

JIMMY, SINCLAIR, AND JIM:  
ON THE BIOGRAPHICAL TRAIL OF JAMES SINCLAIR ROSS

**John J. O'Connor**

The deaths of Earle Birney and Robertson Davies late in 1995 reminded readers of Canadian literature that the old order—those writers born before the First World War—was quickly passing. Of the major figures born in the early years of this century (Birney, Davies, Callaghan, MacLennan, Ross), only Ross was still living at the beginning of 1996, albeit in very poor health in a nursing home in Vancouver. Sadly, he too has since died—on February 29, at the age of 88. Each of his contemporaries named above has been the subject of either a full-scale biography or at least a substantial monograph in the Canadian Biography Series (ECW Press). The 1990s have been a period of active interest in the subject of literary biography in Canada, and the time for such studies, long overdue, seems to be very much at hand now. The growing popularity of the Biography Series at the annual International Festival of Authors in Toronto strongly suggests readers' keen appetite for still more biographical fare.

Some members of the English Department at the University of Toronto have been actively at work in the field of literary biography for many years: in addition to Elspeth Cameron's extensive investigations of the lives of Hugh MacLennan, Irving Layton, and Earle Birney, there is the celebrated work of Phyllis Grosskurth (studies of J. A. Symonds, Melanie Klein, Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, and a forthcoming biography of Lord Byron) and the current acclaim for Rosemary

Sullivan's *Shadow Maker*, the biography of Gwendolyn MacEwen that recently won the 1995 Governor General's Award for non-fiction. Unlike Cameron, or Judith Skelton Grant (author of *Robertson Davies: Man of Myth*, 1994), Sullivan was dealing with the life of a deceased writer, and thus could offer something like a whole life of her subject—inasmuch as such wholeness is really ever possible. Presumably second editions of the biographies of MacLennan, Birney, and Davies will eventually be published; and the need to finish their stories raises some important questions. Will the deaths of the subjects free the biographers to include material previously omitted? At what point in a writer's life should such a study be published? How much are the contents and emphasis of a biography affected by the subject's cooperation and by publication during his or her lifetime? Should the biographer's connection to the subject and search for the details of the subject's life become part of the story? Biographers are often told that there is a second book to be written: the shadow text behind the biography, the book about the writing of the book. To some extent postmodernist fashion demands that research procedures be incorporated into the narrative alongside an account of the literary life. Certainly Sullivan has found a judicious balance in *Shadow Maker*, offering an engaging, empathetic, and dramatic narrative about MacEwen's life and her own search for the story without irritating the reader through excessive self-reflexiveness. In this essay I want to explore some aspects of these and related matters, with particular reference to my current research project at the University of Toronto: an authorized biography of the Canadian prairie novelist and short-story writer Sinclair Ross. I have been pursuing this work steadily since the spring of 1990, when I first met Jim Ross in Vancouver, and very actively since the summer of 1992 when he signed a contract with me and my co-author.

How is it possible to capture and convey an accurate and comprehensive sense of the 88 years of Ross's life, stretching as it does from the first to the final decades of this century? The birth of "Jimmy"

Ross on a prairie homestead in 1908 was followed by a peripatetic childhood on several farms and in small towns, and the beginning of his working life as a bank clerk at the age of 16 in one of those towns. Following his transfer to a Winnipeg bank in the early 1930s, Ross began a decade of fiction writing under the name "J. Sinclair Ross," then simply "Sinclair Ross," and served as a soldier with the Canadian Army in England during the Second World War. Thereafter he worked as a bank employee for two decades in Montreal, retiring to Greece in 1968, but moved to Spain in 1971. Returning briefly to Montreal in 1980 for health reasons (Parkinson's Disease), Jim—as he was known to his friends—soon took up residence in Vancouver, where he lived for his last 14 years. When queried in letters about his life, Ross often replied to scholars that there was no story to tell, and asked rhetorically of one interviewer, "what can you say about 43 years in a bank?" (French 25).

But of course, it is not his work at the bank that interests the literary biographer, though naturally it must be acknowledged as part of Ross's life experience.

It is not the counting of other people's money, but rather the creation of his own living fictional characters that prompts and holds the interest and attention of scholars. After banking hours, in those same years, Ross turned his mind to his real work—the writing of the novels and short stories upon which his reputation as a central voice in Canadian literature now solidly rests: *As For Me and My House* (1941), *The Well* (1958), *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* (1968), *Whir of Gold* (1970), *Sawbones Memorial* (1974), and *The Race and Other Stories* (1982). There is indeed a story to tell here: how such a refined literary imagination and talent evolved from very unpromising circumstances, and how Ross struggled heroically against the discouraging facts of a literary life in Canada from the 1930s, when his first story appeared in print in England, to the 1980s, when the last of his new fiction was published. It is the story of six books published and of many others completed and then abandoned, of Ross's considerable talent as both painter and musician, of his love of travel and gift for languages. It is

also a story of old acquaintances, eventually tracked down, re-entering Ross's life after 70 years, of photos and letters unexpectedly found in drawers, of memories (often remarkably vivid) resurfacing after half a century, and of unpublished stories by Ross discovered in forgotten files. These and other aspects of Ross's life illuminate our understanding of his art; they provide a context within which the whole range of his literary endeavour and achievement can be more clearly apprehended.

It would be foolish to argue that there is no connection between the life lived and the books written, for they inevitably contain clues and codes that can be pursued, and reflect his view of the world. The writer's choice and treatment of fictional subjects surely do reveal something about his own character and sensibility. But we must not exaggerate the autobiographical underpinnings of fiction or its standing as a work of imagination, whatever its origin in what Alice Munro has called the "starter dough" of reality ("What Is Real?" 225). Of course, Ross's published fiction can rise and "stand on its own," as it has for several generations of readers since 1934. In Ross's view it was the fiction that counts, for it is there that he most deeply expressed what he had to say.

Ross was not the only Canadian writer to hold this view. Robertson Davies, for instance, made the same point to a correspondent in the early 1980s, at a time when he was being interviewed by Judith Skelton Grant for a biography: "really I think academics have a lot of gall, in their firm belief that they can comprehend and explain writers, musicians, painters and so forth, better than these creatures can explain themselves in their work" (Grant 556). (Alice Munro presents a similar criticism of academics in her story "Material," as do Carol Shields in her novel *Swann: A Mystery* and Margaret Atwood in the "Historical Notes" section of *The Handmaid's Tale*.) Whatever Davies' convictions about academics, he nevertheless continued to co-operate with Grant, thereby providing to his readers a substantial account of how his books were written and what their connections to his personal experience

might be. But Davies subsequently used his novel *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985) to emphasize the limits of academic inquiry and to illustrate the primacy of creative imagination: the earthbound academic Simon Darcourt is unable to resolve the enigmas of Francis Cornish's secretive life whereas the extraterrestrial Angel of Biography and his associate omnisciently and easily offer the reader all the missing evidence. To be fair to Professor Darcourt, however, his "feverish lust" and "covetous, unappeasable spirit" (*The Lyre of Orpheus* 105 and 190) as a biographer *do* eventually solve the mystery of Francis's life. Without divine intervention, by one of those happy coincidences in which all detective biographers delight, his sleuthing eventually uncovers the necessary clues, and Darcourt discovers the living heart of his subject's life. (Frustrated academic biographers in need of their own presiding Angel of Biography might take heart from his ultimate success.)

In his last decade Ross, too, generously co-operated with his biographers and was an eager participant in the process of resurrecting the details of his long life, having perhaps reached what Davies called the "confessional moment" (*World of Wonders* 15) in his life and wanting his story to survive him. For a man without direct descendants, it was not a surprising impulse; and Ross finally agreed that there *was* a good story to be told. Although he made modest references to his past in private letters, the details of his life remained largely hidden from Canadian readers until 1988, when he offered an account of some aspects of his childhood and his difficult life with his mother in an autobiographical essay, "Just Wind and Horses: A Memoir." (The title, incidentally, is taken from his mother's judgement of his fiction.) Here Ross wrestles with many of the problems that confronted Davies, and Darcourt, in their attempts to find the essential truths of the past. "What happened? . . . What really happened?" (90), Ross asks in his memoir, as he struggles to recover the essence of his early life; "I was there, but my memories, spanning before and after, are confused, sometimes contradictory" (90). In the end Ross must admit that his retrospective octogenarian revisiting of his childhood is nothing more than "an old

man's conversation with himself—questions and answers, the sifting of memories, guesses and surmises" (90). Indeed, the early drafts of this essay reveal how the "facts" of his story shifted as the final form emerged—shifted, perhaps, to improve the effectiveness of the story. What then is the truth? Deliberate or not, such transformations (Atwood's Offred calls them "reconstructions") are inevitable since memory operates in a highly selective and inventive way, and many parts of the story are unavoidably coloured by the passage of time and changes in the views of the remembering self. This, says Roland Ingstree in Davies' *World of Wonders*, is "the classic problem of autobiography: it's inevitably life seen and understood backwards. However honest we try to be in our recollections we cannot help falsifying them in terms of later knowledge, and especially in terms of what we have become" (61). In his essay Ross describes his less-than-truthful mother "telling all-out whoppers with a straight face" (96), and we might ask to what extent, if any, he inherited this practice from her. It is a question a biographer must try to answer, knowing that much is destined to remain beyond his grasp.

Although the full-scale autobiography Ross once planned will never be written, his fifteen-page essay "Just Wind and Horses" served as a valuable starting-point in my early interviews with him because it outlines some of the central family legends and ancestral history. In the past six years I visited Ross twice annually for at least a week at a time, and we talked for hundreds of hours about his long life and literary work—the times and places where he lived, his old acquaintances, the writers he met, his very active correspondence (several hundred letters are extant), his theories about writing, his struggle to complete various manuscripts, the books and writers he most admired, etc. These interviews in Vancouver each prompted a period of intense research, following up leads, cross-checking facts, writing hundreds and hundreds of letters, conducting countless interviews in person and many others long-distance in three languages, uncovering new clues to carry back to Ross for his comments and guidance. Some answers and

information can be found in the usual places: in university libraries and archives, in small-town newspapers, in private collections of letters, in the memories of the dozens and dozens of people I have interviewed who recall Ross and his mother with varying degrees of vividness. Each adds some piece, often invaluable, to the framework I am building around Ross's life and work; and all permit a clearer picture to emerge. Ross's widespread travels have necessitated similar journeys, which have taken me across the prairies and into British Columbia many times, but also to Montreal, Ottawa, New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Seattle, and many European cities in nine countries as far-flung as Athens and Belfast, Edinburgh and Málaga. Such research has often prompted new questions and revelations. But there are always more questions than answers, and the keys to many locked doors seem to be forever lost. In the end, even the most comprehensive biography can never be more than an approximation of the life it treats. Still, at some point the search for new evidence must come to a halt. Having in all probability already uncovered more than 90 percent of what will ever be discovered about Ross's life, my co-author and I are now assembling this material into a narrative, though the book itself will not appear for a few years.

The principal challenges facing the biographer of Sinclair Ross are in many ways those that confront any writer of another's life story: admitting the presumptuousness of attempting to capture and convey the reality of another's existence and experience even while making that attempt; placing information accurately in context inasmuch as it can be established; acknowledging doubts and limitations and resisting the temptation to exaggerate; offering reasoned speculations (with appropriate use of conditional verbs and qualifying adverbs) where facts are elusive and connections must be made; recognizing the importance of an essential empathy with the subject—often rooted in a developing friendship and a growing gratitude for his trust and assistance—without being blinded by such dependence; weighing the possible significance of lost documents and lamenting the absence of a diary or journal, or even a collection of photographs or copies of

correspondence among the author's personal papers. In addition, there can be concerns about libel when old acquaintances are still living, and about the sensitivities of Ross's surviving family members.

There are other challenges. The biographer who is dependent on the subject's memory as a primary source must never forget that his subject might "remember" things that never happened, or consciously manipulate the facts of his story, or withhold important but unflattering information. Indeed, many anecdotes and details cannot be verified by any another source. Writers are particularly difficult subjects for biography because they are gifted at inventing lives and might easily, even if unconsciously, blur the line between fact and fiction in their own experience. All biographers naturally long for the freedom of the fiction writer to imagine answers and connections, as Simon Darcourt realizes in his long and arduous struggle to assemble an intelligible record of Francis Cornish's life, but such temptation to invent must be firmly resisted. In the case of an aging and ailing subject, the biographer lives with an acute consciousness of passing time and the fear that crucial parts of the story will be forever lost. Moreover, it must be accepted that certain events central to the subject's life will probably never come to light. Always there is the necessity of living in every part of the writer's life at once, since a letter or a phone call can immediately toss the biographer several decades forward or backward in time, and he must then be able to focus quickly and accurately on relevant details in order to advance the research by appropriate questioning. The biographer must know when to press a point, and when simple decency demands silence; and yet, as Phyllis Grosskurth has said, "Biographers have to be very nosey, and look in dark corners. . . . biographies have to be intrusive to a certain extent . . . people have different views about what is intrusive" (Wigston 19). Anita Desai's *In Custody* (1984) presents such a biographical intruder and dramatizes the comic but very real frustrations of trying to pin down the essential truths of a long literary life; and James Atlas has written vividly in "The Shadow in the Garden" about his intrusions into the life of Saul

Bellow and the hunger to learn “everything.” Such experiences and desires will be very familiar to every biographer. Finally, in the long struggle to assemble evidence and documents, the biographer must know what details to exclude, however arduously collected; and he must ultimately, with genuine humility, admit the inevitable distance separating the life lived from the life written. In the words of John Updike, “The trouble with literary biographies, perhaps, is that they mainly testify to the long corruption of a life, as documented deeds and days and disappointments pile up, and cannot convey the unearthly human innocence that attends, in the perpetual present tense of living, the self that seems the real one” (“The Man Within” 187).

In researching Ross’s long life and writing career, I have undoubtedly experienced a representative range of exhilarating successes and heartbreaking disappointments; and serendipity and coincidence have often played a key role. There was Ross’s old friend who had saved for 60 years the photo of the novelist taken when he was three years old, and promised to give me the picture “after Jimmy dies.” There were the accidental meetings with individuals in small prairie towns who had known Ross and his mother more than half a century ago. Quite by chance a letter from a prairie doctor’s wife initiated a series of contacts that eventually led me to a farm attic in Saskatchewan with two of Ross’s own paintings. Daunted by the challenge of tracking down some of Ross’s female neighbours from his days in Winnipeg in the 1930s, I lamented the fact that most Canadian women of that generation changed their names upon marriage and thus seemed to disappear; but eventually the woman I was seeking resurfaced when I learned by chance that her son was teaching my daughter here in Ontario. With only a few given names (no surname) and a 30-year-old picture as my starting-point, I nevertheless successfully enlisted the services of the very well-connected friend of a friend in Italy to track down the family Ross had known in Naples in the 1960s; and research elsewhere in Europe yielded many additional revelations about Ross’s ancestors that had been hidden for so long. A

national radio interview in February 1991, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *As For Me and My House*, brought forward some of Ross's co-workers from the bank, and old Army friends. Repeatedly I have experienced the pleasure of finally discovering the missing pieces that allowed me to connect the fragments of Ross's memory and the anecdotes of others. Indeed, there have been so many unexpected breakthroughs that it is difficult for me to believe now in coincidence or blind chance.

Of course, such successes are inevitably accompanied by many disappointments and failures. The picture of Ross as a child was lost before it could be given to me. A man who corresponded with the novelist after the publication of *As For Me and My House* lost all those letters (only a month before he was tracked down) when his Winnipeg basement flooded in the very wet summer of 1993. One of Ross's oldest friends, a woman blessed with an exceptional memory, died three weeks before I finally traced her to Edmonton (another case of a surname that disappeared when she married). Many other old friends and family members had died by the time my research began—some of them within a few blocks of Ross's nursing home in Vancouver. Several I contacted had not kept Ross's letters, and one man refused to make available the five letters he had received from Ross. Tragically, many of Ross's old acquaintances now suffer from serious illnesses, including Alzheimer's Disease, and can add nothing to the record. Such setbacks are humbling, and make the biographer realize that finding the whole story is an impossibility. It very quickly becomes clear why so many life studies are subtitled "A Biography" rather than "The Biography."

Questions of health and clarity of mind are central when dealing with a subject like Ross. His 16 years of medication for Parkinson's Disease played some tricks with his memory, and it was at times a challenge to separate fact from fantasy. What should I do with the contradictions? Where can the truth be found when he told different versions of an event to me, or one version to me and another to my co-author? For the biographer there is always the obligation to weigh

probabilities, to find a narrative line joining the several selves that make up any life, to investigate its central elements and recurrent concerns. Some readers, perhaps conditioned by the reading of conventional fiction, will demand that the life be formulated into a clear design and pattern. They thus expect something no biographer can honestly provide: the whole story, a seamless narrative in which all the details fit and everything is connected and complete. But as Updike and Sullivan remind us, real lives are not so simple, and are not lived in that way.

Why are the lives of talented writers of particular interest to their readers? In some cases it may be little more than a desire to peer into the private recesses of another's life. But most, surely, hope to glimpse something about the origin and operation of imaginative genius, to understand how a particular writer has managed to create works of enduring value, sometimes in the face of monumental obstacles. They might also wish to enhance their reading of the texts by framing them within the enriching context of the author's lived experience of the world. In offering explanations and insights, a truly honest and instructive biography will neither canonize nor debunk its subject, who must be examined with both sympathy and objectivity. Paradoxically the biographer must simultaneously approach and withdraw from his subject, celebrating the achievement without sanitizing the life. Ross insisted that he not be made a saint in the biography, that an honest record of his life would include deeds "and misdeeds." The objective of such a book must not be to create a new and improved version of the original. It must instead enlarge the reader's understanding of the personal and cultural circumstances within which the work was done, and ultimately send the reader back to a renewed encounter with the fiction itself. For Ross's enduring legacy is found there, in the short stories and in longer masterpieces such as *Sawbones Memorial* and *As For Me and My House*. Ultimately every biography, in its bias and fragmentation, can be no more than a partial record, and the honest biographer must acknowledge its inevitable limitations. Perhaps, as F.

Scott Fitzgerald has written in his notebooks, "There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people, if he's any good" (186). Jimmy, Sinclair, and Jim, and all the parts of himself and his experiences embedded in his fiction and embodied in his characters—together they constitute something like the whole story of the life and art of James Sinclair Ross.

(By the way, the lost photo was found, and has been copied.)

### Works Cited

- ATLAS, James. "The Shadow in the Garden." *The New Yorker*, 26 June & 3 July 1995, pp. 74-85.
- ATWOOD, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.
- DAVIES, Robertson. *The Lyre of Orpheus*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *What's Bred in the Bone*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *World of Wonders*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1975.
- DESAI, Anita. *In Custody*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994.
- FITZGERALD, F. Scott. Notebook entry, quoted in John Updike, "This Side of Coherence." *The New Yorker*, 27 June & 4 July 1994, pp. 186-94 [review of Jeffrey Meyers, *Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography*].
- FRENCH, William. "Too Good Too Soon, Ross Remains the Elusive Canadian." *The Globe and Mail*, 27 July 1974, p. 25.
- GRANT, Judith Skelton. *Robertson Davies: Man of Myth*. Toronto: Viking, 1994.
- MUNRO, Alice. "Material." In *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*. Toronto: New American Library, 1975. 20-36.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "What Is Real?" In *Making It New: Contemporary Canadian Stories*. Ed. John Metcalf. Toronto: Methuen, 1982. 223-26.

- ROSS, Sinclair. *As For Me and My House*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Just Wind and Horses: A Memoir." In *The Macmillan Anthology 1*.  
Ed. John Metcalf and Leon Rooke. Toronto: Macmillan, 1988. 83-97.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart,  
1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Race and Other Stories*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sawbones Memorial*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Well*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1958.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Whir of Gold*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.
- SHIELDS, Carol. *Swann: A Mystery*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1987.
- SULLIVAN, Rosemary. *Shadow Maker: The Life of Gwendolyn MacEwen*. Toronto:  
HarperCollins, 1995.
- UPDIKE, John. "The Man Within." *The New Yorker*, 26 June & 3 July 1995, pp. 182-  
87 [review of Michael Shelden, *Graham Greene: The Man Within*].
- WIGSTON, Nancy. "Detecting the Truth: Interview/Phyllis Grosskurth." *Books in  
Canada*, XXIV, 1 (Feb. 1995): 16-19.