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Published by Ronald Caplan on 1993/6/1

The Family Tree • a story from Beatrice MacNeil's Book The Moonlight Skater

The Family Tree • J'''''' i THERE COMES A TIME when the bones of our an? cestors rattle in their dust and awaken in us the desire to walk back in time, and shake from the ghosts of our his? tory whatever it is we seek to uproot, to plant the family tree in the soil of our desire. In the early fifties, during a religious class, this opportu? nity came to Grade Six. Sister St. Paul and the class were hallway through Eden, when she announced that we each should start a family tree and trace our ancestors back as far as we could go. She turned it into a contest and offered a prize for the best researched tree. I sat at the front of the class. Being of French and Scot? tish descent, I immediately felt the tree shaking. I left Eden and headed for Culloden. Surely one of my an? cestors had shouted the cry, "Sound the pibroch loud and clear!" There was even a chance Bonnie Prince Charles was walking beside him when he gave the command. From Scotland I headed for France. I had visions of BCing Louie and some of my relatives landing in Louis? bourg. I imagined the fog clinging to their backs and the sea shivering on the lonely shore, in a lonely, somber welcome. After school I went to visit my Scottish great- grandmother, Hattie. At ninety-five she lived under a quilt free of ambition and anxiety. "What tree, what prince?" shouted my great- grandmother. "The most interesting member of our family was a Spanish sea captain who landed in Scotland one day, married my grandmother and brought her to Canada. "Do you think we got this dark from playing the bag? pipes under the sun?" I longed to find a laird or maybe a bard amongst the Macs. Was it possible some broken-hearted bard of my blood had left his poetry floating through the glens? "I'm telling you they left nothing behind" • my great- grandmother shouting from under her quilt. "When a person runs for his life he takes only his emotions with him. They chased us out of Scotland. Now put that on your tree." There was a cousin she did remember that fought in the British army; he took part in the siege of Louisbourg and in the taking of Quebec in the mid-seventeen-hundreds. But she believed the French got him in the end. Cover Photograph: Allan and Bertha MacDougall Born in Glace Bay, Cape Breton, Beatrice MacNeil was raised in tl village of L'Ardoise, and now makes her home with her husband, Michael B. MacDonald, at East Bay. From the Highlands of Scotland I gathered for my tree blacksmiths, watchmakers, cobblers and a relative who composed laments for wakes. My tree was starting to look good. On the top branch I would hang my Great-Uncle Rod- die, the boxer, who held the middle-weight champion? ship of Canada in the 'twenties. My French ancestors sprang from their roots. Dead or alive, the soul of sentiment lived on in them. There was an uncle of Grandmere's, named Rheal, who could tell what direction your mind was taking just by looking at you. He was the seventh son of a seventh son and always in demand. There was another uncle, five or six greats back, who feared no man in or out of his sight. He was thrown out of Midnight Mass one year for shouting at the choir, "Oh, come all ye faithfijl but please don't sing!" There were midwives and fortunetellers,



fishermen and lumberjacks, farmers and fur traders. There were those "The Family Tree" Continues on Page 74