Bringing Landscape Home in the Writings of Jane Urquhart

edited by
DOROTA FILIPCZAK
and
AGATA HANDLEY

Łódź University Press • Łódź 2010

To Jane Urquhart

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Preface

Jane Urquhart visited the University of Łódź in September 2007 as a guest of honour at a conference entitled *Altered Landscapes* and devoted exclusively to her work. The event was possible due to the generosity of the Canadian Embassy, whose assistance I gratefully acknowledge. I would especially like to say thank you to Mr. David Preston, the Ambassador of Canada, who very kindly decided to support the project, and to those representatives of his who attended the conference, that is, Counsellor Ms. Bernadette St-Jean and Cultural Officer Ms. Delfina Święćkowska. The Canadian Embassy contributed to the publication of this book with a very generous donation. At this stage I would also like to thank the head of the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Łódź, Professor Jerzy Jarniewicz, without whose support this book would not have appeared. My gratitude extends also to the Polish Association for Canadian Studies for financially supporting Jane Urquhart's visit. Finally, but importantly, I would like to thank Mr. Andrzej Strąk, President of the Association of Polish Writers in Łódź for hosting Jane Urquhart and other participants in the conference for a literary evening, during which Jane read excerpts from her writings, and I read my translations of these excerpts into Polish.

The powerful presence behind this book is, of course, Jane Urquhart herself, and it is to her that the book is dedicated with our thanks and compliments. We all appreciated her being with us, her patience with our papers, her responses to our questions, and her unforgettably elegant speech and warmth, which made the conference room sparkle with wit and inspiration.

The articles collected in this book were submitted not only by Canadianists, but also by scholars able to mediate between their own literary interests and Jane Urquhart's oeuvre. Individuals who were present at the conference came away "altered" by the landscapes in Jane Urquhart's fiction, which brought home important truths. The book opens with my interview with Jane Urquhart, which

gave the title to the whole collection. The author says the following in response to my last question: "I would like to be able to collect small nineteenth century landscape paintings. And one of the things about the smallest of them is that you could have many many many on the wall. So I can bring the beautiful landscapes of the world home and put them in my house, and keep them safe as they disappear from the earth." Interestingly, the author has already collected a number of such landscapes in her writings, and it is to these landscapes that the articles in the book turn in order to explore not only the text, but also the textures of memory, power and subversion.

The interview is followed by an article by Laura Ferri, an Italian Canadianist from the University of Siena, who hosted Jane Urquhart before and after my own conference and edited a pioneering collection of essays devoted to this writer. Laura Ferri's title addresses the two poles of Jane Urquhart's writing: landscape and art, and the way they are interconnected; this theme re-surfaces throughout the book. Laura Ferri also shares with us her observations on Jane Urquhart's stay in Siena, and quotes from the writer's responses recorded during the conferences in Italy. Thus the reader gains unique insight into the writer's reflections, when "away" from her Canadian and Irish homes.

Part One of the book ends with two articles analysing Jane Urquhart's novels in general. The first is by Anna Branach-Kallas, a Polish Canadianist (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), who not only defended her doctoral dissertation on Jane Urquhart's fiction, but also published a number of essays on her work and an important book entitled *In the Whirlpool of the Past: Memory, Intertextuality and History in the Fiction of Jane Urquhart.* The last article in Part One is by Brygida Gasztold (Koszalin University of Technology), who specialises in American literature, and published a book on the fiction of Jerzy Kosiński.

Part Two consists of four articles exploring four different novels in detail. The first article, devoted to *Away* (1993), was contributed by Maria Edelson (University of Łódź), who explores a particularly interesting connection between landscape and story. The second, written by Alana Vincent (University of Glasgow), focuses on *The Stone Carvers* (2001), while referring also to the Vimy Memorial designed by Walter Allward, who becomes one of the characters in Jane Urquhart's novel. The third article, on *Changing Heaven* (1987), was written by Agnieszka Łowczanin (University of Łódź), who focuses on the handling of the past in this novel. The last article, by Marta Goszczyńska (University of Łódź), deals with an intertextual level in Jane Urquhart's latest novel *A Map of Glass* (2005), notably the influence of *The Lady of Shalott* by Tennyson on the book.

As is evident from the publication dates, the articles comprising Part Two have not been grouped to reflect the chronology of the novels they engage with. Connections and transitions are thematic. Lack of chronology is also evident in

Part Three, which examines the poetry of Jane Urquhart, and this unbounded approach offers insights into the earliest, still relatively unexplored, imaginative terrain in her writings. The first text, by Mary Condé (University of London), is a brief introduction to Jane Urquhart's poetry. The second, which is mine, concerns the connections between poetry and fiction, notably *Eleven Poems for Le Notre* and *The Whirlpool*, *The Underpainter* and *The Stone Carvers*. The third article is by Agata Handley (University of Łódź), who specializes in, among other things, the poetry of Tony Harrison. The last article from this part was written by Katarzyna Poloczek (University of Łódź), whose interests in feminist theory and contemporary Irish literature by women provide a unique focus for her examination of Jane Urquhart's poetry. None of the texts in this book has been previously published.

Dorota Filipczak

Part One
Jane Urquhart and Her Writings

Dorota Filipczak

Bringing Landscape Home: An Interview with Jane Urquhart

D.F.: My first question concerns landscape, since I want to connect with the conference *Altered Landscapes in the Fiction and Poetry of Jane Urquhart* which was held at the University of Łódź in the fall of 2007. We all appreciated your presence there and your comments, which greatly contributed to our understanding of your writing. Would you agree that landscape creates a writer? Is there any particular landscape that you identify with in Canada, Ireland or both?

J.U.: One of the interesting things about Canada is that, with the exception of our native peoples, we are a nation of immigrants. Often, therefore we carry two homelands in our imagination. One of these, of course, is the abandoned homeland which often becomes idealized into a sacred homeland; the place that one had to leave behind. It's like a love-affair that was terminated, not as a result of either party wanting to end the relationship, but because something intervened and prevented it from continuing. Impediments almost always facilitate idealization, so lack of access to a landscape can make it seem more beautiful or happier than it really was.

I, myself, have three main landscapes. The first would be the mostly imagined country of Ireland whence my ancestors on my mother's side set out for the new world. The second one, the landscape into which I was born is the landscape of a northern part of Ontario. My father was a prospector connected to a small gold-mining settlement called Little Long Lac. It was relatively far north, about two hundred miles north of the top of Lake Superior. I remember that landscape very vividly; and the memory of it has informed certain parts of my writing as well. But it became another abandoned landscape because the mine closed, and my family was forced to move to Toronto. Near Toronto was the third landscape that I identify with (although I lived there from the age of six until I was seventeen Toronto is not a landscape that I identify with. It was the

place I wanted to get away from most of the time). But there was another landscape that was much more colourful for me, and that was my mother's home landscape of rural Ontario, Northumberland County. My uncles had farms there (as did my grandparents), and my parents eventually bought a summer house nearby on the great lake. I spent every summer, therefore, in the place where my mother had spent her childhood and had then been forced to leave. In a way, I guess, this was her own abandoned landscape, one that she mythologized in the stories she passed on to me. A lot of my writing is situated at least partly in Northumberland County, about an hour and a half east of Toronto.

D.F.: One of the things that intrigues me about your comment is the motif of prospecting. I could tease a whole interpretation out of it, because it sounds like prospecting for creative resources in the landscape. Would the landscape provide an access to creativity and inspiration?

J.U.: Yes, in some cases that's very true. For example, when I was writing *The Underpainter* I knew that I was going to have my main character come across the lake from Rochester to the area of Northumberland County where my mother grew up and where I spent my summers. But, during the period when I was writing, I happened to take a trip back to the north with my brother Nick, who is also a prospector. And, while we were in the North we visited the places of our childhood. We went to see the little settlement of Silver Islet which was in many ways similar to the settlement that would have been my childhood home. That changed the course of *The Underpainter* for me. I suddenly knew where my main character, Austin Fraser, was going to be spending his summers. I knew he was going to head for the north shore of Lake Superior. Yes, often the discovery of a particular landscape can inspire, or at least enrich or add to what is already there in terms of inspiration.

D.F.: Now that you've mentioned *The Underpainter*, I want to ask you about the whole concept of the North. I'd like to know what the North means to you. How do you see yourself in the context of other Canadian writers exploring the North, e.g. Aritha van Herk in *The Tent Peg*, or Margaret Atwood in *Malevolent North*?

J.U.: I should add that Aritha is married to a geologist.

D.F.: Right, I know that.

J.U.: who knows my brother.

D.F.: Oh, really? What a coincidence!

J.U.: Yes. Geology, prospecting and mining cover a great deal of territory in Canada but there are not that many people involved. They all know each other.

There's a wonderful prospectors' convention in Toronto where they gather once a year to talk about rocks and drink Canadian whiskey.

I was born into what was essentially a pretty remote northern community. When my parents arrived in that area there was really no community to speak of; no roads, no schools. It was necessary to go in by dogteam, or by bush plane, or a combination of the two. By the time I was born, twenty years later, the infrastructure was in place. But, as young adults, my parents, the descendants of settlers themselves, really were pioneers. I think that made my family different than the usual mid-twentieth century Canadian nuclear family, but this was a difference I knew nothing about till after I was six years old, because I hadn't experienced anything else. But once we moved to the city, I began, even as a small child, to see how special and singular that northern landscape was and at the same time, I began to know that I had lost that landscape. When I came to Toronto, I remember being horrified by the fact that all of the houses on our street were the same, and frightened about how I would ever figure out which one of those houses was mine.

I know that the North is a big theme; something that Canadians have written about and thought about, but living there is another thing altogether. It's a unique aspect of Canada because Canadians, ironically, have a tendency to believe more in East, West, or South. They have a tendency to look at the world in terms of a stately procession of provinces moving from eastern to western part of the country following the patterns of settlement.

What I discovered when I went back to the North when I was writing *The Underpainter* was that the light is completely different there. I recognized it as being light from my childhood, although I hadn't thought about it at all until I returned. The way the light falls on the water is different as well. Another thing that should be noted is that the North exists in spite of us, and in spite of our exploitation of it. The settlement in which I spent my first six years, for example, has completely disappeared, gone. There were beautiful log houses built along the edges of Lake Kenogamisis, but they have either burnt down, or they have decomposed. Everything has gone back to bush. This kind of reabsorption is something very hard to imagine when you're living in a city like Toronto which has the same atmosphere as any large American city; the fact that a complete townsite could be absorbed back into the earth. For me the North was something that made me different than everyone else, and it gave me something of my own; an abandoned sacred land. One that would have to exist, if it continued to exist at all, in my imagination.

D.F.: In the passage from *The Stone Carvers* that you read in Poleski Ośrodek Sztuki on the 18th of September 2007 there is a reference to the Northwest Passage. Margaret Atwood associates John Franklin with a disaster, and adds that "Canadians are fond of a good disaster" (11). In *Strange Things. The Malevolent North* she enlarges upon Canadian interpretations of the motif.

J.U.: The problem with that, of course, is that the Franklin Expedition wasn't really a Canadian disaster. It was an English disaster.

D.F.: Quite. That's a significant correction.

J.U.: I always think of Franklin and his expedition and other Arctic expeditions as another example of bizarre male suicide. Some men seem to be driven to throw themselves into impossible situations when they know perfectly well they're going to die. But, I suppose, being frozen into Arctic ice is more interesting than taking an overdose or hanging oneself in some banal way in a garage. Nevertheless I am completely fascinated (as many Canadians are) by the whole Northwest Passage story. One of the things that interested me was how Franklin took along a library of many volumes on the ship, and Sterling silver tea services and Royal Doulton china. As if he believed he could domesticate the Arctic. So years later, apparently, prospectors and explorers in the Arctic would come across an Inuit hunter who would have nothing in his igloo but skins and hides and a Sterling silver teapot.

D.F.: Another word that came up in our discussion is the crucial Canadian word: pioneers. I'm familiar with the concept as it surfaces in Margaret Laurence's fiction. I'm also familiar with the importance of pioneers in literary discourse, when I think of Laurence and her tribute to Catharine Parr Traill, or when I think of Carol Shields and her tribute to Susanna Moodie. Who is your pioneer, either literally or as a writer?

J.U.: I don't necessarily identify with the women that we would consider to be pioneer writers. Primarily, I think, because they were English. I admire the writing, and I'm delighted by it, and I'm very interested in the information it has given me, but I don't identify with them, because, regardless of where they were living, as the wives of British officers they were connected to an established system. The type of pioneer experience that I find I identify with would be much rougher, much tougher, even than *Roughing It in the Bush*.

I think that there are many other pioneer stories that need to be told in Canada: stories concerning Polish pioneers, Ukrainian pioneers, Swedish pioneers, Icelandic pioneers, and of course, French pioneers. The immigrant experience in Canada is a story of dislocation more than anything else, so that I would say that people from Africa arriving last week are pioneers in the same way that my Irish ancestors were pioneers. The experience of migration unites us all; the experience of coming to a new place, and having somehow to chop out your own little space in the wilderness.

D.F.: That's an interesting image. How do you do that in literature, when you chop out your own space?

J.U.: It's something that happens organically, or not at all. First of all, you have to do your clearing in a very private way. You have to do it at a table with the pen and a piece of paper.

Then, of course, within the literary community one has to find his or her own place. I think there are a couple of routes to that. There can always be a political reason to be included. But although one can never entirely avoid the political, I'm more interested in cadence, in the whole idea of making something on the page that actually sings, that although it delivers information, it does so in such a way that there is a kind of music there.

D.F.: I asked about the pioneers, and you don't seem to identify with any, so where do you come from imaginatively, if this can at all be grasped? There may be many inspirations, and I realize it's not so easy to delineate, but is there any formative impact that you would name?

J.U.: I would think that, likely, in a way pioneers have influenced me, but unpublished pioneers, my own ancestors. I think of my mother, who recently died at the age of ninety six, and my grandmother who lived till about ninety, both women very interested in literature, both women great readers, neither woman having any opportunity whatsoever, had they desired to do so, to pursue the career of a writer. My grandmother looked after her eight children, two hired men and her husband, doing the farm chores every day of her life. My mother, because she was the oldest and a girl, was taken out of school and forced to help her mother look after the children on the farm. She was very bright, very curious, and never, I think, recovered from being denied a full education. I think, however, that what mother and grandmother experienced, and the stories that they told me about their lives on a pioneer farm, combined with the stories that my father and his friends told about the bush and the wilderness, really was central to the development of my imagination.

D.F.: Now, this reminds me of a similar phenomenon described in Margaret Laurence's memoir *Dance on the Earth.* Women in her family often would have liked to be creative as writers or artists but were not given the opportunity. Incidentally, how did you respond to Laurence's writings?

J.U.: Well, I responded to Margaret Laurence and her writing generally with a lot of enthusiasm. I remember when her first work was published in *The New Yorker*, a story from *A Bird in the House.* My mother subscribed to *The New Yorker* even when she was in the far North, but this was after that. I remember how excited she (my mother) was by the fact that there was a Canadian woman writer in *The New Yorker* writing this wonderful stuff.

Margaret Laurence was from the generation of the Canadian writers who didn't necessarily benefit financially from their fame. There was a kind of sacrifice involved in what she did. Her life was tough; it wasn't easy. She was