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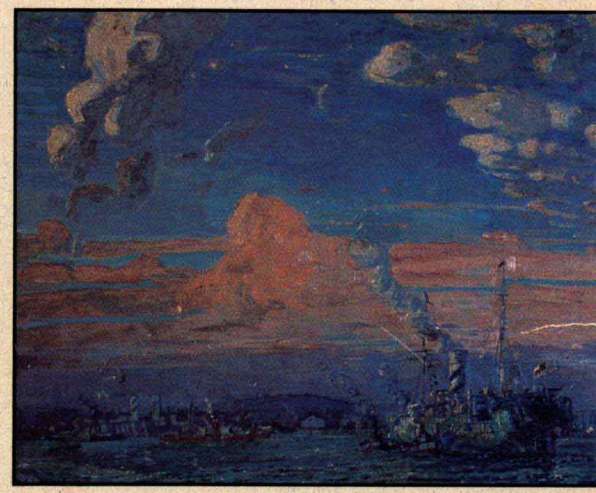
Hugh

MacLennan



Barometer Rising

Afterword by ALISTAIR MACLEOD

HUGH MACLENNAN

Barometer Rising

With an Afterword by Alistair MacLeod

M&S

The following dedication appeared in the original edition:
To the memory of my father

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The Author

HUGH MACLENNAN was born in Glace Bay, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, in 1907. He took his B.A. (1928) in Classics from Dalhousie University, then travelled as a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford University where he obtained another B.A. and his M.A. (1932); he completed graduate studies in Classics at Princeton University, where he received his Ph.D. (1935).

MacLennan returned to Canada in 1935 to accept a teaching appointment in Latin and History at Lower Canada College in Montreal, which remained his home. In 1951 he accepted a position in the Department of English at McGill University, where he taught for three decades.

Barometer Rising was MacLennan's first novel. His seven novels as well as his many essays and travel books present a chronicle of a Canada that often mediates between the old world of its European cultural heritage and the new world of American vitality and materialism.

MacLennan's many honours include five Governor General's Awards and nineteen honorary degrees.

Hugh MacLennan died in Montreal, Quebec, in 1990.

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General Editor: David Staines

Foreword

It seems necessary to offer more than a conventional statement about the names of the characters in this book, since it is one of the first ever written to use Halifax, Nova Scotia, for its sole background. Because there is as yet no tradition of Canadian literature, Canadians are apt to suspect that a novel referring to one of their cities must likewise refer to specific individuals among its characters. If the names of actual persons, living or dead, have been used in this book, it is a coincidence and no personal reference is intended.

Nova Scotia family names have, nevertheless, been employed; to avoid them would have been too definite a loss. Since there is no great variety in Scottish given names, the combinations are inevitably repetitious. The characters are, it is hoped, true to their background, and nothing more.

Eight days are involved in the story: Sunday, December second, to Monday, December tenth, in 1917.

Contents

SUNDAY

four o'clock

He had been walking around Halifax all day, as though by moving through familiar streets he could test whether he belonged here and had at last reached home. In the west the winter sky was brilliant and clouds massing under the sun were taking on colour, but smoke hung low in the streets, the cold air holding it down. He glanced through the dirty window of a cheap restaurant, saw the interior was empty and went in through the double doors. There was a counter and a man in a soiled apron behind it, a few tables and chairs, and a smell of mustard. He sat on one of the warped stools at the counter and ordered bovril and a ham sandwich.

"You English?" the man behind the counter said.

"No. I used to live around here."

"Funny, I thought you were an English fella. You been over there, though?"

"I just got back."

He glanced restlessly over his shoulder before he let his muscles relax, but there was no need for caution in a restaurant like this. No one he had ever known in Halifax would be seen in the place.

"You been away long?" the restaurant man said. He poured steaming water over the glutinous bovril essence after he had ladled it into a thick mug.

"Quite awhile."

The man set the drink on the counter and began cutting slices from a loaf of brown bread.

"Guess you been in the war, too," he said. "I was in it myself for a while but I didn't get very far. I got to Quebec. My wife thinks that's funny. She says, when you got in the army you started moving backwards before you even began." He pulled

a thin slice of boiled ham loose from a pile on a plate and slapped it on the bread.

"What was your outfit?" he said.

The customer stared at the counter without answering and the restaurant man shifted his feet uneasily.

"I was only asking. Hell, it's no skin off my ass."

"Never mind. I was with a lot of outfits, and I didn't sail from here in the first place."

"Mustard?" When he received no answer the man passed the sandwich over the counter. "A lot goes on in town these days. You'd be surprised."

The sandwich was eaten in a fierce silence, then he swallowed the bovril in one passage of the cup to his mouth. He drew a deep breath and asked for more, and while the restaurant man was supplying it he asked casually, "Are you still in with the army around here?"

"No. They let me out on account of varicose veins. That's why I only got to Quebec."

A tram rumbled around the corner in the gathering shadows of the street and its flanges screamed on the uneven rails. The young man jerked nervously at the sudden noise and cleared his throat. All his muscles had tightened involuntarily, giving him a rigid appearance like an animal bunched for a spring. He remained taut and this physical tenseness invested his words with a dramatic value he did not intend.

"There's a chap I knew overseas," he said. "I was wondering if you'd ever heard of him. Alec MacKenzie . . . Big Alec, we called him."

"I knew a man called Alec MacKenzie once, but he was a little fella."

"Do you know Colonel Wain?"

The man shoved the second cup of bovril closer to his customer. "How would a guy like me be knowing colonels?"

"I didn't mean was he a friend of yours. I meant, did you ever hear of him?"

"There's one Colonel Wain here in Halifax." He glanced at the younger man's thin and shabby overcoat. "But you wouldn't be meaning him, either. He's pretty rich, they say."

"So?" He picked up the mug and drained it slowly, then stood straight and looked at himself in the mirror behind the counter. The war had made as big a change in him as it seemed to have made in Halifax. His shoulders were wide, he was just under six feet tall, but his appearance was of run-down ill health, and he knew he looked much older than when he had left three years

ago. Although he was barely twenty-eight, deep lines ran in parentheses around his mouth, and there was a nervous tic in his left cheek and a permanent tension in the expression of his eyes. His nails were broken and dirty, he carried himself without confidence, and it seemed an effort for him to be still for more than a moment at a time. In England he would have been labelled a gentleman who had lost caste.

He buttoned his coat and laid some coins on the counter. He turned to leave and then turned back. "This Colonel Wain . . . is he in town now?" he said.

"I saw his picture in the *Chronicle* last week some time," the restaurant man said. "I guess he must be."

When he left the café he turned toward George Street and slowly began the climb toward Citadel Hill. When he reached the last intersection he continued across the pavement, then upward along a wavering footpath through the unkempt grasses which rustled over the slope of the hill. He pulled himself up slowly, with a jerky nervousness that indicated he was not yet accustomed to his limping left leg, which seemed more to follow his body than propel it forward. At the top of the hill he stopped on a narrow footpath that outlined the rim of the star-shaped moat which defended the half-hidden buildings of the central garrison. An armed soldier stood guard over an open draw-bridge giving access to the military enclosure. Over it all rose a flag-pole and signal masts.

He turned about and surveyed the town. A thin breeze was dragging in from the sea; it was a soundless breath on the cheek, but it made him feel entirely solitary. Though it was early December, the winter snow had not yet fallen and the thin soil had frozen onto the rocks, the trees were bare and the grass was like straw, and the land itself had given up most of its colour.

The details of Halifax were dim in the fading light but the contours were clear and he had forgotten how good they were. The Great Glacier had once packed, scraped, and riven this whole land; it had gouged out the harbour and left as a legacy three drumlins . . . the hill on which he stood and two islands in the harbour itself. Halifax covers the whole of an oval peninsula, and the Citadel is about in the centre of it. He could look south to the open Atlantic and see where the park at the end of the town thrusts its nose directly into the outer harbour. At the park the water divides, spreading around the town on either side; to the west the inlet is called the Northwest Arm, to the east it is called the Stream, and it is here that the docks and ocean terminals are built. The Stream bends with the swell of

Halifax peninsula and runs inland a distance of four miles from the park to a deep strait at the northern end of town called the Narrows. This strait opens directly into Bedford Basin, a lake-like expanse which bulges around the back of the town to the north.

He followed the footpath and looked for familiar landmarks, walking around the moat until he had boxed the compass. From here even a landsman could see why the harbour had for a century and a half been a link in the chain of British sea power. It is barricaded against Atlantic groundswells by McNab's Island at the mouth of the outer harbour, and by the smaller bowl of George's Island at the entrance to the Stream. It was defended now against enemy battle squadrons by forts set on rocky promontories running over the horizon into the sea. It was fenced off from prowling submarines by a steel net hung on pontoons from McNab's to the mainland. This harbour is the reason for the town's existence; it is all that matters in Halifax, for the place periodically sleeps between great wars. There had been a good many years since Napoleon, but now it was awake again.

The forests to the far west and north were nothing but shadows under the sky at this time of day. Above the horizon rim the remaining light was a turmoil of rose and saffron and pallid green, the colours of blood and flowers and the sheen of sunlight on summer grass. As his eyes shifted from the dull floor of the distant sea to this shredding blaze of glory crowning the continent, he felt an unexpected wave of exultation mount in his mind. Merely to have been born on the western side of the ocean gave a man something for which the traditions of the Old World could never compensate. This western land was his own country. He had forgotten how it was, but now he was back, and to be able to remain was worth risking everything.

After sunset the hilltop grew colder. The colours died quickly and as the landscape faded into darkness the street lights of the city came on. They made bluish pools at intervals along the narrow thoroughfares that fanned away from the roots of the hill, and all the way down to the waterfront the life of Halifax began to reveal itself in flashes. Barrington, Granville, and Hollis Streets, running north and south, were visible only at the intersections where the inclines plunging from the hill to the waterfront crossed them, and at these corners pedestrians could be seen moving back and forth, merged in irregular streams.

Children were playing a game with a whole block of a George Street slum for their playground. They darted in and out of his vision as they pursued each other in and out of doorways and

back and forth across the street. Here and there in the withered grass along the slope of the Citadel the forms of men and girls lay huddled, scarcely moving; they clung together on the frozen ground in spite of the cold, sailors with only a night on shore and local girls with no better place to be.

Halifax seemed to have acquired a meaning since he had left it in 1914. Quietly, almost imperceptibly, everything had become harnessed to the war. Long ribbons of light crossed on the surface of the water from the new oil refinery on the far shore of the Stream, and they all found their focus in himself. Occasionally they were broken, as undiscernible craft moved through the harbour, and he suddenly realized that this familiar inlet had become one of the most vital stretches of water in the world. It still gleamed faintly in the dusk as its surface retained a residual glow of daylight. Ferryboats glided like beetles across it, fanning ruffled water in their wake. A freighter drifted inland with a motion so slight he had to watch a full minute before it was perceptible. Its only identification was riding lights; no one but the port authorities knew its home port or its destination. While he watched, its anchor ran out with a muted clatter to the bottom and its bow swung to the north.

Then the Stream became static. The smoke of Halifax lay like clouds about a mountain; the spire of St. Mary's Cathedral cut George's Island in two; the only moving object was the beam of the lighthouse on McNab's, circling like a turning eye out to sea, along the coast and into the harbour again.

He descended the hill slowly, easing his left leg carefully along the dirt path. Down on the street the contours of Halifax were lost in the immediate reality of grim red brick and smoky stone. In the easy days before the war he had winced at the architecture, but it no longer bothered him. Halifax was obviously more than its buildings. Its functional aspect was magnificent, its solid docks piled with freight to the edge of deep water, Bedford Basin thronged with ships from all over the world, the grimy old naval and military buildings crowded once more with alert young men. However much he loathed the cause of this change, he found the throbbing life of the city at once a stimulation and a relief.

For twelve hours he had been back, and so far he had been recognized by no one. He stopped in the shadow of a doorway and the muscles of his face tightened again as his mind returned to its endless calculations. Big Alec MacKenzie had returned from France—and so had Wain. The colonel had probably been back for more than a year. The problem was to find MacKenzie

before he himself was discovered by Wain. If only he could get to Big Alec first.... He began to smile to himself.

When he reached Barrington Street and the shops he found himself in a moving crowd. Girls with English faces brushed by him in twos and threes, sailors from a British cruiser rolled as though the pavement were a ship's deck. Although most of them were walking the main street because they had no better place to go—soldiers, dockworkers in flat cloth caps, civilians—they did not appear aimless. Even their idleness seemed to have a purpose, as though it were also part of the war.

By the time he had walked to the South End where the crowds were thinner, he realized that underneath all this war-begotten activity Halifax remained much the same. It had always looked an old town. It had a genius for looking old and for acting as though nothing could possibly happen to surprise it. Battalions passed through from the West, cargoes multiplied, convoys left every week and new ships took over their anchorages; yet underneath all this the old habits survived and the inhabitants did not alter. All of them still went to church regularly; he had watched them this morning. And he was certain they still drank tea with all their meals. The field-gun used in the past as a curfew for the garrison was fired from the Citadel every noon and at nine-thirty each night, and the townspeople took out their watches automatically twice a day to check the time. The Citadel itself flew the Union Jack in all weathers and was rightly considered a symbol and bastion of the British Empire.

Grinding on the cobblestones behind a pair of plunging Clydesdales came one of Halifax's most typical vehicles, a low-swung dray with a high driver's box, known as a sloven. This one was piled high with bags of feed and it almost knocked him down as the driver brought it around to level ground. He cursed as he jumped clear of the horses and the driver spat and flourished his whip, and the lash flicked in a quick, cracking arc over the sidewalk. The sloven moved north onto Barrington Street as the horses were pulled in to a walk. Traffic slowed down behind it, a few horns sounded and the column stopped behind a stationary tram.

His leg pained after the sudden pull on his muscles and he walked more slowly until the soreness abated. Images flashed through his mind and out again . . . shell-shock simultaneous with a smashed thigh and no time to be frightened by either; the flash of destruction out of the dark; who knew until it was experienced how intense the molten whiteness could be at the heart of an exploding chemical? . . . Naked when they picked

him up, unconscious . . . and afterwards memory gone and no identity disk to help the base hospital.

The English doctor had done a fine job in mending his thigh and a better one in saving his reason. This, at least, had been no accident; more than twenty centuries of medical history had been behind that doctor. Even though his world was composed now of nothing but chance, it was unreasonable to believe that a series of accidents should ultimately matter. One chance must lead to another with no binding link but a peculiar tenacity which made him determined to preserve himself for a future which gave no promise of being superior to the past. It was his future, and that was all he could say of it. At the moment it was all he had.

A motor horn sounded and he leaped convulsively again. Every time a sudden noise struck his ears his jangled nerves set his limbs jumping and trembling in automatic convulsions which made him loathe his own body for being so helpless. He stopped and leaned against a lamppost until the trembling stopped. Like a fish on the end of a hook, he thought, squirming and fighting for no privilege except the opportunity to repeat the same performance later.

People moved past him in both directions, laughing, talking, indifferent. Were they too stupid to care what was happening to the world, or did they enjoy the prospect of a society in process of murdering itself? Did he care himself, for that matter; weren't any emotions he had left reduced to the simple desire for an acknowledged right to exist here in the place he knew as home? He had long ago given up the attempt to discover a social or spiritual reason which might justify what had happened to himself and millions of others during the past three years. If he could no longer be useful in the hell of Europe, then he must find a way to stay in Canada where he had been born.

He took his bearings when the trembling in his limbs subsided and was astonished to see how far south he had walked. Had the years in London made him lose all perspective of distance? He walked slowly to the next corner and knew he had reached his objective. But now he was here he felt nervous and unreasonably disappointed. He surveyed the cross-street to his right as though he were searching casually for his bearings, but he knew every inch of it and every doorway as far up the hill as he could see.

It seemed to have lost all its graciousness, and yet nothing was actually changed. Then he realized that he had been remembering it as it was in summer with the horse chestnuts and elms and

limes towering their shade over the roofs, with the doorways secluded under vine-covered porches, with everything so quiet that it always seemed to be Sunday afternoon. Actually there was little difference; winter had always made it look bare, stripped as ruthlessly as the rest of Halifax. There was no town anywhere that changed in appearance so quickly when the foliage went.

He fumbled for a cigarette and lit it slowly, looking carefully in all directions as though he were deciding which way to shield himself from the wind. Then he began the steep ascent of the hill, his movements furtive and his hat pulled low over his left eye. He stopped at the crest and stood panting, hardly believing that after so much time he was really here, that the red house opposite had stayed just as he remembered it, that the trees still crowded its windows and the high wooden fence shut the garden away from the eyes of passersby.

At least the war had not dulled his trained appreciation of good architecture. Among the many nondescript Victorian houses of Halifax, this one stood out as a masterpiece. It was neither gracious nor beautiful, in a way it was almost forbidding, but it so typified the history and character of its town that it belonged exactly as it was: solid British colonial with a fanlight over the door, about six feet of lawn separating it from the sidewalk, four thick walls and no ells or additions, high ceilings and high windows, and shutters on the inside where they could be useful if not decorative. It had stood just as it was for over a hundred years; it looked permanent enough to last forever.

To cross the street and knock on the door, to take a chance on the right person opening it, would be so easy. Just a few movements and it would be done, and then whatever else he might feel, this loneliness which welled inside like a salt spring would disappear. Spasmodically he clasped one hand with the other and squeezed it hard, then turned back down the hill and followed it to Barrington Street.

There was nothing more he could do today. Sunday was the worst possible time to hunt for Alec MacKenzie or anyone else too poor to own a telephone. He walked north to the junction of Spring Garden Road and waited for a tram. Evening service was under way in St. Matthew's Church and the sound of a hymn penetrated its closed Gothic doors. "O God of Bethel by whose hand thy people still are fed . . . Who, through this weary pilgrimage, Hast all our fathers led. . . ."

The girls went by in twos and threes, sailors rolled past, evening loafers lounged against the stone wall of the military

cemetery opposite, a soldier picked up a girl in front of the iron gate of the Crimean monument. "God of our fathers, be the God of their succeeding race." With a muffled sigh the congregation sat down.

A tram ground around the corner and stopped, heading north. Fifteen minutes later when he left it he could hear a low, vibrant, moaning sound that permeated everything, beating in over the housetops from the sea. For a second he was puzzled; it sounded like an animal at some distance, moaning with pain. Then he realized that the air was salty and moist and the odour of fish-meal was in his nostrils. The wind had changed and now it was bringing in the fog. Pavements were growing damp and bells and groaning buoys at the harbour-mouth were busy. When he reached his room in the cheap sailor's lodging he had rented that morning he lay down, and the sounds of the harbour seemed to be in the walls.

five o'clock

From a window in her office at the Shipyards Penelope Wain stood watching the evening draw in over the water. It was invading the Stream like a visible and moving body. It spilled over from the land and lapped the massive sides of the graving-dock and the hulls of vessels riding at anchor; it advanced westward from the hidden sea; and because fog was behind the darkness, the air was alive with the clanging of bells.

She stood quite still, alone in her unlighted office. The mauve depths of the sky were slashed starkly by the upthrust angles of the great cranes, by the row of hoppers lining the dock to the north, by the two masts and three funnels of the cruiser which lay at the naval dockyard lower down the Stream. From somewhere in the recesses of the enormous building at her back came the sound of a closing door. She turned slightly to listen, but if there were faint footsteps they receded, and she turned back to watch the harbour.

This assembly of enormous and potent apparatus was so familiar she hardly noticed it. Yet even while she rested her eyes on the soft colours of the twilight, she was conscious of objects that the advancing darkness had partially covered. There was the long skeleton of the ship under construction, lying with its keel buried in the night and its ribs caged in the net of a great gantry. Flat in the open spaces of the yard under her window sprawled three bronze propellers waiting to be con-

nected to their shafts. And there was a row of parked trucks and a line of freight cars standing on a siding, all part of her work. She handled none of them and had no immediate authority over their disposal, yet ultimately the results of her daily work became parts of the whole of which these also were parts.

There was something delicate, something extremely fragile in the appearance of the girl alone against that angular background of motionless machinery and silent engines. She appeared slight because the lines of her waist were slim and her fingers and feet dainty. A second glance would discover definite curves at her hips and breasts, a latent fullness the more pleasing because it revealed itself as a surprise. She had quantities of reddish-brown hair pulled back onto the nape of her neck, but no amount of tidying could hide the graceful manner in which it grew from her forehead and temples. Now, in repose, her face seemed absorbed and private, and because this was the only expression she was able to discover from a mirror, she fancied that she was a plain, average girl of twenty-nine.

But contact with another person transformed her. In conversation her face opened and disclosed a sympathetic and comprehensive mind. She seemed to become part of the experience and emotions of anyone who engaged her interest, and the town was filled with individuals who would like to have found excuses for talking with her. But of this she was entirely unaware. The most striking and piquant feature of her appearance at any time was a lock of white hair running from the left side of her forehead along the temple and over her ear. It set her apart from other women and arrested men's attention by its obscure appeal to their sensuality, though it seldom succeeded in making her thoroughly attractive to them. When they discovered her profession, when they learned that she was a ship-designer with an office of her own at the Shipyards, they kept their distance in fear of the excessively unfamiliar.

She slipped back into the high swivel chair before her desk and turned on the goose-neck lamp at her elbow. It threw a yellow pool over the disarray of papers, pencils, T-squares, and erasers on the desk and shut the rest of the room away in darkness. She began to gather the papers together, checking each one carefully before laying the lot in a lower drawer. A list of figures engaged her attention as she ticked them off slowly with a pencil, and then this paper was placed on top of a pile of blueprints in another drawer.

She dropped the pencil with a clatter and leaned back, stretching her arms. She was tired and knew she should stop, but this