

IRONY IN LIME RIDGE: RALPH GUSTAFSON'S UNPUBLISHED NOVEL

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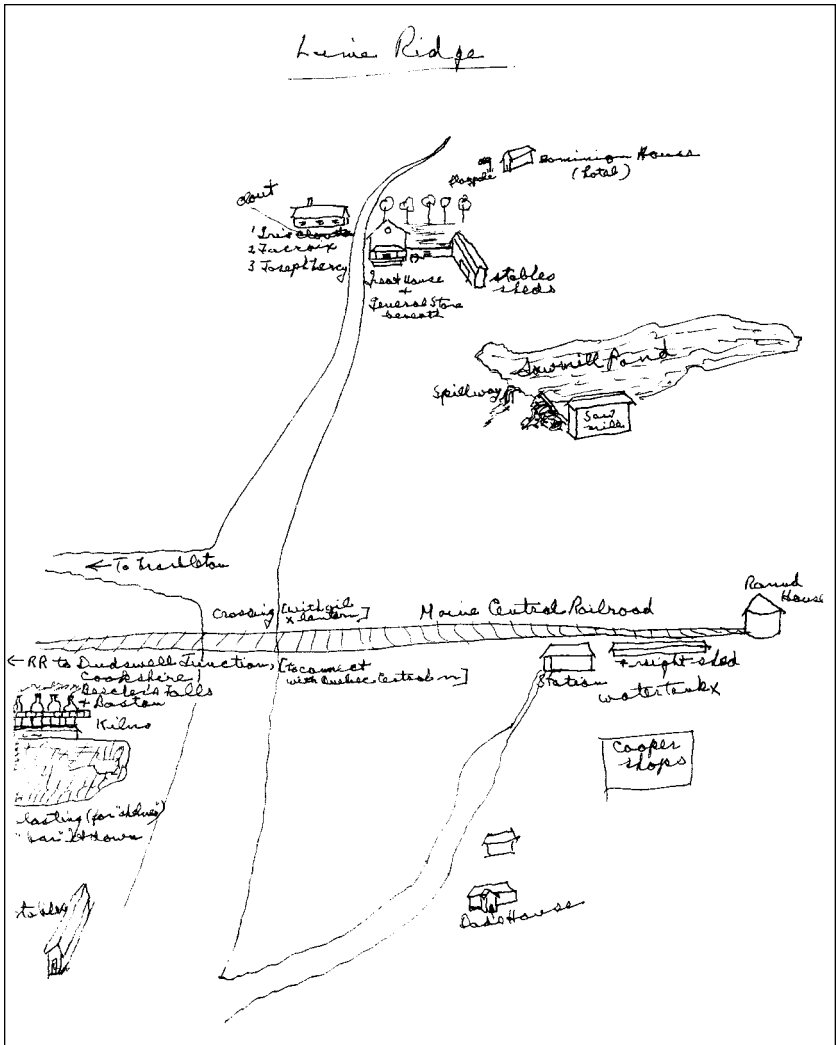
The hamlet of Lime Ridge, birthplace of Ralph Gustafson and setting for his unpublished novel *No Music in the Nightingale*, has vanished utterly.

Instead of a picturesque though somewhat dusty community nestled on the high ground above the St. Francis River about 40 kilometres east of Sherbrooke, there is a multi-million dollar mining installation dominated by a ten-storey lime rejuvenating kiln, towering storage silos, a funicular railway, and a huge quarry dynamited out of the gentle green Townships countryside. The predominating colour is a bluish, chalky grey, characteristic of limestone from the Devonian period. There are "Zone de Dynamitage" signs everywhere in the underbrush.

Limestone has been mined on this ridge since early in the nineteenth century when kilns were constructed of granite ferried down the St. Francis river and wood to fire them was hauled in from the Stoke mountains. You can still find three such kilns, one crumbled to the ground, another about to be split open by a birch tree in a clearing back of Florian Breton's farm on the northern end of Lac Miroir. The construction in 1887 of a rail spur from the Quebec Central line running through the St. Francis valley past Bishop Pond (later Mirror Lake) to the richer deposits a few miles up at Lime Ridge itself accelerated the development of the resource.

By the first decade of the century the village was considered quite prosperous. Although the town is gone, the 400-million year old ocean reef from which the lime is extracted is rich in high quality limestone. According to estimates made by Graybec, the company presently mining the lime, there is an estimated 100-year reserve, enough presumably to make one very big hole in the ground.

At some time during the nearly nine years from 1954 to 1962 that Gustafson wrote and rewrote the manuscript of *No Music in the Nightingale*, he drew a map of the Lime Ridge he remembered as a child, the village to which his uncle, a dynamiter at the quarry, and later his



father, who worked in the general store, emigrated from Sweden during the last decade of the nineteenth century. The map indicates a sawmill, a cooper's shop, a general store, the Dominion House Hotel, and a line of five bottle-shaped kilns next to the quarry. At the bottom right hand corner of the map there is a drawing of "Dad's House." Bisecting the main road through Lime Ridge is the Maine Central spur line to Dudswell Junction where it joined the Quebec Central line, providing rail transport of the processed limestone west to Montreal and south to the New England States. The map suggests a community in which mine, railway, hotel and homes coexisted on intimate terms. In

fact, *Lovell's Business Directory for the Province of Quebec 1910–11* gives the hamlet of Lime Ridge a population of 300 people while local historian Yanic Cauchon estimates that there were, at the turn of the century, about 40 well kept homes as well as a blacksmith and a flour mill. In the novel, Gustafson evokes not only the proximity of quarry and town (the name of which he changed to Lime Rock) but also the tendency of the former to swallow up the latter:

The five tall furnaces of the kilns dominated the hollow. The Company buildings displaced old William's town hall, the pit swallowed the grace of Dorsecroft. From the station this side of the turntable and roundhouse, the railroad was swung across the main street to the new loading sheds. Night glowed with the perpetual fires banked in the kilns; in daylight the heated air trembled over the chimneys. Around the kilns the foliage hung with a deposit of white lime; the turbulent brook emptying from the pond dam where the sawmill was, ran rockflour, boiling with the waste of the factory. In the centre of the village, traffic halted at the warning whistle while the greater blasts went off in the pit, tons of the hill trembling then sinking down, the foundations of the rock gone beneath.

By the end of the 1960s the swallowing process was nearly completed. Advanced technology reduced the need for unskilled labour, the demand for lime products increased with the post war boom, and the pit got larger. The nearby towns of St. Adolphe and Marbleton provided habitation while Lime Ridge slowly vanished. Dust, fumes and noise had made living in the community impossible. Although the original Gustafson home was still standing when the recently married Betty and Ralph Gustafson visited the area in 1960, it too was soon to disappear.

On one level, then, *No Music in the Nightingale* is an attempt to capture a departed past, a retrieval of a community in which the tensions between the imperatives of industry and the desires of those who wish to retain a more romantic attachment to the land could be effectively dramatized. More specifically, it is about ownership and its transference, through chicanery, from a line of original legendary settlers, the Dorsets, to the more mercantile and ruthless Henry Bradshaw, owner of the Lime Rock mine. When the two last remaining descendents of these antithetical families, Brand Dorset and Ann Bradshaw, find themselves drawn to each other, the action of the novel becomes dense with passionate and ironic possibilities. The fact that Ann also loves and is loved by the company dynamiter, Johnny Gulbranson, provides an additional complication. When Johnny sets out to block the machinations of Ann's father, the story moves to its

surprising and ironic climax. In fact, it is Johnny who becomes the focus of the novel's second main theme: the rejection of love. Ann, Brand and Johnny form a curious triangle of relationships which the novel explores with the kind of irony and indirection which characterized much of Gustafson's poetry.

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The foreground action of the novel covers a two week period from the end of September to mid-October in the year 1911. Wilfred Laurier's Liberal government has recently been defeated on the issue of reciprocity, Roald Amundsen has reached the South Pole, the Balkans are beginning to stir against their Turkish overlords, and middle class Canadians are reading the latest work by Edith Wharton and Joseph Conrad. The opening chapter reaches back into Townships history to describe the initial landgrab engineered by Samuel Dorset, a United Empire Loyalist who arrives in Wolfe County from Boston in 1776 and proceeds by not entirely honest means to accumulate territory on a large scale. Succeeding generations of Dorsets, however, eventually lose their holdings to Henry Bradshaw who takes advantage of James Dorset's (Samuel's grandson) penchant for gambling by getting him to surrender the deed for the remaining land, which includes the lucrative mine site, in exchange for a loan of \$58,500 dollars. In fact, however, the signature which appears on the deed is not James', but his wife Melissa's to whom the property had been left by Old Samuel because he had no faith in his son's ability to hold on to it. Desperate for money, James forges his wife's signature, then, taking two years to lose nearly everything, blows his brains out. Melissa and her son Brand are left to survive in the local hotel in scandalous proximity to transient railroad men and rough mine workers.

Bradshaw has known all along that the signature is a forgery, as does his lawyer, the club-footed, cat-loving Cephias Bales, but both accept it, letting James proceed to his inevitable self-destruction. It is this secret which lurks in the background of the novel's main action and operates as a kind of fate to which the three younger characters are subjected, an impression accentuated by the fact that the reader knows the secret by Chapter 3, though not all its implications.

Unaware that he may be the rightful heir to limestone wealth, Brand Dorset arrives back from Montreal after years away at the study of law and encounters the nineteen year old Ann Bradshaw when he emerges naked from the lake below the last remaining Dorset possession, a hunting cabin on a bluff above Mirror Lake. This episode. rem-

iniscient of the kind of sudden sexual encounters which fascinated D.H. Lawrence, causes Ann to retreat quickly, less out of offended modesty than of anger at his contempt for her. Yet his Byronic loneliness has made an impression on her; Ann's life begins to divide between her growing attraction to Brand, which is not only physical but also vaguely impelled by a desire to right an historical wrong, and her genuine affection for Johnny Gulbranson, the company dynamiter, who has been courting her over the summer months.

When Henry Bradshaw discovers that his daughter has been consorting with the son of the man he ruined, he is not pleased. A widower who lost his wife when she gave birth to Ann, he presently lives—platonically—with his sister-in-law Marion Broughton in the kind of “wooden castle” which can still be seen in the Dudswell municipality. When Brand shows up at a church social to dance with Ann, Bradshaw leaves in a dyspeptic fury. It is clear to him now that he will have to make it easier for Johnny to have Ann than for Brand. He invites Johnny to dinner and offers to double his salary and place him in a supervisory position. He then directs Cephas Bales, the same lawyer who had witnessed the forged signature 20 years earlier, to offer Brand a substantial amount of money if he will sell his cabin and disappear. Bales, however, sees an opportunity to extort an even greater amount from Bradshaw by threatening to reveal the illegal transfer of deed and tries to draw Brand into the scheme, but the revelation of his father's weakness leaves the younger man stunned. When he shows up somewhat drunk at Johnny's hotel room, he offers him the cabin for next to nothing saying that he is going back to law studies. Johnny, who by now has pretty well decided to cede Ann to Brand, leave town and take up photography, points out that this gives Bradshaw the victory. In the meantime, Bradshaw, informed that Brand has refused the offer, decides to get rid of him by other means. He takes steps to purchase a sulphur mine at the head of Mirror Lake (fictional; there was no such mine) closed down years ago by the Dorsets because it smelled bad and killed the fish. Reactivating the mine will destroy the landscape Brand so dearly loves thus driving him away from the county and from Ann.

Hearing of this plan, Johnny decides to take direct action and accompanied by Mrs Broughton, who now feels her brother-in-law needs his comeupance, sets out to blow up the sulphur mine with dynamite stolen from Bradshaw's company, an act which will delay its opening for a good 18 months. While Mrs. Broughton waits outside the mine shaft, Johnny enters, sets the charge, discovers there is not quite enough wire for him to clear the scene, ignites the charge any-

way, and buries himself alive.

The principal actors arrive at the site of the disaster: Ann, guilt-ridden because she has spent the night in Brand's bed; Brand concerned that his friendly competitor is about to die; and Henry Bradshaw back from a trip to Portland, Maine. Brand is slugged by the rescuing mine workers because they confusedly see him as responsible; and Bradshaw, with suitable irony, is stoned by the same irate workers because they sense his guilt in the whole matter. He returns and burns the deed in expiation. Johnny Gulbranson remains trapped under tons of earth, calculating the amount of air left to him, his rate of its consumption and the probable time it will take for rescuers to reach him. The prognosis is not good.

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Gustafson subtitled his novel "an ironic comedy" which, depending upon one's tolerance for melodrama, might be what the reader perceives in the preceding account. The ending certainly appears to provide the kind of incongruous reversal often achieved by an ironic plot: the dynamiter dynamited, victim of his good intentions, trapped in what he says with heroic irony "would make a good darkroom." Above ground there is repentance and expiation, some revenge too, accompanied by blows; underground, the good guy counts the useless contents of his pockets and writes a farewell note to Ann requesting that she not mourn. Whether this ending is designed to suggest the futility of fighting the Bradshaws of the world, the tendency of the land to swallow up people who mess about with it, or simply the advisability of getting out of the darkness of mining and into the light of photography (or art), are questions which the plot leaves open for readerly speculation.

Or is it a form of cosmic revenge for Johnny having rejected love? In a handwritten note among his papers, Gustafson stated that the novel's theme was the rejection of love. When he sought a title for his manuscript,* he eventually found it in Shakespeare's early comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a play which is in turn based on a story demonstrating the superiority of friendship over love. In Shakespeare's take on this theme one of the gentlemen lovers, Valentine, offers his lady, Silvia, to his competitor Proteus as a gesture of brotherhood even though Proteus has just tried to rape her. In Shakespearean terms, this appears to be acceptable behaviour; certainly the lady in question has virtually nothing to say about her treatment. Gustafson may well have decided to correct the story, issuing a

tongue-in-cheek warning that he who hands over blonde nineteen year old girls to brooding dropouts from law school had better be prepared to have the world cave in on him.

Johnny Gulbranson, laconic, witty, and quietly amused at the absurdities of small town society, is the kind of man you would expect to be able to handle dynamite. He prefigures more recent handlers of high explosives, Patrick Hazen of *In the Skin of a Lion* and Kip Shand in *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, who arrived at Bishop's University shortly before Gustafson took up a position there. (Did they discuss dynamite, one wonders, after class?) Like Ondaatje, Gustafson is interested in the metaphorical implications of dynamite. His hero is in the process of declaring his independence from social and industrial constraints by becoming an artist. As a photographer, he will concern himself more with capturing the luminous qualities of the landscape on film than with blowing up what lies beneath the surface. The character is based on Gustafson's own uncle Johnny who worked as a dynamiter for Dominion Lime company when he first arrived in Canada. The interest in photography, however, is transferred from Gustafson's own father who left work in the Lime Ridge general store to take up photography, first in Marbleton and then Sherbrooke.

The character of Brand Dorset has wider cultural associations. Brand and Dorset are traditional Townships names. But Gustafson also had in mind the young Marlon Brando of the 1950s, a picture of whom appears in the manuscript box of *No Music*. Like the Brando of *The Wild One* or *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Brand Dorset possesses a certain animal magnetism which draws Ann to him in spite of her love for Johnny. Unlike Brando, however, Dorset is associated explicitly with the fulness and beauty of nature, a theme Gustafson would later develop magnificently in *Rocky Mountain Poems* (1960). Here is Dorset caught in the aesthetics of September light:

The sun was gone but the sky spread an interception of crimson from the sun not yet set beneath the rim of the farther hills. Eastward, the evening was silver. Brand stood at the pump in the beauty. The lake lay unmoved, the gold of the birch along its edge doubled in the water. It was the instant of stillness that came at the close of autumn. He sensed an attainable peace: loss and completion.... He felt the need of sensualness, of assertion to be free of himself. He placed the pail under the lip of the pump. The links were stiff. The water flooded over the pail's rim. He raised up, breathing heavily.

Bracketed by these two male figures is Ann, a young woman

endowed with good looks, a quick wit, and a brand new motor car painted, in Mrs. Broughton's words, a "proclamatory red." Once she has sensed Brand's attraction, as well as the natural charm of his cabin in the hills, she finds the Victorian scrollwork on her house detestable and her father's interference and pomposity quite irritating. Like certain female figures from the work of D.H. Lawrence (one of Gustafson's acknowledged influences), she questions the social and religious conventions of the time, a virgin seeking her gypsy, prepared at the end to make a complete break with her father by moving out to Brand's cabin by the lake. It is she, really, who gets most fully victimized by the events of the novel, left at the end alienated from her father, inheritor of a tainted fortune, deprived of Johnny's intelligent love, and possibly committed to an uncertain future with Brand.

Given such character and plot material, it is no wonder that Gustafson imagined the book as the basis for a film script. "There is a first-rate movie story in it," he wrote to his agent Diarmuid Russell on September 8, 1956. Add in a set of vivid minor characters: the unconsciously witty and surprisingly daring Mrs. Broughton, the conniving Cephas Bales, a jovial, Dickensian clergyman, an impudent servant named Zed Sample, and numerous brief satirical portraits of small town types, and the potential director has plenty to work with. But the book never found a publisher, let alone a producer interested in transforming this evocation of Townships society into the kind of thing that Merchant-Ivory Productions have done for E.M. Forster. Why did the book remain in the darkroom?

The answer lies in Gustafson's reluctance to write in a fashion easily accessible to the reader. Reports from publishers' readers, many of which Gustafson kept, and some of which he responded to, found the writing "clotted," "dense," "obscure," "distorted," and "ugly." Although he worked through three drafts to respond to these criticisms, to make the book more "commercial" as he put it, the style remained a barrier to acceptance. His claim that the language was "deliberately disproportionate in order to achieve satire" (Letter to C.H. Brooks of Heath Publishing, Nov. 27, 1955) did not mollify his exasperated readers. After rejections from Viking, Scribner's, Heath and other American and British publishers, Gustafson turned to Jack McClelland in Toronto whose personal reaction to the novel was favourable despite negative reports from his readers, one of whom, Conway Turton, in an eight page critique of the work, expressed perplexity with individual sentences, noting "sprained" syntax, awkward turns of phrase and puzzling word choices. "The effect of the difficulties," she wrote, "is cumulative. One becomes tired of trying to make

sense of one riddle after another. In reading a poem, one is braced for the effort, knowing that it will pay off shortly, and in full. But the sentences and paragraphs of a prose work are another matter." McClelland was nevertheless prepared to publish the novel on the condition that an American or British publisher could be found to supplement what he thought would be a thin Canadian readership. The search was unsuccessful, and when Gustafson received an offer to teach at Bishop's University in 1963, the novel was permanently shelved.

Style is not the only problem with the novel; character motivation and behaviour are often hard to track. The emotional complexities of Ann's divided love for two men is not plausibly explored; Brand remains much too remote and abstract a figure to be a believable Brando type; Johnny's surrender of Ann is so diffident as to be nearly indiscernible; the behaviour of the angry miners at the story's end comes without adequate preparation. There is, in addition, an overall improbability in the speech and behaviour of the characters, if we are to accept them as creatures of the year 1911. They often speak and behave in ways which are more appropriate to mid-century sophisticates than Edwardian townshippers. Gustafson's comment in a letter to Jack McClelland, July 26, 1962 that he was not writing an historical novel does not absolve him of creating bewilderment in the reader. If the novel is also satire, then surely we need targets that are plausible and recognizable as belonging to the year 1911. Instead we get caught up in a rarefied artifice in which the characters speak and relate to each other at a frequency which requires very fine tuning on the part of the reader. Much is left unsaid; much of what is said is done so in a very oblique and laconic manner. Gustafson's cerebral approach to his characters, consistent with his satiric mode, makes involvement with their fate a matter of continual effort on the part of the reader.

No Music in the Nightingale is a hybrid narrative which attempts to fuse elements of romance, satire and melodrama utilizing irony as the bonding agent. Gustafson has set aside the conventional language of such successful short stories as "The Pigeon" and "The Human Fly" and undertakes an intense struggle to discover what words in prose narrative can be made to do under extreme pressure. Even though he hoped for a commercial success, he was too much the artist to resist trying out the devices which he had already begun to perfect in his poems: sudden verbal shifts to different psychic ground; imagistic moments of intensely vivid perception; dry wit and tightly wound diction; a general effect of compression worthy of Robert Browning at his most intricate. In the final analysis, the world of Lime Rock was of less importance to Gustafson than the wordscape he created in his

mind's eye. He was, after all, a poet.

NOTES

- * The title comes from a line in Valentine's speech proclaiming his love for Silvia in the first scene of Act 3:

What joy is joy, if Silvia be not by?
 Unless it be to think that she is by
 And feed upon the shadow of perfection.
 Except I be by Silvia in the night,
 There is no Music in the Nightingale.

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Her most famous works include the novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928), and the booklength essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), with its famous dictum, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Woolf suffered from severe bouts of mental illness throughout her life, thought to have been the result of what is now termed bipolar disorder,[1] and committed suicide by drowning in 1941 at the age of 59. As part of her literary work, Woolf wrote certain tales, in which we find *The Legacy*, published in 1944. Ralph Gustafson, poet, professor (b at Lime Ridge, QuÃ© 16 Aug 1909; d at North Hatley, QuÃ© 29 May 1995). Gustafson wrote more than 20 books of poetry and edited several important anthologies of Canadian verse; he has also published 2 books of short stories. He was raised in Sherbrooke, QuÃ©, and educated at Bishop's University and Oxford. He taught at Bishop's from 1963 until his retirement in 1979. His poetry, which is widely celebrated for its exquisite craft, its erudition and its passionate simplicity, often evokes 2 strong currents in Canadian literature: the colonial impulse to