanny? "Old STC" provides no answers, nor does Clark Gable, nor does Buster's father ("solid for intolerance, Mac" [61]) with his conventionally biased wisdom on the

Maori problem: "gradual absorption, hmm, perhaps, say, after a phase of disinfecting" (61).

But for all of Buster's ironic perceptions of his father's attitudes, or of STC's and Clark Gable's inappropriate dialects in his "lovely smiling land," his own attraction to Fanny is based on yet another series of local, culturally induced misperceptions. Buster perceives Fanny as the uninhibited Maori, free from cultural or parental constraints, vast educational brouhahas, conflicts between imported idioms and her own language. He sees in her the genuine native, and thus idealizes her himself even as he derides his father's bromides. Self-consciousness and self-awareness counterpoint his description of Fanny as he addresses several audiences in several idioms:

Fanny from her perch seeming to gather about her the background of green paternal acres, fold on fold [Traditionally poetic vision of Fanny the Maori daughter, daughter of the land itself]; I bore down upon her in all the eager erubescence of youth, with my hair slicked back [gazing inwards and outwards, he sees himself in both literal/literary "eager erubescence" and as an à-la-mode teenager, fashions imported from abroad]; she trembled, wavered, fragmented and re-formed in the pungent vapour through which I viewed her [at once poetic, STC-inspired rhetoric and ironic, deprecatory awareness: Buster recognizes that the "pungent vapour," far from being ethereal in the literary sense of the term, is gassy tractor exhaust; in a further irony, the tractor fumes, which are real, distort Buster's perception of Fanny]; (Oh for an open-air job, eh mate?) [mate-to-mate talk about the locally recognized virtues of being out on the land, unencumbered.] (57; bracketed interpolations mine)

Of course Fanny, "too deliciously substantial to be creature down on a visit from Mount Abora," is just as heavily influenced by imported cultures and their idioms as Buster himself. She plays her dulcimer/ukulele, "natively engaged in expressing the most profound distillations of her local experience, the gleanings of a life lived in rich contact with a richly understood and native environment: A Slow Boat to China, if memory serves" (57). Nor can Duggan resist a multicultural commemorative plaque, an unholy dirge of alliances between Coleridge, Yeats, chivalric knighthood, and motorcycle gangs:

Here played the black lady her dulcimer. Here wept she full miseries. Here rode the knight Fergus' son to her deliverance. Here put he about her ebon and naked shoulders his courtly garment of leather, black, full curiously emblazoned — Hell's Angel. (57)

Buster's relationship with Fanny revolves around two sets of perceptions. First (with help from Puti Hohepa) Buster perceives Fanny to be “too good for [him] by far. . . . spontaneous, natural, remarkably free from queries of any kind” (59). On the other hand, looking at himself he sees “half-baked verbosity and conceit” — the results of his “impeccable upbringing under the white-hot lash of respectability, take that, security, take that, hypocrisy, take that, cant . . . and that and that and THAT! Darling!” (59). Verbose and beaten-up Buster (beaten up, the “darling,” in the name of parental guidance and discipline) has relegated the wordless Fanny to the position of silent and noble savage, a Maori Pocahontas. For all of Buster's ironic disclaimers, he is a prisoner of perceptions no less distorting than those of his father. The older narrator looking back realizes that he was caught up in the tangle of his own rhetoric, but Buster in his actual “progress” does not share this perception as fully. Duggan's narrative technique is fluid enough to allow us to see Buster growing out of one perceptual framework and into another. We hear the ironic collision of cadences, idioms clashing against experiences; these half-languages gradually resolve into Buster's own voice — at least, what Buster believes to be his own voice — as he leaves Hohepa's farm at the end of the story. Speaking his own language in his own voice, he is bound for an apprenticeship in the larger world, beyond the confines of parental home or Maori “paternal acres,” and free from the constrictions of inappropriate languages describing his actual experience.

Fittingly, the centre of the story is set on Puti Hohepa's porch, where Buster, his father, Fanny, and Puti act out their parts in Buster's staged melodrama. Staged, because Buster would perceive his father as the blustering villain of the piece, Puti as the inscrutable, silent, wise Maori chief, Fanny as the unquestioning, purely sensual creature. So Puti Hohepa is “a dignified dark prince on his ruined acres . . . gravely attending to Dad's mum-

bled slush" (62); Fanny is "falling in slow movement across the end of the old cane lounge chair to lie, an interesting composition of curves and angles, with the air of a junior and rural odalisque" (63). Characteristically, Buster looking back on the scene doesn't spare himself:

Me? I stood straight, of course, rigid, thumbs along the seams of my jeans, hair at the regulation distance two inches above the right eye, heels together and bare feet at ten to two, or ten past ten, belly flat and chest inflated, chin in, heart out. (63)

Buster's posture is as ridiculously rigid and articulated as his father's. But the postures, the settings, the roles and idioms begin to dissolve when Buster recognizes that the "mad figure [going] black as bug out over the lawn" is also, beyond rhetoric, beyond idiom, his father. "Caught in a passion of sympathy for him, something as solid as grief or love, an impossible pairing of devotion and despair," Buster watches his father walk away (66). Beneath rhetorical posturing, Buster recognizes the "solidity" of real grief, real love; this recognition signals the beginning of the end of his "summer's dalliance, a season's thoughtless sweetness" with Fanny *and* with the nuances of essentially foreign idioms. His delight in the acuties of his own perceptions begins to fade as he realizes that there is no real or lasting liberation for him on Puti Hohepa's farm, in Fanny's arms, or in the liberties he takes with language itself — the liberties language has taken with *him* up to this point in his story. Puti Hohepa, that dignified dark prince, finally speaks the universal language of parents to their children, circumscribed as his particular version might be: "Buster, you should make peace with your father. . . . A boy shouldn't hate his father; a boy should respect his father" (68). Buster's delusion was to think that "proscription and prescription [were] differently ordered in this farm world of crummy acres" (68). To follow the language of the imagination, he finds, leads ineluctably to the real world: Hohepa's crummy acres are no more ideal than his father's home. Neither can contain him. His first reaction to this insight is bitter:

Well, my own green liberty didn't look like so much at that moment; for the first time I got an inkling that life was going to be simply a matter of out of one jail and into another. (69)

But finally his “green liberty” is not as grim a matter as he had thought. It is only after he has realized that adolescence is an idiom, not a whole language, that he can meet Fanny on more mature and experiential terms. Their final lovemaking goes beyond literary associations, clichés, the distancing ironies of detached descriptions. Buster begins in his usual vein, describing the setting: “I made note of the natural scene. Dark water, certainly; dark lush grass underfoot; dark girl; the drifting smell of loam in the night: grant me again as much” (71). But this time the experience transcends Buster’s verbosity:

Then, by one of those fortuitous accidents not infrequent in our national prosings, our hands met, held, fell away. Darkness. My feet stumbling by the river and my heart going like a tango. Blood pulsed upon blood, undenied and unyoked, as we busied ourselves tenderly at our ancient greetings and farewells. And in the end, beginning my sentence with a happy conjunction, I held her indistinct, dark head. (71)

The “happy” conjunction “and” has replaced the separating conjunction “or” of the first sentence, in which the language of the imagination — STC’s world, which Buster tries to force into a too-literal connection with his experience — actually detached him from direct experience, from the possibilities of happy conjunctions. The traditions, the idioms are still there for him to draw upon, but finally it is Fanny’s “last touch [which] spoke volumes. (Unsubsidised, gentlemen, without dedication or preamble.)” (72).

Buster’s language in the closing paragraphs is free of the delightful but finally superficial idiomatic clutter of the story up to this point. Appropriately, Buster leaves “old STC in the tractor box along with the spanner that wouldn’t fit any nut . . . and the last letter from mum, hot as radium” (72). His own language at this point has to grow more directly out of his own perceptions; his description of his own state of mind is now more stark and objective, his images fashioned more directly from his own experience. There are no more Mount Aboras, dulcimers, River Alphs:

I was packed and gone at the first trembling of light. It was cold along the river-bottom, cold and still. Eels rose to feed: the water

was like pewter; old pewter. I felt sick, abandoned, full of self-pity. Everything washed through me, the light, the cold, a sense of what lay behind me and might not lie before, a feeling of exhaustion when I thought of home, a feeling of despair when I thought of Fanny still curled in sleep. (72)

Buster's final description of landscape borrows nothing from Coleridge: "I looked back, Rideout Mountain and the peak of ochre red roof, Maori red. That's all it was" (73). The "rush of relief" he feels is qualified by the dour commonplaces of the new world he's entering: the driver who picks him up is a "gloomy bastard" with "a cigarette stuck to his lip like a growth," and Buster rides out of his adolescence in a hearse, driving through the "tail-end of summer," sacrificing the saccharine sweetness of various nostalgias for the bittersweet present (73). The story begins and ends in Buster's voice: all of the cultural complexities that attend the colony's break with Empire are subsumed in the struggles of an adolescent breaking free from his parents. Duggan's evocation of a culture bound up in a tangle of idiomatic webbing is masterful; but the creation of Buster O'Leary's own voice is Buster's — and Duggan's — most exciting achievement. Duggan's control of language and of the inflections of a voice experimenting with language makes "Along Rideout Road That Summer" a narrative *tour de force*: when, gentlemen, Buster finally gets his act together — when the voice, mac, is tuned in, and the vibes, man, are turned on — when we know, madam, that we're getting into something hip, hot, heavy, and relevant — then we can dig, mate, that Duggan's O'Leary, pardner, is, in short (and not to put too fine a point on it) — right on!

NOTES

- ¹ Northrop Frye, "Conclusion," *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 826.
- ² Hugh MacLennan, *Two Solitudes* (Toronto: Collins, 1945); Bill Pearson, "Fretful Sleepers," in *Fretful Sleepers & Other Essays* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1974).
- ³ Bill Pearson, *Coal Flat* (Auckland: Paul's Book Arcade; London: Angus and Robertson, 1963).
- ⁴ Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart; New York: Knopf; London: Macmillan, 1974).

- ⁵ Maurice Duggan, "Along Rideout Road That Summer," in *Summer in the Gravel Pit* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1965). For an excellent overview of Duggan's short stories, see Terry Sturm, "The Short Stories of Maurice Duggan," *Landfall*, 25 (1971), 50-71.
- ⁸ "Along Rideout Road That Summer," p. 55. All subsequent references to this story appear in the text.