

*Memoirs from Away: A New Found Land Girlhood.* Helen M. Buss/Margaret Clarke.

Malcolm Macleod

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Volume 17, Number 1, Spring 2001

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds17\\_1rv03](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds17_1rv03)

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Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

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Cite this review

Macleod, M. (2001). Review of [*Memoirs from Away: A New Found Land Girlhood.* Helen M. Buss/Margaret Clarke.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 17(1), 98–101.

*Memoirs from Away: A New Found Land Girlhood.* Helen M. Buss/Margaret Clarke. Waterloo, ON, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Life Writing Series, 6, Series Editor: Marlene Kadar, Humanities Division, York University, xvi, 153 p. softcover with French flaps, \$29.95, 1999, ISBN 0-88920-314-8

## MALCOLM MACLEOD

AFTER WAITING YEARS for the chance, it is finally appropriate to start a review with the old joke about Canada being discovered by two Frenchmen named Jack — Jacques Cartier. Similarly, *Memoirs from away* seems to have two authors. They turn out to be the same person. Helen Clarke grew up on Craigmillar Avenue, St. John's, and later became Mrs. Helen Buss, then Professor Buss, University of Calgary. When this scholarly Buss began to produce academic studies, she wanted another label to distinguish her creative writing. So she dusted off an unused middle name, reattached the family name with which she was born, and created Margaret Clarke. The girly, imaginary persona Clarke, and the more serious, fiercely feminist Buss, have contributed in equal proportions to this interesting, slim account in which a few childhood impressions and memories — up to her early teenage years in the 1950s — are subjected to unrelenting introspection and ideological interpretation.

After an introduction to this project, and to Newfoundland, the book follows an outline of five chapters that correspond with principal stages of childhood. There are numerous digressions, especially when she slips into recent experience to discuss the difficulties of writing autobiography, and how she worked on this one in British Columbia, Calgary, Ottawa, Newfoundland, on visits to her parents'

retirement home in Florida, and while driving and fighting with her husband on trips between some of these places.

The wartime chapter is "Mother's child." She muses about her mother's situation, stuck in a foreign country (North Sydney) and raising three children by herself, distressed by isolation and loneliness, while Dad was in the army. "I had found the truth of why I had such terror in remembering my early childhood: I was being raised by a woman on the edge of a breakdown." (p.40) In "Peace: Daddy's girl," the father for whom she had yearned was home again, but rarely at home, as he followed a self-made man's busy path to success. This increased the impact of his seeming perfection. Only in middle age did the author confess to a sort of penis envy. "What I envy in my father and other men" is their confident assurance, "their comfort with who they are." (p.62)

In "Avalon: knowing my place" she covers familiar territory of childhood: playing with dolls and giving them up, neighbourhood squabbles, causes of pride and of punishment. The next chapter is "Losing Mary Lou, finding Sally." Mary Lou was an imaginary playmate Helen/Margaret had before starting kindergarten, vividly believed in. She was especially useful for confessing or disguising crimes. The first day the author attended school she realized her pal could never fit in such a serious and regimented place.

I had a desperate feeling of being without Mary Lou and I needed to find her. Perhaps I had left her in the washroom.... a cool, lonely, hollow space.... I gamely pulled down my underpants and sat down to pee. Suddenly terror rushed in from every corner of the room.... I do not know if I left Mary Lou in the first floor girls' washroom at Holloway School... I just know that she was not with me after that." (p.111)

Sally was the energetic and adventuresome heroine, a leader and organizer, in a social studies textbook which arrived in the Newfoundland curriculum after Helen/Margaret passed that grade; all the girls in her readers were timid, mousy followers.

In "History and politics," approaching adolescence now, she recalls how Newfoundland and Canadian history had to be continually reimagined, in order to make them fit with pride in the interstices of British/American relations; and how Prime Minister St. Laurent spoke to her brother, but not to her, when he visited St. John's.

Throughout, there is the precise, practiced language of sincerity and revelation. Even discussing serious subjects, she drops numerous light-hearted remarks. Newfoundlanders "knew the difference between a whale and a whale of a story." When as an adult she juggled marriage, children and a career she was "in danger of losing my balance.... I went to a psychiatrist to get balanced again." When Mary Lou was lost in the washroom "I may have given up the part of me that might be able to learn to spell properly." (pp.22,29,111)

“Memoirs from away” is the title of this one book, but it is a fitting label for a whole category of writing about Newfoundland. While Newfoundlanders have been massively re-locating themselves in North America for 120 years, literary elements in the diaspora have often penned accounts of displacement, adjustment and nostalgia for a distant, past homeland.

The best-selling Newfoundland book of all time — George Whiteley’s *Northern seas, Hardy sailors* (1982) — is in this category. While publication in New York reflected the author’s new world of privilege and private schools in Pennsylvania, the subject matter showed how Whiteley retained strong links with, and fond regard for the lore of Newfoundland. Half of the two dozen life-stories introduced in *Crossroads Country* (1999) show the same pattern: folks whose adult lives were spent in the United States or more frequently on the Canadian mainland, remembering their Newfoundland roots. The best-titled of all Newfoundland family histories, recalling a kin famous for inspecting lighthouses and building carriages — *The Oke Tree* (1987) — was published by a resident of Winnipeg.

The granddaddy of the genre is David Macfarlane’s *The Danger Tree*. Here “granddaddy” is the rightly chosen term because Macfarlane’s masterful interweaving of Newfoundland’s 20th century experience, with the fortunes of the Goodyears from Grand Falls, was triggered not by his own brief boyhood visits, but by the often re-told memories of his mother and her generation. She was the one who moved from Newfoundland to Ontario; Macfarlane grew up at Hamilton.

Buss/Clarke grew so much after the brief period covered by this autobiography, that her “memoirs from away” seem from very far away indeed. Except for a rivetting, four-page illustration of how Protestant children of her generation were taught to despise and demonize Roman Catholics, this story does not particularly belong in Newfoundland. Many of its events might have happened in Calgary, Cape Breton or even Florida. As she interprets it, her girlhood was not so much an inculcation to how things are done in Newfoundland, as a socialization to make her content — she has been fighting it ever since — with the “great evil that has the world in its thrall.” (p.100) This evil is paternalism, the thorough male victory in the war of the sexes, which relegates women and girls to inferior status.

She finds the roots of her strongly-held ideology of feminism in childhood events. In particular, there are “three historical markers that my adult psyche has chosen as its making moments.” (p.143) The earliest was in North Sydney, 1942, when her father left to go off to war. Little two-year old Helen stood for hours at the kitchen window where he disappeared, wailing over and over, “My daddy gone, neber took me.” Later, age seven or eight, growing up tomboy on Craigmillar Avenue, she with her older brother and his friends built a little clubhouse. The first thing the boys then did was put up a sign that said, “No girls allowed.”

Later, she was sexually molested by the husband in a home where she baby-sat. It started with his furtively fingering her chest, still flat, and nicely rounded

schoolgirl knees. But one evening he came home ahead of his wife and pulled her into his lap.

Between my underpants and the tops of my stockings, there was a space of flesh which I have been told is now regularly fetishized in soft-porn movies. In that space ... you could find my skinny little eleven-year-old thighs.... This was the first time he had actually managed to touch my flesh. I don't even remember what it felt like but I knew this was too much. This had something to do with getting pregnant. My panic took me away from him...." (p.141)

She never baby-sat there again, parried her parents' questions why not, felt the guilt was hers, and worried for months she might actually be pregnant. Years later she told her mother about the neighbour who molested her. She was not believed, until her brother spoke up and said the man did indeed have that reputation.

This appealing and opinionated book is about feminism more than the girlhood of either of its authors, or Newfoundland. The feminism is fervid without being frosty; Helen/Margaret accepts as collaborators and partners on her side of the great question, not only all women, but also "males who have become the victims of patriarchy." (p.100) For the struggle she wants to wage, however, both her names seem unfortunate. Buss is her husband's name, and Clarke, no better, is the name of her father. Would she have done better to adopt her mother's original surname, Osmond? But that was not so much her mother's name as it was the grandfather's. In our tradition women do not have surnames of their own: patriarchy triumphant, whether remembered close at hand or far away.