# Ernest Buckler

Ernest Buckler (1908-1984) was a walking paradox. Born in the bookless society of poor, rural Nova Scotia, he earned a B.A. in mathematics and philosophy at Dalhousie University and an M.A. in philosophy at the University of Toronto, alongside Hugh MacLennan and Northrop Frye respectively, before going back to the Annapolis Valley to farm by day and write by night. He is best known for his pastoral first novel, *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), which garnered as high critical acclaim in the US and Canada as the novels published concurrently by established American writers, notably John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and Ernest Hemingway’s comeback *The Old Man and the Sea.*The simultaneous publications illustrate the coexistence of early and late modernisms and their correlation to geopolitical space, notably centre and margin.Later hailed as a “pioneer in Canadian writing” by Margaret Laurence and a “pathbreaker for the modern Canadian novel” by Margaret Atwood, Buckler nonetheless refracts the interrogations of modernity beyond national borders and connects with writers and thinkers ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson to James Joyce, Marcel Proust (see Purdham),and Albert Camus.

Buckler’s texts adhere to a number of staple modernist tenets. One finds a fascination with -- yet distrust of – an increasingly technologized, knowledge-based society also found in such works as John Dos Passos’snovel, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and Charlie Chaplin’s film, *Modern Times* (1936)***.*** One also finds a passion for the formal mechanisms of language and an interest in the relations of the perceiving subject with a reality which is arguably only a mental, culturally conditioned construction, accompanied by an Idealist preoccupation with *eidos* (the essence or form behind all things) and the *noumenon* or Unity beyond the senses. Buckler inherited these from Immanuel Kant’s and then Arthur Schopenhauer’s and Emerson’s Neoplatonic investigations, and from the English Romantic poets’ organicist belief in a unity in diversity. Buckler’s preoccupation with simulacra connects with modernity’s concerns regarding authenticity (see Ross), voiced by cultural figures from Marshall McLuhan to Jean Baudrillard. Like Gabrielle Roy, Sinclair Ross**,** and W.O. Mitchell, Buckler wrote about the land in a sensual, Romantic manner when much Canadian fiction chose to use urban settings. Equating characters with the items in their kitchens as astutely as Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, he celebrated the home and family when male writers rarely concerned themselves with the domestic sphere. *The Mountain and the Valley* melds individual and regional identity construction and presents the upheaval of modernity’s “rural-urban deconstruction” (see Willmott), which T.S. Eliot and Dos Passos had addressed from the opposite vantage point of the metropolis. The novel’s fraught mythopoeic realism adheres to certain conventional narrative elements of the realist tradition, yet volatizes other features. The flashbacks and flash forwards intersect fluidly in a perpetual motion rooted in the motivic variations with which modernists fabricate connections in their narrative design.

Buckler published essays, reviews, and newspaper columns on social, political, and economic as well as literary issues from the 1930s on. He also wrote short stories that began appearing from 1940 in **l**iterary magazines such as *Esquire* and in the better popular magazinessuch as *Maclean’s*. Fourteen of these stories were collected by Robert Chambers under the title *The* *Rebellion of Young David* (1975, out of print). *Thanks for Listening: Stories and Short Fictions by Ernest Buckler* (2004) gathers over thirty stories selected and edited by Marta Dvorak, including previously unpublished stories and uncollected works in their fuller, original versions. Some of his stories were adapted for the Halifax Theatre and broadcast live on the CBC, but he also wrote radio and television dramas specifically for the new mass media, especially for CBC Halifax. Buckler wrote a second novel, *The Cruelest Month* (1963), and a fictional memoir, *Ox Bells and Fireflies* (1968), a groundbreaking, genre-bending prose poem. He subsequently produced a book of prose poems and photographs, *Nova Scotia: Window on the Sea* (1973), in collaboration with the photographer Hans Weber, as well as a collection of satirical prose and verse, *Whirligig* (1977), which won the Stephen Leacock Award for Humour. Its autobiographical essay “Muse in Overalls” laments the “clash between a squash and a sonnet” that is the daily fate of the writer-farmer unable to hire his farm-work done because “the average [Canadian] writer’s income is roughly that of a Burmese coolie” (86).

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Visual material for the entry:

1. Author photo (separate file)

2. 1 scanned photo from *Nova Scotia,* *Window on the Sea* (separate file)