

Macdonald, Alastair. *Flavian's Fortune; A Psychological Thriller, and Towards the Mystery.*

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[See table of contents](#)

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REVIEWS

Flavian's Fortune; A Psychological Thriller. Alastair Macdonald. St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications, 1985. 196 p. \$9.95; *Towards the Mystery.* Alastair Macdonald. St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications Ltd., 1985. 116 p. \$7.95.

HELEN PORTER

Two books in one year. That's quite an achievement for any author, especially one who, like Alastair Macdonald, has a full-time job as professor in the English Department of Memorial University. Dr. Macdonald has been known as a prolific poet for a number of years now. His three earlier books of poetry, *Between Something and Something* (1970), *Shape Enduring Mind* (1974), and *A Different Lens* (1981), have been well received by the critics and the reading public. *Towards the Mystery* shows signs of becoming equally popular.

Flavian's Fortune is, as far as I know, Dr. Macdonald's first published novel. It's interesting to speculate about what impelled him to try this new form. Some critics contend that fiction, especially long fiction, is closely related to poetry. A book like Al Pittman's *Boughwölfen* tends to bear this out. In *Flavian's Fortune*, however, I see little indication of the poet's hand.

The novel, a kind of mock psychological thriller, is a solid, well-constructed work much more competently written than many first novels I've read. No doubt Dr. Macdonald's vivid imagination and flair for soft-core satire, wedded to his practised ability with words, have stood him in good stead here. The plot is well thought out, perhaps even too much so. Characterization is something else again; except for occasional brilliant flashes I didn't really get to know any of Macdonald's people. Most of the time they came across as types rather than human beings. I realize that Dr.

Macdonald's tongue was probably firmly in his cheek during most of the writing; in comic novels of this nature characterization is perhaps not as important as it is in more serious books or even in humorous works of a different kind. Nevertheless I kept wanting to know more about what makes the characters tick. In the first section of the book I was convinced that Flavian and his wife Harriet were staid middle-aged characters, even though it says right at the beginning that they'd been married for only six months and that Flavian was a young Oxford don. Later, in the Oxford segment, they suddenly become much younger. At times Harriet appears to be heavily-built and rather plain; then all at once she becomes an attractive, well-proportioned woman. I suppose the author is trying to show her through the eye of the beholder. More physical description might have helped.

The basic plot is fairly straightforward. Flavian, having failed to get a coveted fellowship at Goster College, Oxford, has recently become a lecturer in English in the aptly-named town of Grimingham. He has married Harriet for her money and her "pleasing aura of the aristocratic" but "How could I have told that only months after marriage she would show distressing bourgeois tendencies . . . ?" Although the first ninety-six pages of the novel are told from Flavian's point of view we soon learn that he is a snob-bish, intolerant man with an inflated sense of his own importance. The author has been subtly clever here; it's not always easy to convey such negative impressions about a first-person character. By page 13 Flavian has had enough of Harriet: "She was crass, and overbearing, and insulting, and altogether hateful. . . . If I could only leave it all and go away by myself." After a period of frustration and panic the perfect solution presents itself to Flavian: "I had thought of Harriet and her money. She should die, and it should be mine."

Why do so many male writers deal with husbands who want to get rid of their wives? I've read a number of books and short stories, both published and unpublished, with this theme. Flavian develops an elaborate plan to murder Harriet and make it look like an accident, another old chestnut. Of course he fails, and fails again, and fails again. . . . Such elaborate attention is given to each plot that about halfway through the book I began to wish that Flavian would succeed. The narrative was bogging down badly, becoming boring. The story picks up speed when Oxford philosophy don and thriller-writer Winnie Walker is introduced, but even after that one is tempted to skip pages now and then.

Flavian's Fortune is the result of a strong, sometimes quirky imagination, coupled with a thorough knowledge of English university life and a wry

sense of humour. Some of the lines are priceless. Referring to Harriet's wish for him to be a good mixer, Flavian says: "Did she think I was some kind of cake powder or kitchen utensil?" And then, complaining of his hard lot in life: "I lectured and tutored no less than five hours each week." He considers Shakespeare "overrated" and refers to John Donne as "that tiresome and hackneyed poet." But there is far too much unnecessary detail in the book and it's much too long for its content. A novella or even a long short story would have been more appropriate for what the author has to say here. Even so, the novel has many redeeming features that perhaps could have been brought into sharper focus by an experienced, keen-eyed editor.

It's as a poet that Alastair Macdonald shines. As in his earlier books, in *Towards the Mystery* he is preoccupied with time. A gentle, incurable sadness pervades much of his work, a sadness that we all share when we give ourselves time to think. "A Story," which describes an encounter between a little girl and an old man, is laced with a misunderstanding for which there will be no solution. "The Dead in Dreams" handles with dexterity a subject that, hard as we try to push it to the back of our minds, is familiar to us all:

... we're partly
in someone else's story
as well as our own. It shifts
direction unaccountably
like mixed-up reels
from different films

and the last section:

So unpredictably
they get in touch,
by downed communications'
tangled lines. . . .

In "Letter of an Old Lady" the poet gets inside the head of an elderly woman who lives alone:

I cannot go outside
so each day's just
a copy of them all.

Later in the poem come four lines that would be better omitted:

I think I'm truly blest
to keep
what powers I haven't lost
and strength to hope.

There's a Norman Vincent Peale quality to them that does not do justice to the valiant lady of the poem. The final stanza, with its cautious optimism, is better:

This phase of solitude
is not as void
as you suppose.
There's much to do
before the dark will close.

A few of the other poems would also benefit from the elimination of certain lines. "Saturday Children," for example, would be stronger if it ended with the line "that lurks round the corners of the years."

A feature of Dr. Macdonald's poetry that I find irritating is his habit of omitting the article. This gives his work an old-fashioned ring, as in these lines from "Havens of Youth":

Healing is free drift in sea days
of summer, when for brief season
tensions ease in what is called escape.

Perhaps this kind of thing is done for the rhythm; to my mind that's not reason enough.

I like Dr. Macdonald's use of physical description. Never overdone, it has a naturalness that many struggling poets would envy. His use of colour is particularly effective; here is an excerpt from "The Wall":

The wall is high and broad;
pale yellow stone
with tints of rose
gold glints
and violet hues in it.

Both *Flavian's Fortune* and *Towards the Mystery* are nicely packaged. Covers and style of print are much smarter looking than in some of Harry

Cuff's earlier releases. The collection of verse has left me looking forward to more poems from Alastair Macdonald. As for the novel, I rather doubt that there will be another one. If there is I'll be willing to give it a go.

MOUNT PEARL, NEWFOUNDLAND

Newfoundland in Canada; A People in Search of a Polity. F. L. Jackson.
St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications, 1984. 120 p. \$8.95.

ERIC WADDELL

As I turned the pages of Jackson's *Newfoundland in Canada* I could not help but think of the March, 1974, issue of *The Canadian Forum* on the subject "Newfoundland: Nation and Province." And on picking it out from my bookshelf I was struck yet again by the bittersweet observations of David Alexander and of G. K. Goundrey on central Canada's conceptualization of the "Newfoundland problem": that the province suffers from an excess of population and that the mainland needs the island's resources. Hence, by improving communications between the two, out-migration would be facilitated, while the resources would be exploited and exported more efficiently! Following such reasoning, Goundrey could only "recommend" that "What is needed is a tunnel under the Straits of Belle Isle connecting the Island with the mainland" (18), while Alexander arrived at the depressing conclusion that "It is a shabby prospect for any province, and especially one so recently a country" (13).

Jackson's essay also brought my mind back to an earlier article by Jim Lotz reviewing several publications of the Institute of Social and Economic Research. In it he remarked on the tendency of central governments to advance "the assumption that the problem is 'out there'—among the out-porters, the Indians, the Eskimos, the poor" (*Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* [1971]:58), with social scientists, in their concern to be "socially useful," frequently acting as both architects and victims of the myth. Hence his recommendation that "the time is ripe in Canada for an anthropology of business and government, to study their culture, their values, their kinship system, their interaction patterns. In the new vertical villages in the capitals and the cities lie many of the sources of the problems of isolated areas" (58).

A decade or more later little seems to have changed, and Newfoundland