

# The Master's Wife: An Antipodean Appreciation

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There may be no polity anywhere in the world in which literature is so prominent an economic commodity as it is on Prince Edward Island. I would not belittle the literary achievement of L. M. Montgomery: she is a peerless author of romance. But her very high profile, especially in her home province, may cast into shadow someone I consider an even greater writer.

You will think this impertinent from a writer living on an island -- Tasmania -- on the other side of the world. And -- please believe me -- I really do not wish to disparage "Anne." What I do intend is to speak a word for what seems to me, from the other side of the world, to be *the* unparalleled work of genius emanating from Prince Edward Island. I write of a consummate masterpiece, and to someone from "away" its modest profile (at least when compared with that accorded *Anne*) in the island that produced it, and that is in turn lovingly celebrated by it, is inexplicable. I refer, of course, to Sir Andrew Macphail's luminous 1939 work, *The Master's Wife*.

*The Master's Wife* is one of the world's great literary evocations of place. This is a big call, given that affectionate explication of place has always been a central theme within artistic production; perhaps *especially* literary production. *The Master's Wife* is, on any standard of assessment, one of the great writings of the departing century.

Macphail, it won't take me to tell you, is one of PEI's greatest sons. He lived an arc of time when history's wheel turned with deceptive rapidity. The tight, Gaelic-speaking rural communities and their idiosyncratic (from our arrogantly cosmopolitan standpoint) world views were poised shortly to vanish from living sight. Macphail himself was a "modern," an academic of medicine with international renown, as well as a prominent man of letters; an essayist and critic and himself a wonderfully lucid writer. A man of the world; at ease therein.

Yet he came from a small and bounded world, one inward-focused and low on dynamism. He writes of this world without artifice or pretense; with no successful expatriate's self-congratulation. Instead, he portrays his Orwell home with love and affection -- but with a complete absence of sentimentality. The Orwell of his growing years is a place of enchantment -- but not all enchantment bedazzles. It is also a place of rigid routines -- which make for drudgery, but also for comfort. Even the Master and his wife, dearly loved, compassionately sketched, are presented with virtues and foibles alike. And there is no fudging Macphail's fierce ambition to escape the life he paints with such empathy and care.

But I don't need to conventionally review this great book. What I should do here is try to explain why it is that this book should have made such an impact upon a reader from the other side of the planet.

My own island lacks PEI's tradition of close familial and communal ties with its progenitor places. Europeans came to my own island as individuals, not collectivities; many of them came, insofar as they arrived in the irons of felony, with no willingness to be here, but without any ties

of regard for the land that expelled them, either. Scottish and Irish names abound in my island -- but Scottish and Irish communities do not. Within two generations, most Tasmanians had lost all inherited memory of European forebears. By contrast, Macphail (like Alistair MacLeod's Cape Bretoners) knows his Highland provenance in impeccable detail.

This is a facet of Maritime Canadian life for which I harbour deep envy. To me it is fascinating in and of itself. But it is what follows from this -- as it seems to me -- that is of greatest import. It adds a perception of continuity, of distant place potently transposed upon present place. Because of this, it reinforces the fabric of colonial place with many traditions and cultural appurtenances. It gently mantles place with a fey and a marvelous character; place becomes charged and elemental, its natural features attaining heightened meaning. Even its other living components, the "higher" animals in particular, become significant rather than marginal entities within the landscape. And it enjoins a view of place in which the local is primary, not universalized to some notional sociological mean. Is it PEI of which Macphail writes? Perhaps it is not. Perhaps his observed community cannot be generalized beyond Orwell itself. Certainly Macphail is at pains to impress upon his reader the world-away difference between tight, God-fearing Orwell, and swinging, sophisticated Malpeque.

Given such a rich inheritance, it is unsurprising that Atlantic Canada stands in my view as the global capital of place-writing, and within this corpus *The Master's Wife* stands pre-eminent. I would like to have known the Master's wife. She was formidable -- and she belongs to a life impossibly distant. Of course, given her way of being in the world, she would not have wanted to know someone as alien in time and space as I. But I would "dip me lid" (as we are wont to say in these parts) to Sir Andrew Macphail for the inestimable gift of her to the world. She is the larger-than-life fulcrum around which he has swung one of the world's greatest writings.

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