HUGH MACLENNAN

THE OLDER QUEST

John Hugh MacLennan (1907-1990) was born in Glace Bay and grew up in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He earned a bachelor's degree from Dalhousie University in 1928 and a doctorate from Princeton University in 1935. An excerpt from his dissertation, *Oxyrhynchus: An Economic and Social Study* (1935), was published in the autumn 1936 issue. From 1935 to 1945 he taught at Lower Canada College, and in 1951 he became a professor at McGill University, where he remained for the rest of his career. His publications include the novels *Barometer Rising* (1941), *Two Solitudes* (1945, winner of the Governor General's Award), *The Precipice* (1948, winner of another Governor General's Award), and *Each Man's Son* (1951), as well as the essay collections *Cross-Country* (1949, winner of another Governor General's Award) and *Thirty and Three* (1954, winner of yet another Governor General's Award). The following excerpt is from a talk given at the Dalhousie spring convocation in May 1955, which was published in the summer 1955 issue.

ONE THING I ASSURE THE GRADUATING CLASS I am quite unable to do, and that is to offer you any advice. I'm not going to tell you to keep in mind the lessons you learned here, to work hard and stay sober and keep out of the divorce courts. I'm not going to promise that if you do all these things, and keep on doing them steadily for twenty-five years, and if luck stays with you all the way, you'll have a chance of becoming half as wise as myself. The truth of the matter is that very few people get wiser as they get older. They simply get more cautious. . . .

There is still another reason why I know that advice from me to you would be superfluous on this or on any other occasion. From my experience in recent years at McGill, I have a suspicion that you are a lot more mature than I am myself. I know McGill is not Dalhousie. It is in the heart of Montreal, a debonaire city whose former mayor, Camillien Houde, once defined

humour to me as the art of telling the truth, especially about your own motives. But Dalhousie students can't be too much different from the ones I know in Montreal, and the latter I have come to know rather well. They are the most delightful people I ever met in my life, and for the past four years I have been receiving an education from them. Their attitude toward their parents' generation seems astonishingly wise and justified. Instead of resenting us for the mess we made of the world, they feel sorry for us. They think we're too competitive. They think we drink too much and worry too much about sex, but at the same time they assume that we can't help ourselves because we had a bad time in the depression and were neurotics anyway. They know they are far better adjusted to the world they live in than we are. They take it for granted that there is nothing you can do about science and politics except to make the best of them. In all seriousness they seem to me to do the will of God with complete naturalness, and they don't take it for granted—as I did when I was their age—that God is a Scotchman. Some of them consider the lilies of the field; they take no thought for the morrow, they toil not, neither do they spin nor gather into barns. Others again do the will of God as Plato understood it: they have achieved within themselves a singular harmony. The men among them seem at ease with the now recognized fact that women are the stronger sex, and the girls are no longer afraid that no man will marry them if he suspects they have any brains in their heads. Indeed, for the first time in history, more engagement rings are worn by intelligent girls than by dumb ones, and surely this is proof of an increase in the intelligence of the men, for there is not one engaged male student out of fifty who doesn't intend to put his bride out to work at the earliest opportunity. I find this new attitude toward life admirable in every possible way. It will mean a vast decrease in duodenal ulcers, spastic backs, and migraine headaches, and it should cause serious hesitation to any young medical student contemplating the practise of psychiatry. When faced with even the possibility of having to give advice to a generation like yours, I quail. I couldn't even try doing it without laughing.

What I shall try to do instead is something simpler and more pleasant—it is merely to congratulate you on having obtained your degrees and on having at last reached the place where your real education can begin. It is a privilege to attend Dalhousie and an achievement to graduate from Dalhousie. But the real fun lies before you.

In spite of politicians, propaganda, bankruptcy, losing your job, not being able to find the job you want, alcoholism, arthritis, and technological

extravaganzas like space platforms and rockets to the moon—in spite of all these ills that North American flesh is heir to, life can be wonderfully interesting and exciting so long as you continue to learn. I'm not going to pretend that the pleasure of learning is stronger than the pleasure of whisky or making love, but there is one advantage it has over every other pleasure in the world—it never lets you down so long as you keep it up. It can enter into anything you do providing you are not afraid of it. There is only one thing that can crush it entirely, and that is fear—fear of losing your comfort, fear of not conforming to the oafs, fear of being led into hard work you hoped you could avoid, fear of criticism if what you have learned turns out to be different to current fashions, fear of the unknown itself. Many of the greatest discoverers have not been exceptionally intelligent men, but there has not been one of them who was not an exceptionally brave man.

Dalhousie and this whole province of Nova Scotia have been rare seminaries for the development of the pleasure of learning, and the record proves it. I think that as time passes most of you will discover that the best of our people have been quite as remarkable as we boast them to have been. Joseph Howe really did give birth to the idea of the British Commonwealth, and Roddie MacDonald really would have won the middleweight championship of the world if he had kept in training. The four Nova Scotians who served in the cabinet during the last war may have lacked a certain finesse which their chief possessed in abundant measure, but neither they nor their country is any the poorer for that. All of us have our favourite personal Nova Scotian, and quite often he turns out to have been a teacher. On an occasion like this I couldn't stand here in good conscience without expressing my own lifelong gratitude to a great Dalhousian, J. W. Logan, who taught me honour classics here and who taught me the meaning of manhood in the old Sackville Street Academy, and gave to me, as he gave to nearly three generations of Haligonians, a sense of the wonder of being able to learn, of being able to belong to the story of civilization.

But of Nova Scotians dead and gone perhaps the rarest of all was that old seafaring man from the North Mountain, Captain Joshua Slocum, who was the first human being to sail alone around the world. It is not the mere fact of his achievement that makes him memorable, though that was extraordinary enough; it is how he did, and the kind of man he was. As Slocum went to sea in early childhood, he never had a formal education. But by the time he was fifty, when steam drove sailing ships off the oceans, he had become not only a man of many resources but a learned one as well. He turned

the cabin of his little sloop into a library, and there he would lie—day after day, week after week, month after month for more than two years—reading the world's classics while his tiny ship drove along on course with her helm lashed. Within the record he left of that famous voyage, Slocum defined the meaning of education as truly as it was ever defined by Socrates. When alone in the middle of the Pacific, not having seen land or a ship for weeks, he produced the following, which is great literature in its unconscious symbolism:

> The sun is the creator of the trade winds and of the wind-system all over the earth. From Juan Fernandez to the Marquesas I experienced six changes of these great palpitations of sea winds and of the sea itself, the effect of far-off gales.

And then this great sentence:

> To know the laws that govern the winds, *and to know that you know them*, will give you an easy mind on your voyage around the world; otherwise you may well tremble at the appearance of every cloud.

Slocum lived, of course, in the world. He sailed alone around it before it became certain that one day human beings would break loose from the atmospheric envelope and wander in pressurized cabins among the planets and stars. But when these voyages are made they will be neither as fruitful nor as enjoyable as his. No matter how far the spacemen go, or how fast, it is unlikely that they will ever discover what they are searching for, because what they were searching for will lie behind them on the earth. Even in spatial silence their ears will miss the sound of the wind in trees. Even in the middle of nothing there will be moments when their eyes will yearn for the outline of a promontory thrusting out into salt water. For the scientists of our century have discovered and proved a strange paradox. Power resides in the universe and in the atoms that compose it, but it is only on this apparently insignificant planet that circumstances permit conscious life to exist. The earth and the living things in it, not the blind power in matter, are the highest forms of creation.

Perhaps in your generation, after three centuries of ardent search for the source and uses of power, it will seem more interesting to turn back to a quest much older, and to search again for the meaning and the use of life.