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Pastoral by André Alexis

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***Pastoral* by ANDRÉ ALEXIS**

Coach House Books, 2014 \$17.95

Reviewed by **ALEC FOLLETT**

Set just out of reach in small-town Southwestern Ontario, André Alexis's third novel is an insightful exploration of how love and faith are intertwined with place. The novel begins with Father Pennant, who has recently finished seminary school in the city and is ready to find "a way back to the feeling of closeness with God, a way back to the fount of his own spirituality." He quickly learns, however, that this journey will not be easy: miracles, the devil, and a pagan natural beauty vie for his attention. He also realizes that the people of Barrow, who are preparing for a summer festival, are mischievous albeit admirable. For example, Lowther Williams, the self-disciplined, cello-playing church caretaker, who is steeped in local knowledge, is attentive to his surroundings and approaches daily routines with a reverence that leads him towards a full life. The younger people of Barrow have their own concerns as well: Elizabeth Denny and Robbie Myers are engaged, but Robbie is convinced that he can love two women equally, and Jane Richardson, who is tired of rural life, is going to help him try. Alexis's thoughtful merging of marriage and religion with the problems and potential of place make this book a worthwhile endeavor for readers of Canadian environmental literature.

Alexis's concluding "Note on the Text" reveals the self-imposed formal constraints of his project as well as his personal investment in the novel's Southwestern Ontario setting and its appreciation of nature. He explains that the chapters coincide with the movements of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony*

(the *Pastoral Symphony*) and writes that "the *Pastoral Symphony* is also inextricably associated—in my mind—with Lambton County, where I grew up. This novel is, thus, a paean to the place where I first learned what Nature was to mean for my Canadian self." This telling note suggests that the pastoral tradition can be reinvigorated for contemporary environmental purposes and points to the connections that Alexis makes between art, nature, place, and identity.

The novel's pastoral influence allows Father Pennant to retreat to Barrow to learn how to appreciate nature and think more deeply about his religious practices. On first entering the town he finds that

"the dun hay that covered the fields like rotting mats, the crocuses, chicory and dandelions . . . brought relief and joy. These feelings in turn brought him a kind of grateful curiosity about the town itself and he tried to learn as much as he could about Barrow and the land around it."

Humanity and nature become equally important to Father Pennant, spurring the development of his naturalist sensibilities, and prompting religious questions, such as, "could one serve both God *and* the land?" While Father Pennant is listening to the land and gaining a deeper understanding of his spiritual beliefs and physical surroundings, Jane's Arcadia is elsewhere.

Jane "loathed Barrow and rural Ontario and anything that smacked of 'flora and fauna,'" and when her love life turns sour, she conflates her hate for Robbie with "her hatred for Barrow." Although Jane is a well-developed contemplative character, her trouble stems from an inability to find mystery in the mundane: Barrow's *genius*

loci. Having given up on Barrow, Jane leaves for Toronto but learns that “there is not world enough to escape from home.” Jane’s frustration with the flora, fauna, and people of her hometown emphasizes the pain associated with place, but also how an appreciation of home might lead to a little more pleasure and a little less pain.

While the novel offers contemplative ruminations about place, its assessment of Southern Ontario’s violent environmental history and current environmental exploitation is less poignant. For example, Elizabeth’s family owns a sod farm, but the novel fails to account for the farm’s negative environmental impact. Likewise, the colonial history that altered the land and is now responsible for the “crocuses, chicory and dandelions” that Father Pennant finds so alluring is only addressed briefly. The novel looks to love and religion as a means of combating a history in which the clergy “had prepared the way for a civilization that had, over the years, turned away from earth, land and

ground.” Despite this promising gesture, I am left wondering if the pastoral tradition is capable of adequately addressing the complexity of nature and the urgency of contemporary environmental issues.

Nevertheless, the novel is a welcomed and expertly-crafted artistic contribution that highlights the value of existing artistic and social traditions to Canadian environments and their human inhabitants. I wish that the story was longer. I want to walk even slower with Father Pennant and Lowther as they move through the fields. The smell of earth after rain wafts off the page, but it is carried away too soon. This is only forgivable because the novel stays true to the pastoral: the journey is pleasant, it might even be instructive, and like the summer storm Alexis captures so well, it is over nearly as soon as it begins.

ALEC FOLLETT is a doctoral student at the University of Guelph who studies contemporary Ontario literature.