

Landon

Mackenzie

"Landmarks" Landon Mackenzie

by Sarah Hampson, article in *Elm Street*,
April 1998

I first met painter Landon Mackenzie in the fall of 1985, in her Toronto studio, a few months before she moved to Vancouver to teach at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. At 30, she looked fresh as a country girl. In one corner of her large studio, a newborn (her second child) was asleep. In 1981, Mackenzie had made a stunning debut by winning the top prize in the prestigious Quebec Biennale of Painting for a series on the Canadian North entitled *Lost river* - dark, moody landscapes inhabited by imaginary wolf-caribou creatures. The Art Gallery of Ontario had recently bought a second one of her paintings. Perched on a stool, Mackenzie talked animatedly about the paintings that she had completed while pregnant "gestational" painting she called some of them because they had big, womb-like shapes in them. She laughed a lot, and when she spoke she moved her hands in the air. I am three years younger than Mackenzie, and I had just had my first child when we met. I was impressed that motherhood seemed to invigorate rather than tire her - it had awakened powerful emotions that she could pour into her art, "Landon is working within the great tradition of landscape painting," says Matthew Teitelbaum, chief curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, "but she invests it with personal narrative which makes it distinctive." She is clearly fascinated by the physical beauty of the land, the colours and the terrain. But there is much more: The *Lost River* series shows her deep concern for the disturbance of the land's natural ecology, for the real and troubling story beneath the much-mythologized image of the North. I lost track of Mackenzie until early 1996, when I came across a review of her most recent series, the Saskatchewan paintings (1993-1997). When I saw four of the paintings last fall in an exhibition held at the Art Gallery of York University in Toronto, I was mesmerized by their opulence. Nearly two by three metres, they are rich, tactile, complex, with fragments of painted text, some of it raised, some of it hinted at beneath layers of paint; with sections of maps, cartographic icons, grids, of bold colour and dark ellipses she calls "black holes." Mackenzie still lives in Vancouver, but every so often she leaves her three children - Georgia, 8, Jeffryn, 12, and Cluny, 15 - and their father to lose herself in the wide open prairie landscape. What emotions inform her work now, I wondered? Why Saskatchewan? She is also writing poetry now to accompany her art, and she reads at showings of the Saskatchewan paintings. I was curious to know how she had changed, how she was coping with the balancing act of motherhood. Since we'd met, I too had become a mother of three. I had read that she called herself *flaneuse*, and an observer, who travels on the back roads of Saskatchewan. I called her to see if I could join her on such a trip.

Day 1

It's a blazing mid-August day: noon when we meet in the Regina Airport. Dressed like a teenager in a shop: skirt, T-shirt, denim jacket and sandals. She is 43 now, but hardly changed. She marches through the arrivals gate, bustles through the crowd and hugs me, we walk out to the parking lot to my rented red Lumina. The sun boils overhead, and there's little breeze, "I'm so hot." Mackenzie sighs, "I think I have to change." She takes some clothes from her bag and leaps into the back seat, emerging in orange and red cotton suppress. "My party dress," she announces with a wide smile.

A car is grown for an interview: The subject can't escape. The writer can ask questions in no particular order, even repeat herself. Mackenzie is an easy subject, though. Casual and relaxed. "I ate too much this summer," she announces as she whips down the short side zipper of her dress. Driving west on the Trans-Canada Highway, she talks about her life, her art, her background. She is a sixth-generation Canadian. Michael Mackenzie, her father, is an accountant, a former partner with Clarkson Gordon in Toronto - he is now an executive-in-residence at York University's business school. Her aunt and namesake Landon (Mackenzie) Pearson is a member of the Senate and well known social activist, married to Geoff Pearson, son of Lester B. Pearson.

Mackenzie offers this as information, not to impress. In fact, she appears mildly amused, and goes on, candidly, to explain how her parents' separation when she was 11 caused her much distress. She tells me that the "black holes" which punctuate the rich fibrous tapestry of the Saskatchewan paintings might be her painful feelings of abandonment, or, as Mackenzie says, "scary black ice which you think you can cross but run the risk of falling through."

The experiences of her childhood continue to play themselves out in her art and poetry Mackenzie and her three younger siblings remained with their mother after their parents separation- and subsequent divorce - in a Rosedale home. The family had been taking in boarders to help with expenses, and her mother, much to her chagrin "she couldn't cope with them," says Landon - had to keep doing so. Her parents were close to many people in Toronto's arts scene. It was the early Sixties. Members of the Painters Eleven, an influential group led by the flamboyant artist Harold Town, were frequent visitors to the house. When Mackenzie decided at 16 to leave Jarvis Collegiate before completing high school to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, her mother sent her to Town so he could review her portfolio. He gave her a positive review She studied painstaking there and later at Concordia University in Montreal, where she completed a master's in fine art working with artists Guido Molinari and Irene Whittome. Town kept an interest in her career, playfully pressing Molinari to convert her to painting because he considered painstaking to be more of a complementary art form. Mackenzie lovingly describes the people who have influenced her. There were the artists in her family: her spirited grandmother, Alice Sawtell MacKenzie, a painter, designer and watercolourist; an uncle, Hugh Mackenzie, a realist painter whose dishevelled appearance at family gatherings impressed young Mackenzie, it showed that artists were somehow exempt from the social restraints posed on others; her great-uncle, George Douglas, an early Canadian frontiersman who went on mining expeditions in the Northwest Territories. Imagine: a Victorian gentleman with a box camera. He paddled up the Coppermine River in a Peterborough canoe - his father had patented the collapsible canoe. Mackenzie remembers as a child visiting George in his Wakefield, Ont., home. He had long white hair and used an ear horn to hear the questions the children would ask.

Women can move quickly to confessional friendships. The highway stretches far and flat and straight ahead of us. We are 40 kilometers or so west of Regina. The sun is sinking in a pink sky. Our conversation has dipped into and out of past and present. In between Mackenzie's stories, I have told her about myself. We have peeled our personalities like oranges. We have talked about our children, about the joy they bring and the sacrifices they require; about our understanding partnered about our work. We have touched on juicy stuff-former lovers, the difficulty of fidelity, a woman's struggles to satisfy her need for independence and "creative space" in the face of demands as a mother and wife. We are speaking to each other, but sometimes, with the windows rolled down, that vast, silent landscape all around, it feels as though we're telling secrets to the wind.

"I started coming to Saskatchewan in the early Nineties to - well, drop out of my life," Mackenzie says, "to find my opposite of suffocating in responsibility and time schedules." She was then teaching full time (and now part time) and her children were younger. "It's affordable here, and I'd fit in a few days on the way to and from lectures and shows in other provinces." The sunset stretches itself out across endless fields, and in such a sky, birds look pink as though transparent. "I also felt," she adds, "that here I was travelling over another planet." After completing three of the Saskatchewan paintings (each one took almost a year to do because she worked a little bit at a time, adding layer upon layer of colour and images), she applied for and received a Canada Council grant in 1994. After having taken a sabbatical from the school in 1993, this grant allowed her to work half-time the next couple of years.

"And your partner?" I ask.

"Donald and I have always had this I thing that we need to support whatever the other person needs to do. Still, he does sometimes get upset." She says it softly, wrinkling her nose a bit, and I sense that her relationship with her husband is loving - unconventional. Mackenzie has been with her partner, Donald Macpherson, for 25 years. He was a fiddler when they met in Halifax. The former director of the Carnegie Center, a social agency in Vancouver, he is now a social planner.

"Late '30s, early '40s. It's a weird time," I offer.

"I heard some psychologist say it was the same as being a teenagery," Mackenzie says. "The rebellion thing." We laugh, then fall silent for a moment. Dark silhouettes of grain elevators stand out against the sky.

"See the land," she says suddenly. "That's how other artists have painted it. As a big, open space. I'm more interested in the ghostly bits.

"Ghostly bits?"

"Stories of people, of women pioneers and men, of natives, the Metis - what lies hidden beneath documented history." As part of her research on the Saskatchewan series, Mackenzie dug into the provincial archives to read accounts from early settlers and studied faded photographs, charts of old trails, and the Dominion Land Survey, the document of colonial settlement which divided up the province, the only territory in Canada with arbitrary, manmade borders, into neat little parcels of land.

The text in Mackenzie's paintings meshes archival material with entries from her journal, lines of her poetry and lyrics from country music of which she is a big fan. (For much of our road trip, listen to country music.)

Suddenly a red flashing light appears behind us. Mackenzie quickly zips up her dress. "shit," she says, giggling. She pulls over to the side of the road. The speed limit is 100 km/h. Only problem is, we were going 120.

A policewoman appears by the driver's side. Mackenzie rolls down her window smiling girlishly. She explains we're from out of town and that, jeez, are we ever sorry, we were talking and didn't notice our speed. The officer isn't amused. Mackenzie is handed a \$100 ticket. We move back onto the highway. The zipper goes down again, and we slide slowly into Swift Current.

Day 2

The straight road we're on runs like sticky tape across an enormous parcel of swaying wheat fields. We are north of Swift Current, on our way to Sceptre, which lies at the northern edge of the sparsely populated Sand Hills. Many of the small communities have local museums, where artifacts are displayed for anyone who cares to stop by.

Mackenzie wants to visit Sceptre's Great Sand Hills museum. When we arrive at the small one-storey building, she equips herself with notebook and camera. We enter the main room, which is lined with old maps and charts, and along one wall, a glass cabinet holds sports trophies and black-and-white pictures of old hockey teams going back about 30 years. Mackenzie takes pictures of maps showing the boundaries of the colonial territories, of wind currents and studies of the shifting sand dunes. There is a chart showing Palliser's Triangle, a triangular area along the American border documenting the true prairies, charted as inhabitable in about 1859 by Captain John Palliser, who was one of the first explorers to document areas in what is now known as Western Canada.

She looks closely at this and photographs it. She tells me that she's always fascinated by the little differences in maps she finds in the provincial archives local museums. (One of the paintings in the Saskatchewan series is called "Palliser's Triangle, 1997" The "black hole" that appears in the middle is a series of overlapping geometric shapes, each one different and hand-drawn)

Later, I find Mackenzie in a room that is filled with artifacts from a turn-of-the-century barn. She is hunched down, reading a poster fixed to the wall. Dated 1919, it announces an auction of farm equipment.

"Look at the names of the equipment" Mackenzie says excitedly. She reads them out, in a whisper. "One jumper sleigh. One cockshut gang plow one moline sulky plow" I bend down to have a better look. She is writing the names in her notebook, quickly, like a reporter, as though the past before her might grow silent at any moment.

Day 3

We are climbing up to the top of a sand dune at 8 o'clock in the morning. There is only one poorly marked road that leads into the area. Environmentalists don't want to encourage visitors, and the locals - well, they have their own reasons for avoiding the place. "Some guys went in there in a pickup truck" warned Bonnie, the manager of the Leader Inn, yesterday afternoon over beer stand they never came out."

But we would not be deterred. We owed it to our pride, if nothing else. And the view is spectacular. "It's so primeval," Mackenzie breathes, standing at the top of the dune looking out across the barren landscape. There is no sign of civilization. We stand side by side for a moment, looking to the west, saying nothing. Again last night in the hotel room we talked about the secrets women keep from each other. Details about abortions. The pain of childbirth that is never fully disclosed. Our mothers.

Mackenzie is interested in the feminist movement, but mostly as an observer. She agrees with its principles and objectives, but has found that over time, the rhetoric - as it pertains to the practice of painting - is quite annoying. She was involved in discussions sponsored by the Vancouver Art Gallery with feminist art scholar Griselda Pollack, whose theories ask whether women painters should even try to promote a feminist agenda in a patriarchal art world whose historic paradigm seems to dismiss them automatically as second-rate. "I came away from those talks thinking, Whose time is it to speak?" Mackenzie says. "Who had the right to speak about whom? "Who could speak for me?" The text in her paintings, she explained, is many things: unheard voices of the past, inner monologue, secrets that can't be spoken, the power that language has to define us.

"Shall we?" Mackenzie says to me as we trudge through the powdery sand. She tugs at her shirt.

"Why not."

Now we're marching across the top of the sand dune in our bras. On our last night, we stay in a dingy motel, on Route 13, just outside Shaunovon, which is about a half-hour east of Eastend, home of Tyrannosaurus rex. Guys from oil and gas survey teams are in every other room. We can hear beery laughs, shouts, loud TV's.

Mackenzie is stretched lengthwise across her bed, wearing a prim white nightie. Propped up on one elbow, she works on small abstract watercolor paintings. A water glass balances on the bed. She is telling me about the many rabbits in her large Saskatchewan painting "If I Loved A Cowboy../Leaving Her Fingerprints A11 Over Everything She Does (1994)." In that painting, rabbits appear around the edges of the three dark ellipses. "Rabbits take you down to the underworld," she says, touching her brush to the water in the wobbly glass and then onto a palette of dried colours. She goes on: "Or think of the rabbit in Alice in Wonderland... that rabbit went through a hole, and the question is which reality is reality...." She is speaking in a soft, dreamy voice. "There are lots of bunnies on the prairie of course..." - and she cranes her head the other way --and there's Carrot River that runs south of the main branch of the Saskatchewan river..." She dabs the brush in water. "In Joseph Beuys' work (a German artist: influential in the Seventies and Eighties- the hare is a symbol of the quick passage of time and the thighs of life,..."

I am lying on the other bed, but now I sit up and begin to make notes, "And that's just the beginning." she says, "I am not interested if a painting works on only one level." I realize now that the three days with her have, unexpectedly, put me at a disadvantage rather than an advantage in writing about her. In a one-hour interview, she would have mentioned a few influences - the archival material, say, or her interest in the social and historic texture of a landscape - but over the course of our trip, she has explained so much: too much, weirdly, to make sense of her paintings are repositories offer feelings and thoughts, which she has gathered and layered into her work over long periods of time. In them, she has mapped her personal mindscapes: Ideas about love and childhood, marriage, separation and secrets reside in these works, landscapes that have been formed, eroded and heaved up in places by powerful forces.

Have I learned something from her? Yes. The shifts in emotion we feel throughout our lives should be embraced, not feared. I look at her, with her blond head bent over her watercolour. It's such a fine scene. The painter in her nightie, the hideous yellow brick walls, the brown carpet with an ugly pattern of green swirls, the braying of the guys who surround us, Mackenzie is oblivious, though. She doesn't even notice I'm watching her.

Past yellow fields strewn with bales of hay, rolled up like giant sleeping bags. We are travelling the back roads. We stop at an abandoned farmhouse. The door hangs open. The small living room is littered with mouldy newspapers, an old shoe, an iron kettle. We carefully ascend the creaking staircase, step gingerly on weakened floorboards down the narrow hall and enter a bedroom at the back, I touch the yellowed wallpaper, and the layer beneath that, and the layer beneath that. What are we looking for? Maybe just the feel of a life and of abandonment. We find school notebooks, textbooks and magazines from the late Thirties. In neat and graceful handwriting, someone has transcribed poems and lists of local flowers and herbs. Mackenzie has done this before in other old houses, and I can see why. It's as though we had passed through an invisible wall into the past,

We zip north on Route 2. I am driving now, I lean back in my seat, holding the rep of the steering wheel with one hand, we pass what's known as Old Wives Lake, which dried out years ago, I steal a glance at Mackenzie. She is looking out the window at the open land, stilled by its beauty. Landscape provokes and subdues its observers. Thoughts play inside the head. Passages of inner monologue, fragments of memory, rise and fall, leap forward

and then hide - like the text on her paintings. I am thinking about this when, suddenly, we emerge from the mystical sub-life onto the hard, wide pavement of the Trans-Canada, hurtling toward the Regina Airport, where a tidily uniformed Avis lady will ask us how far we have traveled.