Vancouver Island University

Keith Harrison

Eyemouth: *The Origins of a Novel*

Where does a book of fiction begin? William Faulkner says a writer has three sources: autobiography, observation, and imagination. If observation includes research, i.e., other people's observations, then all three sources contributed much to the making of my novel, *Eyemouth*.

In terms of autobiography, a very important presence in my life was my mother's mother, Margaret Crombie, who was born in Eyemouth. When I was a little kid in Vancouver, she taught me how to tie my shoelaces as we were sitting on her sunny back steps, and she showed me how to pick crunchy fresh parsley straight from her garden - maybe the first time I ate something that didn't arrive in a shopping bag. My grandmother also encouraged my love of reading by buying me a subscription to a Roy Rogers cowboy comic and, a bit later, by giving me Hardy Boy detective books as birthday presents. And I became conscious of a large bookcase in her living room near the front window filled with pale green volumes, the Harvard Classics.

But in a way likely typical of families, I didn't, growing up, know much about Granny's past beyond the bare fact of her Scottish heritage. But one day when I was about eleven, my grandmother's sister, Agnes (or Nessie as I called her) - who used to knit me heavy grey wool gloves as a Christmas gift, and for whom a character in my novel is named - told me the men in the village went out fishing and never came back and she had sudden tears in her eyes. I was both moved and confused. Everyone here, of course, knows of the Great Fishing Disaster that Peter Aitchison's fine history, *Children of the Sea*, so powerfully conveys, but as a boy on the west coast of Canada I knew nothing of that Black Friday.

Of how in October 1881, the fishermen who risked their lives for a pittance had been unable to go to sea for several days because the weather was so rough; of how on that fateful Friday morning the ocean was unusually calm but the glass barometer down at the beach had never been so low; of how a few of the younger men set sail in their small open boats and, as by collective tradition, the rest of the fleet followed, out into the North Sea with its rocky coastline; of how the fiercest storm in centuries blew up, toppling oaks hundreds of years old and drowning fully a third of the men of Eyemouth, including my mother's grandfather, James Crombie, on the *Radiant*.

In the aftermath of those tremendous losses, Margaret Crombie (according to family lore) was singled out as an exceptional young woman to go to Edinburgh to study to become a teacher, an education enabled by relief funds. Just before her departure for the big city, my grandmother suffered a mastoid infection, and was strongly advised to remain in Eyemouth to convalesce, but she insisted on going to Edinburgh for the start of university term, feeling obliged by the generous efforts on her behalf. She left her village as her sickness raged on, and Margaret Crombie ended up permanently deaf in one ear.

But in Edinburgh she met James Inglis Reid, a man from Kirkintilloch who became her husband, and the couple emigrated to Canada. There he ultimately set up on Granville Street in Vancouver a Scottish meat store, which flourished. Its motto was, 'We hae meat that ye can eat.' My grandfather was an unusual man who felt everyone who worked in his store should have a share in the profits, that his wife - who gave up her teaching career to raise a family - should have an independent allowance, and was instrumental in setting up a statue of Robbie Burns in his adoptive city.

My grandmother encapsulated a lot in a few words, and from her I came to understand something important. One day, speaking clearly and quietly to me, she said: 'You can never be satisfied, but you must be content.' I realized, increasingly, that this was not a glib aphorism but a very hard-earned truth. Her son Knox, nearing graduation from high school, was sailing with friends off Lighthouse Point, at the mouth of Vancouver's harbour. He was a very skilled sailor but a schoolmate was at the helm, and the wind shifted. The heavy boom swung round, and my grandmother's only son was knocked overboard, unconscious, and his friends were unable to pull him from the waters of Burrard Inlet. Granny never once spoke to me of that death. Or of her father's. One a raw, painful echo on another ocean of that first huge loss: both just offshore from home. What tough-minded coping and what spirited aliveness there was in this remarkable woman! Both her father and son taken by the sea, yet somehow she nurtured with joy two daughters and six grandchildren, myself being one of these lucky ones. I remember Granny in her late 80s, reading hardcover books about the crisis in the Middle East and trying out new recipes in her kitchen. In many respects, the inspiration, themes, and characterizations of my novel have come from vivid memories of my grandmother from Eyemouth, a model for art as well as life.

In trying to research Scotland from the remoteness of Canada, McGill University in Montréal turned out to be of extraordinary value. Historically this city, which is now mostly French-speaking, was shaped by the economics of fur trading, shipping, banking, and the transcontinental railway that was crucial to Canada's confederation, and those in the forefront of these activities were often Scottish. The wealth these immigrants generated found expression in McGill's Library, whose collection of period material from Scotland included diaries, atlases, novels, statistical accounts, biographies, gazetteers, journals, and letters. In the early 1980s, when I started looking for my heritage in Montréal - a city newly self-conscious of its francophone identity - the library's wonderful Scottish holdings were untouched, apparently of interest to no one. For example, I came across a very valuable first edition of poems by Robbie Burns lying dormant on the open stacks. For about two years, I was able to delight in locating, reading, xeroxing, notating, and mentally inhabiting the life of another country that had been imported onto Canadian shelves by wealthy, homesick Scots who wished their ancestral past to be readily available for perusal and comfort. I feasted on this banquet of texts. If I read through hundreds of pages of some obscure, plodding account of farming methods and gleaned in the end one bright detail, the research felt worthwhile. So, not painfully but with exhilaration, I slowly built up in this composite way a solid sense of a country I had never been to. Finally, I had so much information and language in my head that I became half-sick of all this secondhand knowledge. Somehow, I needed to make it tangible.

At that moment - on my fortieth birthday to be precise - nearly 24 years ago, I flew to Scotland in mid June, and walked for the first time through the buildings and geography through which I hoped the lives of my characters might move. After visiting Edinburgh and Glasgow, I traveled along Scotland's southeast coast on buses, listening to the voices of my fellow passengers, who

were either decades older or younger. I went for a boat ride off St Abb's Head to see and hear the seabirds. Throughout my journey I took half a dozen rolls of film, noting the locale, the time of day, and the direction I was facing. In Eyemouth, I requested my hotel room be one overlooking the sea, and I was awakened in the middle of the night by the sounds of children. I looked out the window and, in the extended midsummer light, saw kids playing down at the beach. I got up and went out for a stroll, thinking this country of Scotland is very far north, and reflecting how prolonged the night time must be here in winter, and wondering about the reluctant exchange of light and dark that must be part of the sensibility I have inherited.

Invigorated by my visit of direct observation, I returned to Montréal, and began writing the novel. Fortunately, the personal computer had just come out, as I'm a slow typist. Because the novel opens in the eighteenth century, I felt that the appropriate form to use would be the one developed in that period, a story in the form of letters. *Eyemouth* would, ultimately, become my third published novel, and I had learned from the first two contemporary works of fiction that I had to keep writing without backtracking and revising what was imperfect or I'd never emerge from the first page. This too-critical awareness of my own writings is probably a consequence of my education that has given me knowledge of most of the great works of world literature, against which my own attempts can appear puny and pointless.

For instance, the novel that I wrote my PhD thesis on, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, has an extraordinary internal richness of language via the streams of consciousness of a quartet of characters, but it also locates these lives within the concrete, menacing historical world that the characters inhabit, Mexico during the Spanish Civil War, with World War Two looming. In the structure for *Eyemouth* I aspired to a similar balancing of inner and outer, a simultaneous dramatic interplay of subjective and objective realities, which seems to be our human condition.

To explain the conflict between interior and exterior worlds that I hoped would animate and give resonance to my novel, I need to return to Faulkner's categories of sources for the writer - autobiography, observation, and imagination - and talk briefly about the third term. Perhaps the central imaginative act I made in creating *Eyemouth* was one of transposition, shifting the time of the novel from the more obvious late Victorian period of the actual Eyemouth fishing catastrophe to the era of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Taking on history at a further historical remove might seem foolish, overly intricate, escapist, or too cute, but I wanted to set out in fiction a key psychological question that held present tense, personal immediacy for me. As a young man deciding not to go to law school at the University of Toronto but to do graduate work in English at the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1960s - a time of protest against the Vietnam War and the emergence of an alternative culture celebrating equality and love - I felt a kinship to the idealism of the French Revolution.

But after awhile, I sensed how such a naïve dream of a totally transformed world collides with obdurate reality. Bitterness and cynicism were commonplace results that I wished to avoid. What seemed psychologically important to me, then, was a possible third phase, *after* both ideals and their disillusionment. *Eyemouth* I conceived of in the distant mirror of the French Revolution as an imaginative study - mainly through the character of Gavin whose letter begins the book - of the historical persistence of hope and love. Or, as my grandmother might phrase it, 'You can never be satisfied, but you must be content.'

About two years after I came back from Scotland, I had a complete but essentially unread draft of nearly 500 pages - about a quarter in length more than the final published version - and I was extremely dissatisfied and discontented. I had taken this weighty bulk of paper down to a beach cabin on the coast of Maine, and read it beside the same Atlantic Ocean that was its primary setting. When I finished reading my work-in-progress, I felt half-suicidal - it was sooo boring! In my historian-like pleasure in unearthing thousands of nuggets of the past, I had created an immaculate corpse. The book was perfectly researched, but it didn't breathe. I had forgotten I was writing a novel, so the pacing was all wrong, and I did not have distinct voices of interesting characters telling a collective story with narrative urgency. The epistolary form, ideally, is a reflective, slow-motion drama in which interhooked characters over time express incompatible desires, resulting in a plot that compels the reader to turn the pages - not just a bulgy, inert sack of letters.

Fortunately, my typescript did have an unexpectedly lively character, Nessie, who showed up a hundred pages in, and whom I could move forward to energize the beginning of this potential book. And I remembered a good piece of advice from a Peruvian journalist friend about motivating the actions of characters via the pressure of events instead of by whims flitting through a character's head. Also, I could be more rigorous in applying my self-imposed rule - learned from the military tactician who wrote the epistolary novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) - of having each letter *advance* the plot instead of just expressing a character's viewpoint. Most crucially, in taking on again these half a thousand exquisitely dull pages, I had a computer, so I didn't have to retype everything.

For me, the writing of a novel has affinities with my ancestral traditions of fishing. Repeatedly, you go out into the wet cold dark, float around, steer a little this way, then that, bait the hooks with numb fingers, try not to fall overboard, a big wave washes over you, you try not to lose your footing, feel chilled and taste too much salt in your mouth, but still hope to catch something, or at least make it back to shore safely. Repeatedly, I went through my novel, eight times in total: refining, combining, shifting, omitting, polishing, and re-imagining. In some letters I would only clarify a metaphor, or delete a word.

In 1990, about seven years after I started my research, *Eyemouth* was published. It received some excellent critical recognition but didn't sell many copies. Perhaps the most complimentary thing I heard was hidden in a question that assumed this gathering of letters were based on real ones somewhere in a family attic. But, for me, the book's most significant moment was when I read from this newly-minted novel at the Vancouver launch with my mother, the dedicatee, who was dying from cancer, standing in the audience, looking content.

Born in Vancouver in 1945, Keith Harrison studied at UBC, Berkeley, and McGill (PhD, Dean's Honours List), writing a dissertation on Malcolm Lowry. He has published two dozen scholarly articles on a wide range of topics, including documentary film, narrative theory, Canadian poetry, Shakespeare, and comic books. His five novels are Dead Ends (1981), a tale of two cities, Vancouver and Montréal, After Six Days (1985), about two contemporary couples, Eyemouth (1990), set mainly in Scotland during the French Revolution and its aftermath and taking the form of letters, Furry Creek (1999), a documentary fiction exploring the life, death, and art of Pat Lowther, and Elliot & Me (2006), a doubled-voiced narrative about a mother and her teenaged son. Harrison's novels have been nominated for Books in Canada Best First Novel Award, QSPELL's Hugh MacLennan Fiction Prize, and the Ethel Wilson Award. He has also written a group of stories, Crossing the Gulf (1998), which contains a piece that won the Okanagan Short Story Award, and he has edited an anthology of short fiction, Islands West: Stories from the Coast (2001). His literary papers are archived in Special Collections, The Simon Fraser University Library. Keith Harrison teaches at Vancouver Island University, and lives on Hornby Island, British Columbia. His first book of non-fiction, The missionary, the violinist, and the aunt whose head was squeezed, will appear in the spring of 2010.

TEXT**Vol 13 No 2 October 2009****<http://www.textjournal.com.au>****Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb****Text@griffith.edu.au**