

## Panel Discussion

### **“That Silly, Outmoded Profession”: The Cleric in Recent Fiction**

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As she was planning the program for the 2010 meeting of the Canadian Society of Church History, Vice President and program chair Ruth Compton Brouwer considered inviting Linden MacIntyre, author of *The Bishop's Man*, to address the society. The novel speaks directly to issues in Canadian church history, and Ruth had heard that MacIntyre was an excellent speaker. Church historians being rather as frugal as church mice, however, the prospect of paying travel costs and an honorarium to Mr. MacIntyre thwarted the program chair's plans. However, a conversation with President Marguerite Van Die led to a new option: a panel on novels with clergy as central characters.

William James, Sandra Beardsall, and Andrew Atkinson agreed to be panellists. A lively e-mail discussion ensued about which fictional works to choose. The final criteria were threefold: clergy as central (not peripheral) characters, recently published novels, and works that were reasonably well known and/or celebrated. Each of the three novels chosen reflected those principles: Linden MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man* (2009); Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (2005); and Elizabeth Strout, *Abide with Me* (2006). Bill James suggested a title: “That Silly, Outmoded Profession,” which he believed to have been penned by John Updike. Although he was unable to locate his citation in Updike's work, the title set a suitably light-hearted tone for the presentations and the discussion that followed.

## Reflecting on Elizabeth Strout's *Abide With Me*

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One of the most interesting aspects of this collaboration came in the weeks and months that followed the initial invitation, as we decided what would be the focus of a panel on clergy in fiction. Should it be historical novels, as befits this Learned Society devoted to church history? Should it be Canadian fiction? Or should the emphasis be contemporary? We knew that with three panelists, each presenting one work, there would have to be some comparative basis. Moreover, we did not want the works to be so obscure that audience members would be unlikely to have read any of them. For a time we thought about doing recent Canadian works dealing explicitly with religion, such as Margaret Atwood's *Year of the Flood* or Linden MacIntyre's *The Bishop's Man*. Then, too, with a plenary session being offered at the Congress in Montreal featuring Lawrence Hill, maybe a panel at least partly dealing with *The Book of Negroes* might be a good idea.

In the end the decision was made to present three novels with clergy protagonists written in the last decade. Linden MacIntyre's *The Bishop's Man*, winner in 2009 of the Governor-General's Award for English Fiction, provided Canadian content and was likely to have been widely read. Another prize-winner, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, was awarded the Pulitzer the year following its publication in 2004. The third novel chosen, Elizabeth Strout's *Abide With Me*, was published in 2006. All three novels are contemporary, although the two American ones – *Gilead* and *Abide With Me* – are set in the 1950s.

The phrase in the title for the panel, "That Silly, Outmoded Profession," I had thought came from John Updike's novel, *A Month of Sundays*. I told Marguerite Van Die that was the source. But then I could not find these words anywhere in the book, even after paging through it forwards and backwards several times. I also mentioned to Marguerite that I thought that a colleague had used these words, quoting Updike at a convocation ceremony at Queen's. Finally I confessed my lack of confidence in being

able to name any source for these words at all. Marguerite, who I have always thought of as among the most accurate and meticulous of historians, came to my rescue. She told me, “Well, you said it, Bill, and so we’ll leave it in quotation marks!” And we did.

### **On Abide With Me**

Set in 1959, *Abide With Me* is about the recently widowed thirty-two-year-old Rev. Tyler Caskey, a Congregational minister in a town in northern New England. He’s been there, in this first parish, for six years. At the novel’s beginning, he’s struggling with his grief and trying to be the single parent of two young girls. The older daughter has behavioural issues, and doesn’t talk much. The younger one has been taken away by Tyler’s overbearing mother who’s also trying to find her son a new wife.

Caskey memorizes his sermons, and preaches without notes – preaching still counted for something in those days. One of his questionably relevant sermons, however, is entitled “On the Perils of Personal Vanity,” an oblique argument against the church’s need for a new organ. He loves Bonhoeffer – he keeps talking about “cheap grace” – and quotes Reinhold Niebuhr, Tillich, Kierkegaard, Augustine, Tolstoy, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. He also experiences, consonant with C.S. Lewis’s *Joy*, or *Sehnsucht*, what he calls “The Feeling” – for Canadian readers also reminiscent of W.O. Mitchell’s Brian O’Connell in *Who Has Seen the Wind*. While in many ways a conventional Protestant cleric of the 1950s, Caskey perches and preaches ominously at the end of the decade. For 1959, the narrator tells us early on, “happened to be the first year in many where countrywide church membership had not increased at a greater rate than the general population.”<sup>1</sup>

With this, *Abide With Me* opens up some interesting comparisons for a contemporary reader, because the ecclesial culture of the late 1950s prefigures in Strout’s view of things much of the church in our own day. Some of Caskey’s congregation attend only on the High Holy Days of Christmas and Easter, while others have drifted away altogether. Some of the remainder are indifferent, or are caught up in the petty issues of church politics. Many watch their minister and gossip about him. He is rumoured to be having an affair with his housekeeper and his daughter’s problems at school have become alarming. Caskey can’t effectively deal with things any more, and has declined into depression and inactivity, though he

wishes he could be a hero like Bonhoeffer and courageously go out to be hanged – perhaps remembering his wife’s dying words, “you’re such a coward” – or else go off to the South to contribute in the burgeoning movement for civil rights.

The novel catalogues for us the issues and conventions of its day, especially within the Protestant church. Blacks, Jews, Catholics, gays all get referenced in ways that anticipate changes to come – or the need for such changes. The Cold War and Krushchev and Sputnik threaten in the background and some of the townsfolk have built bomb shelters. Consumption and shopping have become hobbies – especially for Caskey’s late wife, who has left him in debt. There is some talk about the Bible as myth, the possibility of voicing hatred at God – whose death was to be proclaimed in a few more years – and the therapeutic, as Philip Rieff was soon to detail, is becoming religion’s chief competitor. The demythologizing psychologist who is seeing Tyler’s daughter explains to him that the Garden of Eden is about shattered innocence – “because we really feel guilty by our sense of being enraged as infants, by that unconscious desire to kill our parents.”<sup>2</sup> She explains the problems of the Caskey girl in terms of “infantile grandiosity,” and when Tyler resists this interpretation, she tells her friends about his narcissistic rage.

What *Abide With Me* fails properly to engage are the ethical issues it raises – or else Strout may be suggesting that the resources for proper engagement were unavailable at the time. In advance of Joseph Fletcher’s situational ethics, the Rev. Caskey is plunged into a personal ethical dilemma that he can no longer adequately frame in deontological terms. At first believing that God would save his wife from a death by cancer, and then unable to stand her continuing suffering, Caskey finally leaves a bottle of pills by her bedside. This gesture, perhaps, results in his wife’s stinging comment about his cowardice. Although he does not regret assisting her suicide in this indirect way, Caskey never fully examines his role: “It was wrong, but he would do it again.”<sup>3</sup> Yet he also wishes that he had dared directly to end her life. When his housekeeper, Connie, tells him that she killed two paralyzed patients in her care at the nursing home by deliberately overfeeding them, the horrified Tyler sees her as a murderer and encourages her – but again, only indirectly – to turn herself in. Though Tyler Caskey is uncomfortably reminded of his own deeds when he visits Connie in the county jail, he distinguishes her mercy killing from his own complicity in his wife’s death. He also places Connie in a different moral

category from a woman seeking an abortion. Despite his reverence for Bonhoeffer's heroism, Caskey seems unable to confront his own demons fully. When he has a breakdown in the pulpit one Sunday, the courageous act that leads to his restoration is standing up to his mother,<sup>4</sup> and reclaiming his younger daughter. It's more Tillich's *Courage To Be* than Bonhoeffer.

In all, *Abide With Me*, written almost fifty years after the events it depicts, wants to say that the late 1950s presage our own time. It suggests that many of the moral and ethical issues that preoccupy us have their roots there, at the end of the decade that began the unraveling of America's Protestant hegemony. For her contemporary readers Elizabeth Strout throws in a few asides about gays, about the effects of Korean War combat fatigue, about class divisions, about the first glimmers of the coming sexual revolution, about television becoming the small-town drug of choice, and touches on the international issues that shake America's security and self-confidence. Is she trying to locate too many of our own current preoccupations in this New England parish at the end of the 1950s? Is it likely that a young Congregational minister, a graduate of small seminary, would possess the kind of theological knowledge that Caskey has? Or that the lives of his parishioners would have so much relevance from our own vantage point a half-century later? They are alarmed by the popish way he raises his arms for the benediction, and warn him not to get them into any liturgical holding of hands. What is easier to credit is the way Strout uncovers the small-mindedness of a rural parish and its effects on an earnest clergyman dealing with his own suffering. The novel instigates sympathy for the protagonist at the same time as it dissatisfies the reader by skirting the deeper issues that it raises without fully addressing.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Elizabeth Strout, *Abide With Me* (New York: Random House, 2006), 96.
2. Strout, *Abide With Me*, 250.
3. Strout, *Abide With Me*, 285.
4. Strout, *Abide With Me*, 283.

## **There is a Balm in *Gilead***

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I learned early in my ordained life to withhold, if I could, my identity as a minister when confined to close public quarters with strangers, such as on an airplane. It turned out that my seatmate invariably loved Jesus, hated the church, or was immersed in a spiritual crisis, any of which could make a long flight seem even longer. Likewise, I tend to approach the construction of clergy as major characters in fiction with wariness. For there is apparently nothing so deliciously entertaining, from Chaucer's nasty "Pardoner"<sup>1</sup> on down, as a fallen cleric.

The delight I took in the novel *Gilead*,<sup>2</sup> then, may stem partly from my relief that John Ames, minister of a Congregationalist church at Gilead, Iowa, has made it to age seventy-six without descending into addiction or committing any obvious sexual peccadilloes, without going mad, and without losing his faith. Of course, one might ask: where's the story in that? This is part of the genius of Marilynne Robinson's 2004 Pulitzer Prize winning novel: with stunning prose she manages to create a compelling, best-selling character who simply does what clerics are intended to do: to observe, articulate, and mediate grace and faith in the parishes where they are planted. I will briefly outline the narrative of *Gilead*, and then offer some beginning reflections on what Robinson attempts to achieve with her Rev. Ames.

### ***The Narrative***

Robinson's narrative is subtle: while it appears to be a meandering reminiscence, it actually features a complex of nested plots. In first person, John Ames pens a "letter" (247 pages long) in 1956 to his seven-year old son. The nameless son is the child of Ames' unexpected second marriage after the early death of his first wife – fifty-one years previous – in childbirth. Ames, born in 1880, is now ill with a heart condition. He realizes his son will grow up without him, and so leaves him a memoir by way of testament, the story of Ames' life told in the circuitous fashion

most life-stories are told: the present evoking memories, the memories interrupted by the present, in a seeming ramble. But we are, in fact, going somewhere, as several relationships unfold in the course of the novel. There are roughly three plots that intersect: first, the father/son/sibling relationships of the narrator's grandfather, father, and brother with him and with each other; second, Ames' relationship with his young wife and son – with echoes of his first wife and the daughter who lived but a few hours; and last, Ames' lifelong friendship with the neighbouring Presbyterian minister, "old" Boughton, and Boughton's apparently wayward son, Jack, who has been named after John Ames himself.

Similar questions drive each of these plots: how did these characters come to relate to one another as they do? What secret deeds lie in the shadowed corners of their histories? Which of them is reliable, both as a witness to their times and as a person in John Ames' life? What became or will become of them? Robinson tantalizes us with just enough information to whet our curiosity.

The three generations of Ames men have all been named John, and have all been Congregationalist clergy. The grandfather, a one-eyed wild visionary, traveled from Maine to Kansas in the 1830s, part of an abolitionist drive to claim Kansas as a free state. He went to the Civil War as an older man, consigned to a chaplain's role because of his age. His son, the narrator's father, was ordained and took a Congregationalist congregation in the small town of Gilead, Iowa, which his son, the narrator, now serves. John the father became a pacifist, and argued bitterly with his firebrand father, who disappeared back to Kansas and died there, unreconciled with his son. The narrator's brother, named Edwards after his uncle (who, in turn, was named after Jonathan Edwards), was brilliant, dropped the "s" from his name, studied theology in Germany, and came home to a college teaching position as an atheist, breaking his father's heart. The pacifist father, weary of the world, retired out of state and left his Gilead church in the care of his younger son, John, our narrator. This Ames family narrative is interspersed with tales of Civil War violence, heated family discussions, and the poignancy of father/son misunderstanding and alienation.

The narrator's two marriages, the first to his childhood sweetheart, and the second to a mysterious young woman, thirty-five years his junior, who arrives in his church and steals his heart, form a second plot, driven mainly by our curiosity about the second wife, Lila. She comes from a

dispossessed background, has no family, has drifted for several years, and is not even baptized. “No one seen to it when I was a child,” she explains. “I been feeling the lack of it.”<sup>3</sup> While the details of her past emerge only in slight hints, Lila’s story resolves for us in her quiet purposefulness. This plot allows us to experience the hardship, loss and poverty that have marked the underside, the non-triumphal narrative, of American history. It also lets us in on the funny and endearingly human side of Ames as he tries to resist the powerful crush he develops on Lila, and then with some embarrassment defends his decision to marry this much younger woman, which apparently caused some gossip in Gilead – the closest we come in this novel to a “fallen” cleric.<sup>4</sup> John Ames thus becomes the only one of our three clergy today who gets to end his narrative within a loving intimate relationship.

The third, and most provocative plot, centres on Old Boughton and his son, now forty-three years old. Jack is the classic prodigal son, and because he was named after Ames, our narrator works hard, and against his instincts, to try to embrace Jack with the unconditional love of the father of the parable. Ames is afraid that Jack has designs on Lila. But Jack turns out to be a complex character, and at the end of the novel we realize that his anger and distance relate to the racism of the mid-twentieth century United States, for Jack is deeply in love with an African American teacher, with whom he has a son. His lover’s father, an African Methodist Episcopal minister, has rejected him. Jack is adrift between two racial solitudes, and the novel ends just after Ames blesses Jack, and his father – in the midst of that social evil – with quiet reverence.

### ***The Project***

As the novel unfolds we come to see Marilynne Robinson’s intentions for the Rev. John Ames. In a life that reaches back, through his grandfather, to the 1830s, and ahead, through his young son, to the present day, where Ames Jr. would now be a sixty-one year-old baby boomer, Ames presents us with a gracious and soaring Calvinist lens through which to view a century and a half of tumultuous American history: war, plague, boom and bust. It is an epoch that ends, carefully, before the *next* tumultuous era of Vietnam, civil rights and liberation movements. Puritans and evangelicals of old sometimes used the word “grave” to describe a good Christian – a person of serious and thoughtful demeanour, deep and



sincere.<sup>5</sup> John Ames is charmingly grave. He has taken to heart the humanism reflected in the response to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What is the chief end of man?” “To glorify God and to enjoy God forever.” Ames indeed has an aim: he looks for, and finds glory, joy, transcendence, in every part of life. His discoveries flow gently through the novel: two young grease monkeys horsing around at the local garage;<sup>6</sup> Ames’ childhood act of baptizing a litter of feral kittens;<sup>7</sup> his grandfather’s Greek New Testament, soaked in a river during a Civil War retreat;<sup>8</sup> the “sacred mystery” in sorrow;<sup>9</sup> the radiant prairie dawn; and the “prevenient courage that allows us to be brave.”<sup>10</sup>

By reclaiming – to the delight of many North American Calvinists<sup>11</sup> – the oft-neglected deep humanism in Calvinist theology, Robinson, through Ames, takes on both the militant atheism and the religious fundamentalism that contend for the right to write American history and to shape the national myth. It is an argument that Robinson takes up in her most recent, non-fiction book, *Absence of Mind*.<sup>12</sup> It is writ large in *Gilead*, too, in that subtle way novels have of inviting us into a worldview. The carefully rambling recollections of John Ames intertwine both sides of that battle: a profoundly religious, indeed Calvinist, mindset and a searing post-colonial critique of American history, brought to life in the shabby folk and the musty church buildings of a small Iowa town.

Ames has refused to leave Gilead, despite his father fleeing to easier pastures, and his atheist brother’s advice that it is a backwater. Instead, he reflects, “To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded.”<sup>13</sup> The Rev. Ames has indeed found a balm in Gilead. His testament hints that perhaps if people stopped awhile in this place of little regard, they too might find something to soothe the sin-sick national soul.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Pardoner,” in *Canterbury Tales*, ed. A. Kent Hieatt & Constance Hieatt (New York: Bantam, 1981), 338-69.
2. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2004).
3. Robinson, *Gilead*, 207.

4. During the panel discussion, my co-panellists reminded us that Jack Boughton reproaches Ames about his May/December union: “You have made a somewhat – unconventional marriage yourself. You know a little bit about being the object of scandal”(Gilead, 230).
5. See, for example, the pilgrim Christian meeting “a grave and beautiful damsel named Discretion” at the house Beautiful in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London: Penguin, 1987), 43.
6. Robinson, *Gilead*, 5.
7. Robinson, *Gilead*, 21-23.
8. Robinson, *Gilead*, 90.
9. Robinson, *Gilead*, 137.
10. Robinson, *Gilead*, 246.
11. For example, Robinson is a senior fellow at the Center for Theological Inquiry at Princeton. She was also the keynote speaker at the “Rediscovering Calvin” Conference held in Toronto in June 2009.
12. Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: the Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
13. Robinson, *Gilead*, 246.

**Et cetera vs. Eternal Hope: Father Duncan MacAskill  
as Catholic Existentialist in Linden MacIntyre's  
*The Bishop's Man***

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“[L]et me tell you what I think a priest should be,” says Father Duncan MacAskill, the protagonist of Linden MacIntyre’s Giller prize-winning novel *The Bishop’s Man*. “I think a priest should, first of all, be human.”<sup>1</sup> To be human, may be the calling, but just what it means to be human is a question for our sharpest philosophers. Martin Heidegger, a philosopher MacAskill is fond of evoking, claims that Dasein (the *being-there*, or the being in the throes of existence) is he for whom being is an issue. Following Heidegger, being human isn’t simple at all, but a process of disclosing a fluctuating existence amid the constructs of our social imaginary. To be human, in the Catholic frame, is to be like Christ; and this is where Father MacAskill has most of his trouble – in embodying forgiveness, hope, new life. He is much more inclined toward dread and discipline.

The priesthood has not been an easy calling for Duncan MacAskill. After a run in with the bishop’s bride partner, MacAskill is shipped out to the hinterland – Honduras – where he falls in love with a young woman, Jacinta. After an irrevocable split with Jacinta, MacAskill has time enough to contemplate dread. It is as a dean at a “nominally Catholic university” in Antigonish that MacAskill develops his second specialty, discipline.<sup>2</sup> At the bishop’s command, he relocates pedophile priests and attempts to intimidate them into righteousness. Amid this dirty business, MacAskill finds time to mull over the subtle depravity of quotidian existence. When sequestering a fellow priest from his young housekeeper who “seems to be putting on weight,” MacAskill tells them, “life is full of temporary absences”<sup>3</sup> – absence of love, absence of purpose, absence of God.

MacAskill experiences the desolation of unfulfilled faith, and in this light, begs to be read beside the young male protagonists of Cormac

McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*; characters who are caught up in death before it has come. Both MacIntyre and McCarthy are Catholics who, in the words of Jacob Taubes, have "gone stale."<sup>4</sup> Somehow, McCarthy has found a way to reignite "the fire."<sup>5</sup> In interviews, our priestly MacIntyre claims he can't carry it anymore.<sup>6</sup>

This has something to do with existentialism. I would argue that MacIntyre's variety of Catholic existentialism is associated with a modern reading of Christology. This Christology takes seriously the problems of contingency, materiality, history with a small "h." It implies that if Christ is a unity of God and "humanity," then his humanity is not to be reduced to fit some idealized myth. The human must be taken in all of its "nitty gritty." A list of artists who take up this problematic would include Martin Scorsese, Flannery O'Connor, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, the aforementioned McCarthy, and of course, Graham Greene. Their works contain two heaps of dread for every cup of goodness. Death, despair, nihilism, and moral ambiguity are aplenty. They also link theological realism – the idea that matter is underwritten by divine substance, which is symbolized in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist – with the aesthetic of realism that dominates modern literary, visual, and dramatic arts. There is a tension between the ideal and the real here, but it is productive, and according to Catholic doctrine, true.

You will find the Catholic Greene, then, linking the "reasonable" explanation for human existence together with the Catholic Dogma, very much in the vein of a theologian like Teilhard de Chardin. In *The Honorary Consul*, Greene writes "I believe that God is suffering the same evolution that we are."<sup>7</sup> This paradox of the apathetic deity being put through the wringer of limited, shifting, changing, mutable existence leads to some blatant contradictions (and interesting literary analogies). So Greene, caught between modernity and Catholicism, calls himself a "Catholic Agnostic," which, as worked out in the form of his character Morin, entails losing belief but not faith – belief being associated with theological arguments for God, and faith with that which exceeds the disproof of these arguments.<sup>8</sup> In Greene's world "lack of belief is a final proof" of faith.<sup>9</sup>

A confessed fan of Greene, MacIntyre appropriates the thematic of despair, yet he leaves behind the contrapuntal note of hope that his mentor celebrates. Father MacAskill envisions himself as a soldier who protects the weak, but he is known in the parishes by the type of monikers that are

reserved for mafia hitmen – “The Exorcist . . . The Purificator.”<sup>10</sup> His despair seems to be generated from the contradictions he lives in and the blind spots that they foster. On the one hand, he is a power for righteousness – the one just man; on the other hand, he is imprisoned by an oath of celibacy to which he only loosely adheres. He appears to be a well ordered enforcer of top down commands, and yet he finds himself waking from a drunken stupor on the floor of the chancel, unable to abstain from drink. His career of relocating problem priests to backwoods parishes appears to be an attempt at last minute renovations on a condemned structure.

MacAskill’s actions are rationalized by his zeal for the faith, a genuine concern for his “flock,” and his desire to protect the Church from an outward tarnish, but he is not at peace with his calling. During one meeting with a victim of abuse and his father, readers are given a glimpse of MacAskill’s internal drama:

I sat for a long moment, head down, hands clasped before my face. Fighting the embarrassment and nausea. The room was silent. Help me here, I was thinking. Help me find the words and the wisdom to navigate through this. Then I felt the anger swelling within me, imagining the fool who exposed himself and all of us to this potentially lethal awkwardness. And an unexpected wave of resentment directed at the whining adolescent in front of me, dredging up this garbage to deflect God knew what crisis in his own miserable life.

“In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” I said, crossing myself.<sup>11</sup>

During introspective passages such as this, which are plentiful in the novel, MacIntyre puts his journalistic talents to work, drawing from interviews with priests who have worn MacAskill’s shoes. MacAskill is a composite for sure, yet his spiritual-political-vocational dilemmas appear to have a root in lived experience.

MacAskill is also figured, as are so many of the protagonists of Catholic existentialist novels, as a representative of Christ who participates in the God-man’s passion. Every individual, according to this theology, is caught in the suffering of disordered materiality – the flesh – and must persevere through a harsh winter before the resurrection of spring. Father MacAskill preaches this natural analogy to his congregation in Creignish, Nova Scotia:

In January it becomes impossible to defer the reality of winter and her casual betrayals. You feel that summer and her pretty sister, autumn, have gone perhaps forever. There is that sense of personal abandonment. That's when we turn inward, and hope to find comfort there.

That was my message January 1, 1995. I thought it was an appropriate reflection on the meaning of Christ's birth and the eternal hope He brought with his arrival among us. The extraordinary promise that gets us through the dark days until the enlightenment of Pentecost and the rebirth of spring. And the promise that one day we will know a summer without end. Et cetera.<sup>12</sup>

Where Mel Gibson's *The Passion* conceives of this suffering in the cosmological mode, it is the privatized angst/dread/despair<sup>13</sup> of contemporary continental philosophy that MacIntyre entertains: "eternal hope" vs. "Et cetera."

The theme of existentialism enters into the novel through a dubious character whose story is fleshed out in a complex series of flashbacks. While in seminary, MacAskill is enamoured with the Catholic existentialism of Father Roddie MacVicar, who offers compelling appropriations of Heideggerian thought. When he appears unannounced at Father Roddie's office, MacAskill finds Roddie in a compromising position with a teenage boy. He attacks his mentor. The bishop, who is Roddie's bridge partner, soon relocates MacAskill to Honduras, where he becomes involved in a *ménage à trois* that ends in the death of his best friend, the ideal political priest, Alfonso. After two years he is brought back to Antigonish, and appointed as a dean at the local university. MacAskill assimilates his disciplinary function into his academic role: "I guess by then a part of me accepted that I'd become a specialist in discipline. Technically it's part of the dean's job, and I was officially a dean."<sup>14</sup>

The disciplinary tasks do not leave him unchanged. The strategies he uses to deaden the response of his pedophile brethren seem to reshape him to the core. His soldier mentality began at an early age, when he rescued his sister from an abusive relationship with their shell-shocked father. Plagued by despair from his youth, MacAskill saw the priesthood as "a substitute for suicide."<sup>15</sup> This realization, however, does not sink in until he has been sent for rehabilitation at Braecrest, a counseling facility in Orangeville, Ontario.<sup>16</sup> MacAskill's stint in rehab occurs late in the novel, and in order to consider the ending, we must return to the opening

pages.

The first event of the novel is Father MacAskill's transfer from the "nominally Catholic university" (where MacIntyre was educated), to the rural parish in Cape Breton where he was raised. In this parish, he suspects that a young parishioner was molested by Brenden Bell, a pedophile that MacAskill previously relocated to a small parish in Cape Breton. Several years after his removal from a parish in Newfoundland where he molested several young boys, Bell leaves the priesthood. He goes on to become a successful business man with ties to organized crime, much like the real-life ex-pedophile priest, Ronald Hubert Kelly.<sup>17</sup> The epistemological suspension that divides MacAskill from his desired certainty about Bell is the principal engine that moves this narrative towards its end.

And the end is where MacIntyre runs into problems. MacAskill has a complicated relationship with the MacKay family, and their son, Danny, who was the victim of sexual abuse. MacAskill suspects that Bell was the perpetrator. Six months after Danny commits suicide, MacAskill is preparing his boat for sea when a drunken "old timer," Willie Hawthorne, confesses to him that he molested the young McKay boy. At this disclosure, MacAskill snaps. He throws Willie some distance onto a moored boat, and Willie dies from the impact. Willie's last words, "Help me, Father . . ." do not move MacAskill to administer last rites, even though he is fingering the confessional stole in his pocket.<sup>18</sup> With this failure to administer the sacraments, MacAskill renounces his vocation and loses his faith. This was a shock to me as a reader. I was convinced that MacAskill's suffering was going to find some redemption in his priestly sacrifice, like Greene's celebrated Whisky Priest of *The Power and the Glory*. Moreover, I am still of the opinion that MacIntyre has ruptured Greene's aesthetic form with a *deus ex machina*. The pedophile that comes to light in the end is not a priest, and the suspected priest, Bell, the symbol of all duplicity and evil, is vindicated. Oddly, although the novel spends three hundred pages describing the despair with which MacAskill and his flock struggle at the hands of pedophile priests, the ending succumbs to MacAskill's despair, while redeeming the guilty (ex) priest (Bell).

MacIntyre's ending speaks to the ambiguity of the age in which he writes. On the one hand, he knows the Church and the plausible psychology of the priest well enough to convince most readers of some correspondence between his text and reality. On the other hand, his love of the Church does not support faith but underwrites a secularist trajectory. I

suspect that MacIntyre has written himself into the novel in two places. First, I suspect that MacIntyre thinks both he and MacAskill end up in an authentic post-metaphysical situation – the convinced atheist. However, there is a scene earlier in the text, when MacAskill is at Braecrest and attempting to keep his identity as a priest a secret. His roommate freely admits that he is a priest with a gambling problem, and he wonders what MacAskill’s vocation might be. When the roommate desires to celebrate mass, he asks MacAskill to assist him. At a crucial part of the ritual, the visible priest forgets the text of the liturgy, and the invisible priest, MacAskill, completes the rite without knowing it.<sup>19</sup> This peculiar priest then, seems to have much in common with the invisible priest that is MacIntyre. The author knows the Church so well that he can’t help but represent it in all of its reality – educated as he was in Catholic existentialism at St. Francis Xavier; yet even while the novel’s ending distances the Church from the sin of pedophilia, his disavowal of faith and mercy seem like an aesthetic infraction.

It leads me, in the end, to believe that MacIntyre is much like Greene – an author who is not sure of his certainties, and who is too certain of his doubts. Are MacIntyre and the novel, in the end, secular, Catholic, or post-secular Catholic? He hasn’t decided. In other words, buy his next book.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Linden MacIntyre, *The Bishop’s Man* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2009), 348.
2. MacIntyre, *The Bishop’s Man*, 10.
3. MacIntyre, *The Bishop’s Man*, 9.
4. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 103.
5. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 283.
6. “Linden MacIntyre – *The Bishop’s Man*,” *Allen Gregg in Conversation*, TVO, 6 February 2010.
7. Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene, Volume 3: 1956-1991* (Toronto: Viking, 2004), 689.



8. Sherry, *Life of Graham Greene*, 688.
9. Sherry, *Life of Graham Greene*, 689.
10. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, 233.
11. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, 104.
12. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, 143.
13. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, 315.
14. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, 10.
15. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, 339.
16. Braecrest is a close fictionalization of Southdown in Aurora, Ontario. See Sarah Schmidt, "Religious Rehab: at a private facility near Toronto, some of North America's most notorious sexual offenders – members of the Catholic clergy – have sought treatment," *National Post*, 6 April 2002.
17. Erik Jackson, "El Espino's Least Desirable Neighbor," *The Panama News*, 11, no. 14 (17 July - 6 August 2005).
18. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, 389.
19. MacIntyre, *The Bishop's Man*, 340.

