BRITISH TRADITION AND THE QUEST FOR CANADIAN IDENTITY IN ALICE MUNRO'S NARRATIVES*

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This article demonstrates how Alice Munro uses *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Hateship, Friendship, Courting, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) and *Runaway* (2004) to highlight the importance of "Britishness" among the people of Anglo-Saxon origin in Canada and how it influences the other ethnic groups in this country in the quest for a real Canadian identity. Life in towns, British history and traditions, the English language, and its literature are the main factors which export the concept of Canada throughout the world as an unseparable part of the British Empire.

Key words: *Britishness, small towns, English literature, the Scots, Ontario, the English language, ethnic minorites.*

Este artículo demuestra como Alice Munro utiliza *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Hateship, Friendship, Courting, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) and *Runaway* (2004) para enfatizar la importancia de la "britaneidad" entre la población de origen anglosajón en Canadá y como influye a los otros grupos étnicos de este país en la búsqueda de una auténtica identidad canadiense. La vida en pequeñas ciudades, la historia de Gran Bretaña y sus tradiciones, la lengua inglesa y su literatura son los principales factores que exportan el concepto de Canadá en el mundo como parte inseparable del imperio británico.

Palabras clave: *Britaneidad, ciudades pequeñas, literatura inglesa, los escoceses, Ontario, la lengua inglesa, minorías étnicas.*

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Since 1988 Canada is by law a multicultural country. However, we cannot deny the fact that Canada, as a nation, has been modelled on the code of Britishness. "They are the only ones nobody calls foreigners" (17), says the young protagonist of John Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death* (1993) when he refers to the Britons. No doubt, their workings have shaped the perceptions of the rest of the nationalities co-existing in this wide territory. This is due in part to the fact that a British background has always been considered as more advanced in the scale of modernity and, also because Britishness –as a form of government, as a kind of civilization– has demonstrated that people can create "an orderly society … which provide[s] its members with freedom of conscience and access to economic opportunity regardless of differences of caste and creed" (Coleman 19). Nevertheless, it has been generally assumed that the standards of British Canadians should be assimilated by the non-British: Scottish, Welsh, and, later, Irish immigrants identified with "a certain arrogant superiority and exclusiveness, perhaps characteristic of the English race" (Woodsworth 240). In addition, a hierarchy of racial types organized in descending order from most to least assimilable was unconsciously established.

Teresa Gibert notes that the construction of a collective past is a central concept of postmodernism in Canada, where many writers involve readers in a process of remembering history through fiction with narratives (92). As a postmodernist writer, Alice Munro rejects a unified national identity giving an outstanding role to the British heritage in her works. In her first novel *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and in two of her collections of short stories *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001) and *Runaway* (2004) Munro highlights the Britons' sense of self-improvement and enterprise as central principles of Canadian middle-class concepts. Parallel to this, she tries to show a purified and refined kind of Britishness, superior to the British Isles original.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Alice Munro uses the works mentioned above to emphasize the importance of "Britishness" among the people of Anglo-Saxon stock and how it influences the other nationalities in the country in the quest for a real Canadian identity. Life in small towns, the history of Britain, the English language, the origins of the settlers, their customs and

traditions, and the books they read are the most remarkable factors which export the idea of Canada throughout the world as an indivisible part of the British empire.

Most of the first settlers who built Ontario's small towns came from Ireland and the rural Highlands of Scotland. The old Scottish values were the source of the new Canadian citizens' virtues. Scots in Canada have been perfectly able to adapt their rural traditions to contemporary problems and have made the standards of such small towns like Windsor, London, Hamilton, Kitchener, Kingston or Cornwall become models for the rest of the country.[1] This way, in "Hateship" (*Hateship*) it is said that towns in Saskatchewan were not like in Eastern Canada with their beautiful Victorian mansions and old graveyards but "mostly pretty and rudimentary affairs" (5**).** In a similar way to the little places in Scotland and Ireland, Canadian small towns embrace farms which represent the ownership of the land, tranquillity, family, stability, and old money like the McQuaigs' estate in "Post and Beam" (*Hateship*). Contrary to this, cities mean a mix of wealth, noise, violence, corruption, crowding, multicultural proximities, and the loss of old values. In "Trespasses" (*Runaway*) Toronto is defined as a "crappy town" where a young girl would not deserve to grow up (28). Ontario's capital city has a shocking effect on Uncle Benny, one of the warmest characters of *LGW.* When he drives there to bring little Diana back to his small community in Western Ontario, he gets hopelessly lost on its streets. For him, the city landscape is a sinister wasteland full of fast cars and terrifying industrial buildings. Small towns symbolize beauty. Beauty and usefulness are synonymous concepts in the New World as far as they were in primitive farm communities in Britain where profits were extracted from the land and cattle. It does not matter how horrendous the Flats End looks like in *LGW* as Mr Jordan considers it most appropriate since it is useful for his fur business.

Unfortunately, this idyllic microcosm is not perfect at all. As William New indicates, the portraits of Canadian towns "focus on hypocrisy as much as community" (157). From the point of view of a person lacking certain economic advantages and feeling like an outcast, Munro stresses duplicity as one of the most celebrated elements of these rural community values. One the one hand she lets us see the vision of those garden alternatives as prototypes of hope and possibility

as opposed to big cities whose size and economic advantage seem to be the only working criteria of definition. On the other, we can perceive small town people's falsity, gossiping and pretentiousness. In *LGW* Mrs Jordan would not talk to Mitch Plim's wife because she had been a former prostitute. In the same novel Sandy Stevenson's fat wife was considered almost an alien as she came "from down east, out of the country altogether" (9). In "Hateship" (*Hateship*) the owner of "Milady", the clothes shop, cannot understand why people go to the city, drive hundred miles and tell themselves that that way they will get something better than she sells there (13).[2] Munro's attempts to establish a relation between rural Ontario and the great cities in the metropolis make the reader be more aware of the significance of this regional world. Small towns are the reminder of Britain in North America. Looking down from the bridge, Jubilee seems to Del a "pattern of streets named after battles and ladies and monarchs and pioneers" (*LGW* 248). By accentuating the role of those numerous and indistinguishable small towns or putting, as Walter Martin indicates, "rural Ontario on the map" (192), she wants to obliterate the fact that Canada can often be associated with provincialism and inferiority.[3]

Ailsa Cox points out that Alice Munro "appears to be less conscious of a broader Canadian identity than pioneering inheritance" (6). In fact, Munro wrote to me in a letter: "I write about Scots and Irish Canadians because this is what I am, that is the small-town farm country I am part of".[4] The people of Scottish-Irish stock are the most salient ethnic group in Canada and Ontario seems to operate as another region of Scotland for her. She even speaks about the time she spent in British Columbia as a kind of exile. Munro describes two Scotlands in Canada: the aristocratic and tragic country sketched as "all bloodshed, drowning, hacking off heads, agony of horses" (*LGW* 66), and the practical Calvinistic nation which venerates her neighbours' and her own family's capacity for improvement singling out the Scots as the inventers and promoters of the concept of Britishness forged in middle-class principles.[5] Del's ancestors in *LGW* come from Scottish-Irish stock and she documents the life of her hometown taking her British past as an unavoidable reference.[6] The young girl is the inheritor of an ancient family tree and her uncle Craig is, according to Coral Ann Howells, "the custodian of tradition", "the patriarchal figure" (39) who links the Canadian Jordans to the European ones as if the latter were supporting

them from the past. Munro's motherland is protective, affectionate and even possesses healing powers: Lauren's colds are significantly relieved when she drinks the hot toddies that her father prepares for her in "Trespasses" (*Runaway*). Undoubtedly, the Scottish-Irish Canadians have settled their majority status by means of strengthening a British identity which has not eliminated ancient loyalties such as their respect to a prestigious colonial heritage and the strong preservation of their intra-group relations and old world connections in order to mark their own boundaries and obtain benefits like promotion or upward social mobility—thanks to his Commonwealth links, Lewis, a New Zealander in "Comfort" (*Hateship*), finds a good job in a town by Lake Huron.

Canada has fully participated in the creation of the British empire. Hundreds of British Canadians regard the imperial saga as part of their national heritage—at the beginning of the nineteenth century "the excitement of the New Imperialism was almost as intense in Toronto as it was in London" (Heble 393). Munro exhibits many of the Scottish Canadians who populate her works as loyal to the fundamental values of a British constitutional monarchy.[7] In *LGW* Del remembers souvenirs such as a tiny Red Ensign or a Union Jack decorating plenty of houses in Jubilee or a photograph of King George and Queen Elizabeth pinned to the wall at the Public School when they visited Canada in 1939 (250). She is amazed by the picture of the royal couple and the two little princesses in their coronation finery that her uncle Jack kept at home (28) or the red-and-gold tin with the picture of Queen Alexandra that aunts Elspeth and Grace preserved (60). In "Family Furnishings" (*Hateship*) Alfrida also told stories about the royal family distinguishing "between the good ones like the king and queen and the beautiful Duchess of Kent and the dreadful ones like the Windsors and old King Eddy" (93).

In *LGW* Munro starts introducing the other minorities by mentioning an Austrian Del's grandfather had hired to work as an employee who eventually became a victim of her aunts' distrust (33). Years later, when Del grows older, she is surprised at the black hair of Italian girls she had seen in pictures (150). In *Hateship* and *Runaway* the writer shows sympathy and understanding for the situation of other ethnic minorities but her focus is nevertheless solidly fixed on the majority figures of the British Canadians. In *Hateship* the station agent

spares a thought for all the Czechs, Hungarians and Ukranians living in Saskatchewan ("Hateship" 4); Sunny's house in Toronto belongs to some people who came from Trinidad a dozen years before ("Nettles" 169); and Queenie danced with a Chinese boy named Andrew drinking the wine that the Greeks had made at a successful intercultural party ("Queenie" 258). As Munro observes in her letter "the racial mix has changed and is changing, making the cities –in particular– much more interesting".[8] This transformation is clearly expressed in *Runaway*. Robin, the protagonist of "Tricks", mentions that her little town is now inhabited by people from India, Egypt, the Philippines and Korea and they are her new friends. Nevertheless, she laments that "the old patterns of life, the rules of earlier days, persist to some extent, but a lot of people go their own way without even knowing such things" (263). Some space is also reserved to other Orientals and Canadian aboriginal tribes in this collection. In "Comfort" the narrator is conscious of the fatalities of the newlyarrived Filipino nurses who are caught in the unfamiliar snow (131), in "Silence" the control of the northern parts of the country "is being gradually, cautiously, … , relinquished to the native people" (157).

In the 1960s there appeared many advent groups to defend the English language in Canada as the British-Canadians became more aware of themselves as "merely" another ethnic group. Munro uses the English language as a mark of social class. Del's mother despised the people in the marginal Flats Road by means of "her noticeable use of good grammar" (*LGW* 8); the Greek landlady in "Queenie" (*Hateship*) may be quite rich since she owns the whole building of rented apartments but "she doesn't speak hardly any English" (245), and Grace in "Passion" (*Runaway*) cannot hide the fact that she is poor because of her strong Ottawa Valley accent (164). Perhaps it is in *Runaway* where Munro insists on the importance of being British in Canada by elegantly ridiculing the other immigrants, even the other whites –so frequently assimilated to the British– because English is not their mother tongue: Ailo's strong and insistent German, Dutch, or Scandinavian accent in "Chance" distinguishes her from the other people in the house (77); the Southern European maid's ungrammaticalities in "Soon" face Julia's university register (106), and the accents of the Dutch farmers who were patients in the hospital in "Tricks" are mocked by the cruel nurses (243). All this is in contrast

to Mrs Travers's proud work as a teacher of Business English at a secretarial school or the Oxford Dictionary that she was giving Mavis as if despising the American one they had been using to play word games in "Passion" (162, 171).

A national literature is essential for the formation of national character. George Bowering points out that Canadian literature like Canadian history is largely Scottish (qtd. in Coleman 91). Canadians are certainly enriched by the masters of English prose and verse and they take joy in these magnificent possessions. According to JoAnne McCaig, "the literature produced in Canada links [Canadians] with [their] ancestors and with one another …" (38). Many English-speaking writers have marked Alice Munro in order to write her novels and short stories and some others have determined her characters. James Carscallen turns to James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a clear influence in *LGW*.[9] Del Jordan is actually the feminine counterpart of Stephen Dedalus, both brilliant young children who are becoming glorious artists. Munro's episodes are a type of *Bildungsroman*, charting a life chronologically. They describe a flux, and, like Thomas Hardy in *Tess*, show how a concentration of circumstances can determine a whole sequence of events. Two stories in *Runaway* illustrate this. In "Tricks" strange misunderstandings make Robin's life change forever and in "Silence" Penelope becomes "a prosperous, practical matron" (156) living in the northern part of the country presumably as a reaction to a too liberal education from her mother.

The XIXth century English poets are also a source of inspiration for Munro. As Walter Martin indicates "she is concerned, as Keats was, with a life of sensations" (187). In *LGW*, the Wawanash River seems to be a symbol of life that moves between land and water, upper and lower worlds, which suggests that Munro had Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" in mind. Del's mother –a book lover who earns her living selling encyclopaedias– signs her letters "Princess Ida", a name borrowed from Tennyson's heroine.

Cox notices that "Along with many teenagers, Munro was obsessed by *Wuthering Heights*, [a] gothic text … suffused with Calvinist imagery" (3). For Del in *LGW*, *Wuthering Heights* is more than a passionate text to be read. It is the urn where to keep a most valuable

possession. Between its pages she folded "those few poems and bits of a novel" (*LGW* 62) that she had written. Charlotte Brontë is indeed a model for the young girl. It was better to be like the Romantic writer than "putting herself on the road to marriage" (*LGW* 191), she proclaimed after thinking about what a normal life could be. Reading *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* gave her a sense of relief after a horrible hangover and helped her imagine "a nineteenth-century sort of life, walks and studying, rectitude, courtesy, maidenhood, [and] peacefulness" (*LGW* 190). Other classics fill the bookcases of Alfrida's family house in "Family Furnishings" (*Hateship*): *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Heart of Midlothian* do not seem like things bought in a store but as "presences rooted in the ground" (101). The XIXth century also reigns in the pages of "Post and Beam" (*Hateship*), as Lionel thinks he is in a Dickens novel (190). It is in "Tricks" (*Runaway*) where the greatest writer of all appears. Young Robin takes the train to Stratford every summer to watch Shakespeare performances. Wearing beautiful dresses, she prefers going there than to the Royal Alex in Toronto when Broadway musicals are on tour. However, however, she should have learnt the lesson well from *The Comedy of Errors* and prepared herself to foretell the mix-ups and disasters that natural duplicity brought to her life.

As a conclusion we can state that, although Munro dislikes the role of spokesperson of a national culture, her writings defend the fact that the colonial past is a form of cultural order that inevitably dominates Canada. In her body of work people of British stock keep giving importance to such things as family sagas or names; they are keen on the idea of the persistence of the empire; they feel comfortable with "an image of European dependability" (New 86) as if they were under the protection of their motherland. *Hateship* and *Runaway* relate small towns to big cities whose identities have been constructed by their values. New ethnic groups populate their pages but most of them have conformed to British Canadian manners and customs and partially deleted their culture and even their language. The small town characters of *LGW* are emancipated in *Hateship* and *Runaway* mainly because they have matured but they still use Britishness as a fortress and see their nation as an old European country on new soil. In *LGW*, *Runaway* and *Hateship* Munro clearly investigates the nature of her own British Canadian ethnicity. Her perspective on Canada is pluralistic,

but she knows that her point of view is a majority one in Canadian society. The final sentences of her kind letter to me are revealing, "If I were able to 'feel' my way into the life of somebody from Portugal – perhaps– or Jamaica or Croatia, now a Canadian, I'd love to do it. But it would not be as authentic as it should be".[10]

NOTES:

[1] Munro's own father wanted to reconstruct a vanished way of life, down to the details of farming practices, social rituals and food and drink as if he were in Britain.

[2] Munro herself also suffered from the consequences of this double dealing, as in 1976 *LGW* was removed from the grade 13 curriculum at Kenner High School because of its sexual context.

[3] Like Jane Austen she invents the names of small communities and leaves the names of big cities untouched. As in Austen's novels her imagined landscape of small towns, rivers, lakes and isolated farmsteads do not need to be named. They have become so familiar to her regular readers that they can feel southwestern Ontario at home.

[4] Letter to the author. Sept 18th 2006. I visited Canada in summer 2005 and, among many other books, I bought Alice Munro's *Runaway*. When I started writing this article, I decided to ask Munro herself about her feelings as a Scots-Canadian. Then I sent an envelope to the editorial place with two letters, one for them and another for Munro, begging them to send it to her home. Months later I surprisingly received a handwritten letter from Munro thanking me for my interest and answering all my questions.

[5] The fictional towns which recur in *LGW,* Walley, Jubilee or Carstairs, are explored through strategies associated with the local and oral history as the histories of Scottish clans and families.

[6] Scottish and Irish immigrants sometimes waved the term Britishness as opposed to Englishness, so they continued the same rivalry as in the metropolis.

[7] At the beginning of the XXth century for the Canadians there was not much difference between a Canadian Briton and a British

Briton. Their accents were different but they usually honoured the same ideals.

[8] Letter to the author. Sept 18th 2006.

[9] English literature also had a sedative power in Del's family: her own father read the same books over and over again and ironically said that H. G. Wells's *Outline of History* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* put himself to sleep.

[10] Letter to the author 18 Sept 2006.

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