

“As Truthful as Our Notion of the Past Can Ever Be”:**William Maxwell, His *Ancestors*, and Alice Munro’s *The View from Castle Rock*****ROBERT THACKER**

Abstract: Beginning in the mid-1980s, Alice Munro drew attention in interviews to her rapt admiration for the work of William Maxwell, a writer she has called “my favorite writer in the world.” The two were not close, although they met a few times through their shared association with the *New Yorker*. In 1988 Munro published an appreciation of Maxwell’s work and, after his death in 2000, agreed to revise it for a tribute volume published in 2004. During those years too, Munro was at work on a family volume she had long contemplated, *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), one that was inspired in part by and modelled on Maxwell’s *Ancestors: A Family History* (1971). This article examines the Maxwell-Munro crux as an example of the dynamics of authorship; it is an important example of two compatible writers who, throughout their careers, created narrative rooted in the very stuff of their own experience in place and time—whether seen as fiction, autobiography, or memoir. Each did so in ways that accentuate, for the critic intent on analysing authorship, the play of the past in shaping of any narrative.

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According to Alice Munro, she and William Maxwell met “a few times” in Manhattan at *New Yorker* events. “The first time I met him I almost fell on the floor with admiration,” Munro has recounted, “and he just sort of held me up, and started talking about very ordinary things, and got me through.” In the same interview, Munro called Maxwell “my favourite writer in the world” (Thacker, Personal interview, 2010). When she said this, she had been referring to his work admiringly for some time: in 1985, for instance, Munro told an interviewer that Maxwell’s fiction is “‘orderly, deliberate, painstaking, traditional,’ and also ‘unsurprising—or so you think’” (quoted in Martin 205). Following this comment a few years later, in 1988 she published an essay, “The Novels of William Maxwell,” in *Brick*. She allowed that magazine to republish it in 2000 as a tribute to Maxwell when he died that year, and she took it up again and expanded it while she was also shaping the family book she had long contemplated and would publish as *The View from Castle Rock* in 2006. When that book appeared, Munro mentioned the whole of Maxwell’s work as an encouragement and, in particular, pointed to his *Ancestors* (1971) as an explicit model of what she was trying to do in her own book (Stoffman). Given these connections, this article takes up as its subject the acknowledged influence of Maxwell’s work on Munro’s generally and, most particularly, the model his *Ancestors* provided her when she came finally to write her own long-contemplated book focused on her own ancestors in relation to her own life, *The View from Castle Rock*.

Beyond the explicit evidence of one writer’s influence on another, and of one book’s presence as model for the making of another, the Maxwell-Munro crux serves those interested in the dynamics of authorship as an important example of two compatible writers who, throughout their careers, created narrative rooted in the very stuff of their own experience in place and time—whether seen as fiction, autobiography, or memoir. Each did so in ways that accentuate, for the critic intent on analysing authorship, the play of the past in shaping of any narrative (see Duffy).

One of the meetings of these two writers, an unusual one, certainly, was well recorded in the *New Yorker*. It happened in May of 1994 at an event the magazine sponsored. Each was among the “fourteen fiction writers closely associated” with the magazine who had been gathered, according to then fiction editor Daniel Menaker, “to have their pictures taken by our staff photographer, Richard Avedon, and then [the group] joined some of the magazine’s editors for an on-location party” (110). The photographs which resulted may be seen in the 24 June and 4 July 1994 issue (“the *New Yorker* Celebrates Fiction” 2); the same issue first published Munro’s “The Albanian Virgin.” There Maxwell, flanked by Michael Chabon and Mavis Gallant, opens the photo portfolio and, two pages on, Munro stands between Harold Brodkey and Tom Drury, with Edna O’Brien rounding out the facing page (110-11, 114-15). In between Maxwell and Munro, for the layout gives the feeling of a line of people, stand such other persons as Ann Beattie, John Updike, and Jamaica Kincaid—it must have been some party. Likening the event, and especially the principals’ delight in it and in their enjoyment of one another, to “the trope of the yearbook photo,” Menaker asks, “what are writers of fiction if not people who observe the world with youthful wonder and curiosity?” (117).

As it happened, Menaker was one of two fiction editors who brought Alice Munro to the *New Yorker* in late 1976. The other was Charles McGrath, who first edited her stories acquired by the magazine and did so into the mid-1980s until, owing to changed responsibilities, Menaker took over. Each was initially employed at the *New Yorker* in other capacities, but the two joined the fiction department to replace two other longtime fiction editors, Robert Henderson and William Maxwell, who were retired at the end of 1975. Before he left, Maxwell hired and then trained each young man in the new position, each of them sitting across a desk from him to see what was done as it was done (Menaker, "Gentle"; Thacker, *Alice* 319).

Maxwell had been an editor at the *New Yorker* since 1936 when he was hired by Katherine White, working there three days a week while devoting the other four to his own writing. "To those he edited," one of them, John Updike, has written, Maxwell "gave a tenderness and an acuity of attention that could not but enhance their sense of vocation; his writers included John Cheever, Eudora Welty, Vladimir Nabokov, Frank O'Connor, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Mavis Gallant" ("Touch"). A singular story often noted is that when J.D. Salinger finished *The Catcher in the Rye* he drove with the manuscript to Maxwell's house to read it to his editor.¹

As a young writer himself, Maxwell had met and been mentored in Wisconsin by Zona Gale, who had recommended his first novel, *Bright Center of Heaven* (1934) to publishers. His second, *They Came Like Swallows* (1937), was published amid short stories in the *New Yorker* and a travel piece in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Established as a fiction editor at the magazine, novels (*The Folded Leaf* [1945], *Time Will Darken It* [1948], *The Chateau* [1961]), *The Old Man at the Railroad Crossing* [1966], and *So Long, See You Tomorrow* [1980]) were published, along with numerous stories and other pieces. As the novelist Shirley Hazzard once wrote, Maxwell "'stayed with the truth that was in him, developing it throughout his life'" (quoted in Wilkinson 77).

For her part, Munro was aware of this prominence. She had been submitting stories to the *New Yorker*, without success, since the late 1950s. She began reading Maxwell's fiction "sometime in the early sixties," beginning with *They Came Like Swallows* and *The Folded Leaf*, and "I knew right away that this was a good writer, but I don't think I knew how good." She continues:

Years later I read *So Long, See You Tomorrow* ... and by that time I knew what I was reading. I went back and reread the novels I had read before, together with *Time Will Darken It* and all the short stories I could find. And I thought: So this

¹ Following on Updike's comment here, it is worth noting that three volumes of Maxwell's correspondence with his *New Yorker* authors have been published and that he, for his part, edited the letters of one of them, Sylvia Townsend Warner (see Marrs, Steinman).

is how it should be done. I thought: If only I could go back and write again every single thing I have written. Not that my writing would, or should, imitate his, but that it might be informed by his spirit. (“Maxwell” 34, 35)²

When Munro came to be edited by Menaker at the *New Yorker*, Maxwell was a presence in their relationship: he mentions him, for instance, when he writes Munro in March 1989 asking for changes to her story “Friend of My Youth” (1990); and as late as 2009, she wrote Menaker that “I have just this week been re-reading [Maxwell’s] ‘So Long, see you tomorrow.’ It gives me enormous deep deep pleasure” (Letter to Daniel Menaker).

Without question, the influence Maxwell’s writing exerted on Munro’s was one of ongoing accretion, of shared similar circumstances and experience, and of an aesthetic recognition that each felt compelled to write of the people and place that were theirs. When Maxwell received the Gold medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1995, he said “‘The novelist works with what life has given him. It was no small gift that I was allowed to lead my boyhood in a small town in Illinois where the elm trees cast a mixture of light and shade over the pavements. And also that, at a fairly early age, I was made aware of the fragility of human happiness’” (quoted in Updike, “Touch”). This last reference is to his mother’s death from Spanish Flu in 1919 when Maxwell was ten and she had just delivered his baby brother. This death figures centrally throughout Maxwell’s work, “nowhere more movingly than in in his second novel, “They Came Like Swallows,”” as Updike wrote (“Touch”) and, as will be seen here, as *the* central moment in *Ancestors*. Munro’s own mother—her remembered healthy presence, her long illness, and her eventual death—and the town they lived in are just as centrally at the core of Munro’s work (see Ross; Thacker, “Finale”). As she writes at the end of “Face” (2008), such a place is resonant: “Something happened here. In your life there are a few places, or maybe only the one place, where something happened, and then there are all the other places” (162).³ Writing to her editor Douglas Gibson in October 1980, detailing the stories she then had available for a new book, Munro told him that she wanted to hold out her then finished memoir, “Working for a Living” (1981), saving it for “a kind of family book” she wanted to do someday (Letter to Douglas Gibson). Munro once spoke of Maxwell’s influence on her as “especially and forever” and, as already noted,

² Munro’s description of Maxwell’s influence here—“it might be informed by his spirit”—is wholly consistent with her practice. (See my “Alice Munro’s Willa Cather” and, for a broader discussion of her influences, Martin and Ober.)

³ Throughout Munro’s work, passages of poetry—usually recited by a character, although not always—are used to complement the narrative. In “Face,” just before this quotation, Munro inserts Walter de la Mare’s “Away” (“There is no sorrow / Time heals never”) as part of a dream sequence between the narrator and an unidentified woman who recites poetry to him while he is in hospital with an eye injury, so that he is unable to see her. This may be a connection to Maxwell: during his sophomore year at the University of Illinois-Urbana, distraught over circumstances surrounding two intimate friendships, he attempted suicide. He used the friendships, and the suicide attempt, in *The Folded Leaf*. Maxwell later “ascribed his suicide attempt to reading too much Walter de la Mare, which gave him a ‘poetic idea of life after death,’ a life in which he would be reunited with his mother” (Updike, “Imperishable” 72; see Jamieson, *Micros*).

she recalled rereading him and realising that “so this is how it should be done” (“A Conversation”; see Thacker, *Alice* 527-28).

William Maxwell died at age 91 during the summer of 2000. In 2004, *A William Maxwell Portrait: Memories and Appreciations*, edited by Charles Baxter, Michael Collier, and Edward Hirsh, was published by Norton. It begins with a poem by Updike and its second essay is Munro’s “Maxwell,” a revised and expanded version of the 1988 essay. Throughout its essays, time and again, its writers recall Maxwell’s own “youthful wonder and curiosity,” in Menaker’s phrase (117). He was a person who met and befriended others warmly, immediately asking about the details of their lives, especially their childhoods—interested, questioning, and eager to share his own recollections, his own remembered childhood, its textures, images, and being. And so Munro found him to be. She knew, along with Maxwell’s other readers, that “he wrote mostly about his childhood,” in a small town in Illinois, and knew too that the central event of that childhood was the death of his mother (Thacker, Personal interview, 2010).

Munro returned to her *Brick* essay at the instigation of Charles Baxter, who likely had seen its republication in 2000 and, along with his coeditors, thought an expansion would fit well into their volume. Baxter recalled that, when they spoke about the possibility on the telephone, Munro “wasn’t certain that she could write such an essay but said she would try—really, I think, out of her love for the man and his work.” When the essay arrived, he says, “she struck a deprecatory note—she described herself as ‘a nervous lady at the book club’” (Baxter). Munro has long expressed such doubts about her own critical facilities, but as Baxter and his colleagues decided, she had nothing to worry over in her revised and expanded essay. There she pays most attention to his great novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* where, Munro writes, “Everything is given its due. Everything is arranged with such skill that there doesn’t seem to be any skill to it at all. Nothing but easy, natural storytelling.” She quotes a long passage there which she characterises as having “Something to say about this matter of storytelling”:

What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life to ever be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to arrange things to conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw. (“Maxwell” 46-47; Maxwell, *So Long* 27)⁴

⁴ The reliability of memory is very much the subject of Munro’s “The Progress of Love” (1985). This passage might serve as coda for that story, and perhaps for all of late Munro (that is, from *The Progress of Love* [1986] on).

Earlier in the essay, Munro describes Maxwell's *They Came Like Swallows* as being "about the life of a young family and the way in which that life is shattered by the death of the mother." She continues, in a passage which is both sharply acute about Maxwell's work and, as well, speaks directly to its congruence with her own, and especially just then:

This story is told again and again in Maxwell's fiction, in stories that seem autobiographical but may not be as autobiographical as they seem—and there is something new with each telling, some new action at the periphery or revelation near the centre, a different light or shading, a discovery, as there must be in stories at the heart of our lives, stories that grow and change as we do and never go away. (40)

This passage did not appear in the original version of the essay, so it bears some relation to Munro's work during 2003-04. Just then she had produced the "Juliet Triptych": three connected stories—"Chance," "Soon," and "Silence"—first published together in a single issue of the *New Yorker* and then included in *Runaway* (2004); though not overtly so, they too have their autobiographical elements, especially "Soon." That story's penultimate paragraph, a single sentence and one Munro initially tried to use to end the story, is one that might be seen as a coda for Maxwell and Munro both; it reads "Because it's what happens at home that you try to protect, as best you can, for as long as you can" (125). During the time of her essay's revision too, Munro was finally shaping her next major project, her autobiographic family book, her own version of *Ancestors*, the book that would be called *The View from Castle Rock*.

In 2008 John Updike took up the Library of America's newly published Maxwell volumes and produced an essay, "Imperishable Maxwell," for the *New Yorker*. Reviewing and appreciating all of his former editor's writing, Updike comments at one point that "Maxwell did believe, ever more strongly, that reality was the best fiction." "In that same recollection," Updike continues, "he says in an aside that even when the author imposes the disguise of a name on characters, actual names are so much more convincing than the names he invents for them." He also cites an instance when Maxwell told an interviewer that "'for me, 'fiction' lies not in whether a thing, the thing I am writing about, actually happened, but in the form of the writing ... a story, which has a shape, a controlled effect, a satisfying conclusion—something that is, or attempts to be, a work of art'" (74).

Just before this Updike makes a passing reference to Maxwell's *Ancestors* and calls it "his book-length essay about his family history" (74). That is so. Reading the book, which details the circumstances, assumptions, and histories of Maxwell's forbearers at considerable length, its reader never forgets the presence of Maxwell shaping the story he is telling. It does read like a long essay. When there he again reaches the paradigmatic moment in his own life, the death of his mother in 1919, he closes the chapter with his aunt taking

him in her lap, welling up, and telling him the news, writing “What had to be done she could be counted on to do” (267). The next chapter is a retrospective one, for Maxwell goes back to a series of memories of his family when they were together, all living, his mother among them. This interlude done, he returns to his chronology, to his essay. That is, “a story, which has a shape, a controlled effect” though not in this instance nor, really, throughout Maxwell’s numerous renderings of his mother’s death, “a satisfying conclusion.” No question but that those renderings—*Ancestors* among them—are “something that is—or attempts to be—a work of art.”⁵

Toward the end of *Ancestors* Maxwell writes,

It is not true that the dead desert the living. They go away for a very short time, and then they come back and stay for as long as they are needed. But sooner or later a time comes when they are in the way; their presence is, for one reason or another, an embarrassment; there is no place for them in the lives of those they once meant everything to. Then they go away for good.

When I was in college I was wakened out of a sound sleep by own voice, answering my mother, who had called me from the stairs. With my heart pounding, I waited for more and there wasn’t any more. Nothing like it ever happened to me before, or since. (307-08)

Brendan Gill, one of the reviewers of *Ancestors* and Maxwell’s colleague and friend at the *New Yorker*, asserted that the author’s “most successful feat of deception” in the book is that “at a certain scarcely detectable point in his narrative the ancestors ... are made to slip away and we are left in the presence of a little boy who, all nakedly and touchingly, is about to lose his beloved mother by death, who is to suffer the ignominy of adolescence in a desolate household, and who is to spend years learning that the contest between father and son can never be won by either, and is not to be ended even after death.” Noting that however central the story of his mother’s death is to Maxwell, in *Ancestors* Gill makes it clear that the passages regarding her are not about the father too. Citing a small contentious incident between father and son, which happened long after, but one described in the book, Gill comments that we

⁵ Paul John Eakin, in *Touching the World*, takes up *So Long, See You Tomorrow* as memoir, as autobiography. After reading it and so seeing it, Eakin then read *Ancestors* and, he writes, “I was not surprised to find the essential facts of the narrator’s life in *So Long* repeated here.” He enumerates them and then asks “But so what? What if *Ancestors* did not exist? What then? Aping the narrator in *So Long*, I could have searched the files of the Lincoln *Courier-Herald* for details” of the murder in the novel. Or he might have gone and tried to verify Maxwell’s presence in the same Chicago high school mentioned there. He continues, “but I did not, unwilling, perhaps, to have my belief in *So Long* as an autobiography disconfirmed.” Eakin ultimately sees this as “an instinct to trust.” “When the narrator speaks of *So Long* as ‘this memoir—if that’s the right word for it,’ I take him at his word” (46-47). This critic is writing of Maxwell here, but similar arguments might well be made about Munro’s work, most especially *The View from Castle Rock*.

“are all more or less uneasily descendants, and we are all imminently ancestral” (90). For Maxwell, a comment he later made about his methods, in *Ancestors* and elsewhere, is salient: “I came to feel that life is the extraordinary storyteller of all, and the fewer changes you make [to facts and details] the better, provided you get to the heart of the matter” (quoted in Carduff 960). So Alice Munro saw and felt when she read *Ancestors* and *So Long, See You Tomorrow*: “the heart of the matter.”⁶

Munro had been thinking about her own family book—the one which became *The View from Castle Rock*—since at least the late 1970s. As she wrote to Gibson in October 1980, the foundational piece in that book was what she called in that letter “a long memoir I wrote about my father, which I think is pretty good, but I think it should be kept out for a kind of family book I want to do someday—maybe about the Laidlaws in Huron County and in Ettrick & James Hogg whose mother was a Laidlaw” (Letter to Douglas Gibson). That memoir was “Working for a Living,” to be published the next year in the inaugural issue of *Grand Street*. There, as with the preference for the mother’s story over the father’s that Gill notes in his review of *Ancestors*, Munro tells more about her father than her mother, although she is more balanced in her treatment of each of them at a key moment of their marriage. And she tells the story of that marriage too.

In some ways, though, such a family book from this writer now seems an inevitability: her own life and her family relations in Ontario were each at the core of the fiction she wrote and published during the over twenty years she lived in British Columbia (1952-73); her return there after she left her marriage occasioned a new imaginative confrontation with the sights, surfaces, and culture of Ontario, and with her family. Especially with her father, Robert E. Laidlaw, who had remarried after being widowed in 1959 and who still lived on the family farm in Lower Wingham. And when Munro moved back to Huron County, to Clinton in 1975 to live with Gerald Fremlin, her literal return home was complete. Imaginatively, it was a time of the rediscovery of her home place, of its mores, its textures, and of her ancestors; and it shows throughout the progress which was Munro’s work from 1973 on: such memoir stories as “Home” (1974), “The Ottawa Valley” (1974), and “Winter Wind” (1974); her abandoned photo text, “Places at Home,” much of it incorporated into *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) / *The Beggar Maid* (1979); and during this time too Munro researched and wrote about her mother’s Irish heritage through “1847: The Irish” (1978), a

⁶ While beyond the scope of this article, and a subject I have already elaborated, Munro’s “Finale” section in what promises to have been her last book, *Dear Life* (2012), owes to the pivotal point of the revelation of the mother’s death in *Ancestors* (Thacker, “Finale”). The title story, “Dear Life” (2011), which ends the book, echoes that moment in Maxwell’s. In an 2013 interview Munro responded to a question about it and the interviewer writes in a headnote that Munro works “by connecting her story or personal history to larger events or circumstances of the time in which it takes place—a technique she has said she admires in William Maxwell’s *Ancestors: A Family History*” (Awano 180).

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television show (published as a story in 1979 as “A Better Place than Home”). Ancestral interests and this trajectory are evident into the 1980s with some of the stories in *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982) (the two-part “Chaddeleys and Flemings” and the title story), with “Working for a Living” (1981) and, in 1988, Munro published “Meneseung,” a complex story which has at its core a narrator deep in biographical research. In 1990 Munro spent three months in Scotland and, in 1995, six months in Ireland. “Home” and “Working for a Living”—each memoirs focused on Munro’s parents—were destined for *The View from Castle Rock*, but the first overt evidence of the emergence of that book was “Changing Places” (1997), a narrative essay exploring her Laidlaw ancestors which Munro contributed to a PEN Canada anthology, *Writing Home* (see Thacker, *Alice passim*; Thacker, “Alice Munro Country”).⁷

But if it is fair to call Maxwell’s *Ancestors* a “book-length essay,” as Updike did, then what Munro offers in *The View from Castle Rock* is a structure more complex than a single, well-informed narrative in which the author may be seen shaping and responding to the historical and biographical facts at hand. Inspired by what Maxwell accomplished in *Ancestors*, Munro attempts and accomplishes a more ambitious structure in *The View from Castle Rock*, the family book that she had for so long envisaged. On 30 June 2005—over a year prior to publication, when actually she was still shaping the book’s structure—Munro drafted a foreword which carefully lays out the book’s provenance. This draft is fundamentally what was published in the book but for one key added sentence, an emphatic paragraph. Of which more presently. Munro begins in the published version, “About ten or twelve years ago I began to take more than a random interest in the history of one side of my family, whose name was Laidlaw.” She then explains something of her researches, that she “lived in Scotland for a few months, close to the Ettrick Valley, so I was able to find their names in the local histories in the Selkirk and Galashiels Public Libraries, and to find out what James Hogg had to say about them in *Blackwoods Magazine*.” Hogg, “the Ettrick Shepherd,” was one of Munro’s own ancestors, the author of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), a novel, and friend of Sir Walter Scott. As Munro writes, Hogg took him to see his mother, “a Laidlaw,” “when Scott was collecting ballads for *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*” ([ix]; see Gilkison, Redekop). After offering this detail, she writes that she

⁷ Munro published “What Do You Want to Know For?” in *Writing Away: The PEN Canada Travel Anthology* (1994) and, revised, it became the penultimate piece in *Castle Rock*. Because she decided on this inclusion late in the process of shaping the book, it makes more sense to see “Changing Places” as evidence of its emergence. Munro begins the foreword to *Castle Rock* writing “About ten or twelve years ago I began to take more than a random interest in the history of one side of my family, whose name was Laidlaw” ([ix]). This would be 1994-96.

put all this [historical] material together over the years, and almost without my noticing what was happening, it began to shape itself, here and there, into something like stories. Some of the characters gave themselves to me in their own words, others rose out of their situations. their words and my words, a curious re-creation of lives, in a given setting that was as truthful as our notion of the past can ever be. ([ix-x])

Munro's foreword to this point addresses the first of the two parts of her book, the one called "No Advantages," the one based on family papers and her historical research. She then shifts to the material in the second part, a section called "Home," and writes that

During these years I was also writing a special set of stories. These stories were not included in the books of fiction I put together, at regular intervals. Why not? I felt they didn't belong. They were not memoirs but they were closer to my own life than other stories I had written, even in the first person. In other first-person stories I had drawn on personal material, but then I did anything I wanted to with this material. Because the chief thing I was doing was making a story. In the stories I hadn't collected I was not doing exactly that. I was doing something closer to what a memoir does—exploring a life, my own life, but not in an austere or rigorously factual way. I put myself in the center and wrote about that self, as searchingly as I could. But the figures around this self took their own life and color and did things they had not done in reality. ([x])

Munro then offers some detail from some of the second group of stories before, in a single-sentence paragraph added sometime after she wrote the 30 June 2005 draft, and clearly referring to both sets of narratives she offers in *The View from Castle Rock*, "These are *stories*" ([x]).⁸ Yes, they are. Although, that having been said, it is perfectly reasonable to call two of the stories in the "Home" section—"Home" and "What Do You Want to Know For?"—memoirs. The same might be said of "Working for a Living," which ends the first section, "No Advantages."

In one of the 1974 memoir stories, "The Ottawa Valley," mentioned above, Munro writes of her mother as she closes the story, maintaining that "she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken" (246). This phrasing and the sentences that follow to close both the story and the book have become a coda in Munro studies, defining her relation with her remembered mother, a relation which has vexed Munro in her published stories from first to last (see "Dear Life"; Ross; Thacker,

⁸ Munro italicised the word "stories" in the book manuscript. See Knopf copy-edited book manuscript, MsC 323 1.1: x, Alice Munro fonds, Archives and Special Collections, University of Calgary.

“Finale”). Analogously, it seems that with the publication of “Changing Places” in 1997 Munro both continued her meditations on her ancestors and announced her movement toward *The View from Castle Rock*. Its account of the Laidlaws’ 1818 emigration to Upper Canada, elaborated and also fictionalised, became the basis of “No Advantages” and “The View from Castle Rock,” the first two pieces in the book. The story of her great-great grandparents, William and Mary Laidlaw, and their children became the focus, also elaborated and fictionalised, of “Illinois,” which then follows. “The Wilds of Morris Township,” the next story, takes up a 1907 memoir written by “Big Rob” Laidlaw, one of the sons of her great-great uncle Andrew and his wife Agnes, and describes the circumstances of his pioneering Huron County, Ontario in November of 1851 with his cousins John and Thomas, Munro’s great-great-grandfather (see Thacker, *Alice* 26-32). She then follows the circumstances of some of Big Rob’s children living in Huron and, thereby, gets to “Working for a Living,” connecting those children to her grandfather William Cole Laidlaw and to her grandmother Sarah Jane “Sadie” Code Laidlaw, and then to their only son, Robert Eric Laidlaw, her father. It also ends the first section of *Castle Rock*, the predominately memoir section, “No Advantages.”

John Updike maintained that Maxwell thought “reality was the best fiction” and in *Castle Rock* Munro can be seen taking the same path—quite literally. In the second section of the book, “Home,” Munro places six predominantly fictional stories, all but one previously published; as she had gathered her collections over the years, she had held them back: these are the “special set of stories” Munro details in the foreword. As she wrote there, “they were not memoirs but they were closer to my own life than the other stories I had written, even in the first person.” In these stories—the earliest first published in 1974, the latest in 2002—she continues, “I was doing something closer to what memoir does—exploring a life, my own life, but not in an austere or rigorously factual way” ([x]).

These stories may be variously characterised. The first, “Fathers” (2002), takes up the Second World War years, the time when eight-to-fourteen-year-old Alice Laidlaw was socialised; at its core is a comparison of two very different fathers. Neither looks at all like her own father, although the electrocution it features nearly happened to him in 1943. The second, “Lying under the Apple Tree” (2002), is a story of young love and was first published in the *New Yorker* as a memoir.⁹ The third, “Hired Girl” (1994), was revised and deepened for *Castle Rock*; it focuses on a summer job Munro had in 1948 working for a Toronto family at their cottage on Georgian Bay. The last two stories in the “Home” section, the memoirs “Home” and “What Do You Want to Know For” (1994), respectively feature Munro a forty-two year-old writer returned to Ontario after years living in British Columbia, and as that

⁹ It is worth noting that “Lying under the Apple Tree” went through production at the *New Yorker* as a memoir. Deborah Treisman, Munro’s editor, became sufficiently aware of its fictional elements that she requested—and wrote herself—a disclaimer that appeared at the “memoir’s” opening in the magazine (88). The disclaimer was omitted from the version in *Castle Rock*.

same writer long-lived in Huron County and now in her sixties, exploring her home place. The single story Munro wrote for *Castle Rock*, “The Ticket” (2006), is the exception that proves the rule.¹⁰ It returns to the circumstances surrounding twenty-year-old Alice Laidlaw’s marriage to James Munro in December 1951, an action which both took her away from home—especially from her increasingly infirm Mother suffering from Parkinson’s Disease—and also probably made her the writer she became. Munro knew this, and the structure to *Castle Rock* she created was clearly one of integrating—connecting—her own life and experiences to those of her ancestors, whom she has worked to discover, write about, and connect to as forming a complex textual continuity.

In early March of 2005 Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, Munro’s agent, submitted “The View from Castle Rock” to Deborah Treisman, fiction editor at the *New Yorker*. The manuscript was 140 double-spaced pages long; it contained almost all of what later appeared as the “No Advantages” first section of *Castle Rock* plus the epilogue, and while the editors at the magazine were mostly enthusiastic about what they had, they knew it would have to be cut. Passing on what she called “a very rough cut from Alice Munro’s 150-page combination of family history and fiction (the characters’ names are all true—the happenings on the boat trip imagined)” on to David Remnick, the magazine’s chief editor, Treisman also wrote that the manuscript “could be made to work, and it has some real Munrovian highlights, which cutting would only accentuate” (Treisman). “The View from Castle Rock”—about thirteen pages of printed text there—was published as fiction in the 23 August 2005 issue. It focuses on the circumstances of the Laidlaw family’s emigration to Canada in 1818, beginning with Andrew’s visit to Edinburgh as in the book, describing the voyage over, and ending with young James Laidlaw’s death “within a month of the family’s landing at Quebec” (77).

I have in my possession a copy of the manuscript of *The View from Castle Rock*—that is, the book manuscript—as it was in late May 2005. (Munro was good enough to let me read it since, just then, I was in the final phases of completing *Alice Munro: Writing Her Lives*, published that fall.) In it, there is not yet the published foreword, the two-section structure with an epilogue, nor has “What Do You Want to Know For?” (1994) been included. Its place in the manuscript is held by “Wenlock Edge,” a story destined to appear in the *New Yorker* in December 2005, one later omitted. As indicated above Munro drafted the foreword in June and over that summer sought advice from her editors Ann Close and Douglas Gibson and her former agent, Virginia Barber, as to whether or not “Wenlock Edge” should be included in

¹⁰ The epilogue, “Messenger,” which Munro initially called “Remnants,” was also first published in *Castle Rock*, as was much of “Part One: No Advantages.” But as the single unpublished fiction included in the “Home” section, “The Ticket” is indicative: Munro apparently decided that her marriage to James Munro had to be included along with these other stories “closer to [her] own life,” as she writes in the foreword ([x]).

the book.¹¹ Having not yet decided upon the two-part structure in the published *Castle Rock*, Munro alternates historical narratives with the more memoir-like fictions. Thus the manuscript opens with a piece called “The View from Castle Rock” (in the published version it is “No Advantages”) followed by “Fathers”; then “Men of Ettrick” (the published “The View from Castle Rock”) followed by “Lying under the Apple Tree”; then “Illinois” followed by “Hired Girl”; “The Wilds of Morris Township” followed by “Wenlock Edge”; “Working for a Living” followed by “The Ticket”; “Home” followed by “Remnants” (“Epilogue”: “The Messenger”) which ends the volume.

Munro obviously abandoned this arrangement, and it may well be that the substitution of “Wenlock Edge” with “What Do You Want to Know For?” occasioned the published sectional alignment of the two types of stories, but the existence of the interleaved manuscript does suggest in Munro what Updike characterised in Maxwell—that “reality is the best fiction.” For her it is and, as she has written her lives throughout her long and very distinguished career, it always has been. At the heart of “Wenlock Edge” is a reality—Munro’s recollections of her time at the University of Western Ontario, 1949-51—grafted onto what is for her a fiction, the imagined dinner with the young narrator in the nude. And in “What Do You Want to Know For?” there appears an assertion that might be taken as coda for both Maxwell and Munro: “It’s the fact you cherish” (*View* 322). Each writing their “stories at the heart of [their] lives,” each has made their best fiction from their realities—Maxwell in *Ancestors* and most especially in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. And so too Alice Munro, following his example but also her own deeply practiced and known aesthetic in *The View from Castle Rock*. Separately, though with Maxwell leading the way through the models of his *Ancestors* and *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, each fashioned narratives that should be seen, as Munro called it in 1980 as “a kind of family book,” certainly, but more than that, as narratives which capture “stories at the heart of our lives, stories that grow and change as we do and never go away.” Just as she wrote, “as truthful as our notion of the past can ever be.” William Maxwell and Alice Munro, “especially and forever.”

¹¹ Barber, Close, and Gibson were Munro’s “literary triumvirate,” as they coordinated her publication from magazines, most usually the *New Yorker*, through books—that is, with separate versions in the United States, Great Britain, and Canada—beginning with *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) / *The Beggar Maid* (1979). As such, each had a hand in shaping those collections in consultation with Munro. With “Wenlock Edge,” Barber and Close counseled against including it since, published with the ancestral and memoir stories in the volume, readers would legitimately think that the central dinner in it, in which the narrator dines in the nude with a clothed older man, had actually occurred when Munro was at the University of Western Ontario in London. As it happened, early in 2004 Munro ascribed the practice of such dinners to a friend of hers (Thacker Interview, 2004). Also, in August 2005 Munro wrote to Barber, speaking of “What Do You Want to Know For?,” “I think it could replace “Wenlock” (Letter to Virginia Barber). It did, and “Wenlock Edge” was included in her next book, *Too Much Happiness* (2009).

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