

ROBERT THACKER

## ALICE MUNRO COUNTRY

THIS FALL MARKS THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY of the publication of Alice Munro's first book, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), by the Ryerson Press in Toronto. Although she had been publishing stories with some regularity since 1950, the editors commissioned a foreword by a then well-known writer, Hugh Garner, who described the strengths of her offerings (this foreword has long since been dropped). Press notices also described her with an amazed tone as a housewife whose husband ran a bookstore in Victoria and who somehow found time to write while raising three young daughters. That she did was seen as all the more remarkable when *Dance of the Happy Shades* won the Governor General's Award for English Fiction. Viewed today, all of this seems distant and a bit quaint.

The first story in the collection, "Walker Brothers Cowboy," is probably many readers' first Munro story. It opens with a remembering first-person narrator, a young girl, walking through "Tuppertown" with her father one evening to "see if the Lake's still there." This was one of three stories that she wrote in the year or so before the book's publication at the behest of her editor (worried about publishing a collection of stories, she wanted to fill out the book's size), and Tuppertown is recognizably an imagined Goderich. The father in the story also resembles Munro's own, although Robert Eric Laidlaw was never a travelling salesman after his fox farm in Lower Wingham failed in the late 1940s. Read now, "Walker Brothers Cowboy" is an especially effective opening story for her first book, and for all of her fiction, since the car trip at its core is effectively a tour of what has since become known as "Alice Munro Country," a term that refers to that part of Huron County Munro used as her primary fictional place throughout her career.

Like the writers of the American south, who were avowed influences, Munro is now seen ever and always in relation to the place she came from, as almost all of her stories are set there and most of her characters come from and live there. This began sometime around 1959 or 1960, when Mun-

ro wrote the following opening for a story called “Places at Home”:

A river with an Indian name, the Wawanash, flows around the town of Marnoch, making an almost complete circle before it turns westward again toward the Lake. In summer it is not much of a river; the water withdraws into a lazy channel winding between thick green plantations of water-weeds, solid as hedges, and mats of floating leaves and white and yellow water-lilies, whose roots trail in the ooze and mud of the river-bed.

Marnoch is the name of an actual place down the Maitland River from Wingham, and later in that opening passage she also describes “The Flood”—an annual disaster that cuts less prosperous Lower Marnoch off from the main town, just as the Maitland did Munro and her family at their fox farm in Lower Wingham. In Munro’s writing, such detail abounds wherever you look.

It was at around this same time that she wrote “The Peace of Utrecht,” which was based on the circumstances surrounding the death of her mother, Anne Chamney Laidlaw, after her struggle with Parkinson’s disease from about 1942 until 1959. Munro has regularly mentioned this story in interviews, acknowledging that “it was the story where I first tackled personal material,” “it was the first story I absolutely had to write,” and it was “the first time I wrote a story that tore me up.” In this story Wingham is called “Jubilee,” and the narrator describes her complicated route there as she returns home to visit her sister after their mother’s death: “There is no easy way to get to Jubilee from anywhere on earth.” The narrator then describes her first glimpse of the town: “I saw ahead of me, so familiar and unexpected, the gaudy, peeling cupola of the town hall, which is no relation to any of the rest of the town’s squarely-built, dingy grey-and-red-brick architecture. (Underneath it hangs a great bell, to be rung in the event of some mythical disaster.)” These two versions of “Places at Home” (“The Peace of Utrecht” originally had that title, too) defined the geography of Munro’s childhood, and it was a place where she would constantly return in her work. She would even ring the bell in the town hall tower to mark the end of World War One in “Family Furnishings” (2001), one of her most affecting stories.

When Munro wrote these two versions of “Places at Home” she was remembering and shaping her home from afar, as she had been in British

Columbia, writing and raising a family, since 1952. By writing and rewriting such stories, she was thus able to remember and imagine her home across distance and time. The relation between Wingham and Lower Wingham is key. It was one that she traversed on foot every school day from grade four on, walking from her home at the end of the road through Lower Town in the morning and, in the afternoon, from Wingham back down through the social classes. Moving along this road recurs perpetually in her stories: it figures in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and is still there in “Dear Life,” the last “Finale” story in *Dear Life* (2012). Yet these early versions of Wingham and Lower Wingham have a more distant quality. She recalled the experience of writing about Huron County while living on the West Coast in a 2004 interview: “When I was in British Columbia, writing about home, it was just an enchanted land of your childhood. It was very odd to say that Lower Town was the enchanted land, but it was. It was sort of out of time and place.”

Then something happened. In 1973 Munro left her marriage and returned to Ontario, and by 1975 she was back in Huron County, living in Clinton, a town about thirty-six kilometres southwest of Wingham. Her return significantly changed her writing since, as she would later have a narrator admit in what would become *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), she was then “a writer in the midst of, so to speak, my material.” She also described this process in her story “Face” (2008), in which an adult narrator returns home from Toronto to clean up and sell his parents’ house. Owing to the memories occasioned during his stay and the experiences he has there, the man eventually decides to stay and live again in his childhood home above the lake. Explaining himself, he writes, “Something happened here. In your life there are a few places, or maybe only the one place, where something happened, and then there are all the other places.” Munro knew this, for the Alice Munro Country we discover as readers was largely created by her return first to Ontario in 1973 and then to Huron County in 1975.

Munro spoke of the two versions of Huron County she drew upon in her work in that 2004 interview:

When I came home I was interested in something different about the country. When I was in British Columbia, writing about home, it was just an enchanted land of your childhood. It was very odd to say that Lower Town was the enchanted land, but it was. It was sort of out of time and place. And when I came back I saw this was all happening in

a sociological way, and I saw the memories I had as being, in a way, much harsher, though they never were very gentle actually.

Her memories were much harsher after she returned to live in Huron County, and this was confirmed by the presences she felt and the surfaces she saw, which Charles McGrath, her first editor at *The New Yorker*, described in the late 1970s as “the rawness of the setting and what people do.”

Munro’s return to Huron County showed immediately in the work she produced. An illustration is a short essay, “Everything Here Is Touchable and Mysterious,” which was published in May 1974. She had been asked, along with other Canadian writers, for a brief piece about her inspirations, and she chose to focus on the Maitland River, which, as she wrote, “flows through that straggling, unincorporated, sometimes legendary non-part of town called Lower Town (pronounced Loretown) and past my father’s land.” The new Alice Munro Country really began with this essay, which was actually a collaboration with her father, Robert Laidlaw. Munro wrote to him from London asking for information, and he replied with a detailed nine-page letter, much of which she used (in gratitude, she shared her fee). The essay also amounted to a map of Alice Munro Country: the annual Flood is there; the geography of Lower Town, which she traversed twice each school day, is there; the river’s character, its plants and fish, are there. Above all, the river’s mystery is there. Munro also notes that indigenous people called the river “Meneseung” (1988), she describes the “Nettles” (2000) along its banks, and she speaks of its “Deep-Holes” (2008)—so saying, she thus offered three titles that she would later use for stories. She concluded the essay by asserting that “this ordinary place is sufficient, everything here is touchable and mysterious,” which in effect proclaims Alice Munro Country looming ahead of her: “I am still partly convinced that this river—not even the whole river, but this little stretch of it—will provide whatever myths you want, whatever adventures.”

Shortly before returning to Huron County in 1975, she also sent Douglas Gibson, her editor at Macmillan, a manuscript of about 10,000 words that was once again called “Places at Home.” It consisted of descriptive sketches intended to accompany photographs of Ontario, and the title piece began: “This country doesn’t arrange itself into scenery very easily. Sometimes it will. Sometimes a river valley, everything melodious, the hills and willows and water and dark cedar bush so cunningly fitted together, not a gravel pit

or a dead elm, no drab edges to be seen. But usually not.” It ended with a question posed and left unanswered: “But if you leave here for good and live away, what can you say you miss? Hard to describe.” Munro had, of course, seemingly left Huron County “for good,” but she came back, as there was evidently something she missed.

Details aside, even the very existence of this manuscript demonstrates that when Munro returned to Ontario she set about the construction of Alice Munro Country in ways she previously had not. By “sociological” she meant that she was burrowing into its textures and cultural markers in a new way—geologically, historically, and socially—which is precisely what McGrath saw and felt in her work. In “History,” for example, Munro included a passage that looked at Alice Munro Country both ways—back and forth. It began with the names of potatoes, roses, and streets:

Someone started to write a history of the town. It was all names, crowding over one another. Names of buildings, names of people. Industries, businesses, railways . . . Who would think so much could grow and prosper and change and collapse and disappear, all within a hundred, a hundred and fifty years? Too much altogether. The chronicler’s job becomes depressing.

And it concluded:

History seems a gentle avocation, orderly and consoling, until you get into it. Then you see the shambles, the prodigal, dizzying, discouraging, confusion. Just here, just on this one patch of the earth’s surface where things have not been piling up for very long, or so we think; what must it be like in other places? Nevertheless some people will continue; some people are fired up with the lasting hope of getting things straight.

Working on “Places at Home” while living once again within the culture that spawned it, Munro was both returning to and transforming her subject, as she began to see and understand it with greater density and more connections—more sociologically, as she said. The ending of “History” is clearly prescient, as “the lasting hope of getting things straight” became her primary concern.

While working on “Places at Home,” however, Munro also saw that what

she had written would pose problems as an effective photo-text made up of contemporary images. In September 1975 she expressed her misgivings to Gibson, saying “I don’t think any longer that an impressionistic book, done at random, is a good idea. I don’t think we can use the text I’ve written—after all, there has to be some theme, some connection. With some thirties, forties pictures that text would do nicely.” Anyone who has read the manuscript of “Places at Home” cannot help but agree with her conclusion here: the sketches she wrote are much more akin to, as she says, “thirties and forties pictures.” The images of two of her avowed influences—James Agee and Walker Evans’ *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and Wright Morris’ *The Home Place* (1948)—was what would be needed.

I am dwelling on what might be seen as a minor episode in her career (the book in question was never published) because it was critical to the creation of Alice Munro Country. When she told Gibson that the text she had written would not work, she commented that she did not feel “the effort to be wasted—in this game, eventually, nothing is wasted.” She later wrote, “I’m into a new book, just shaping. I think it will work.” Then, early in March, she asked him for the return of “the ms. of *Places at Home*, that unusable text for the photographs? It’s the only complete ms. of that I’ve got, and I’m thinking of doing something with it.”

What Munro was thinking about doing was to incorporate “Places at Home” into the book that became *Who Do You Think You Are?*, which in many ways is the central text of Alice Munro Country. (I don’t want to call it “the Bible of Alice Munro Country,” but it is something like that.) After returning to Huron County, Munro produced a deeper, more immediate, and more “sociological” version of what she had done before, even though it was not as autobiographical (Flo is mostly an imagined character, while Rose’s autobiographical connections are there but largely distant).

“I write about where I am in life,” Munro told an interviewer in 1987. Where she was in life when she asked for the return of “Places at Home” in early 1976 was back once again in Huron County. Her father was still living in the house in Lower Wingham along the Maitland River, where “everything is touchable and mysterious”—the same house where she had so often walked to Wingham for school and where her mother had struggled with Parkinson’s. Munro had returned to live with a man who was a physical geographer, whose passion for the geological history of Huron County she shared, and with whom she worked to discover its details over their almost

four decades together. Returning there in 1975, she was very much like her character Helen, the narrator of “The Peace of Utrecht,” who, on discovering her own high-school handwriting, “felt as if my old life was lying around me, waiting to be picked up again.”

She certainly picked it up. Wherever you look during the decade of Munro’s career after 1975—the ten years during which she published thirty stories in magazines and three books (*Who Do You Think You Are?*, *The Moons of Jupiter* [1982], and *The Progress of Love* [1986])—Munro was creating Alice Munro Country at an almost frantic pace.

As she was assessing the stories she had on hand in October 1980, looking toward the next book, she commented on “Working for a Living” (1981) to Gibson: “There is also a long Memoir I wrote about my father, which I think is pretty good, but I think it should be kept out for a kind of family book I want to do someday.” She then offered Gibson a comment that, seen now in the fullness of her accomplishment from *Dance of the Happy Shades* through *Dear Life*, is certainly prescient: “I know people going on about their families can be very tiresome but *maybe* I can do something unexpected with it.” She was envisioning the book that later became *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), which includes “Working for a Living” and which does indeed show her doing something “unexpected with it.” She thus recognized the trajectory she had long been on and saw the looming presence of her next projects in the elaboration of Alice Munro Country. Back in Huron for over five years, she had been sociologically picking up the details of her own life and her own legacies. She was puzzling the numerous (and numinous) connections she felt and saw as she kept building Alice Munro Country—an imagined place, a country of the mind, as “touchable and mysterious,” as powerfully human, and as affecting as any that might ever be imagined or written.