

## A Note on the Publishing History of Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*

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Laidlaw and Laidlaw (until 1938 Laidlaw and Butchart), once of 32 Alfred Place, London, WC 1, disappeared shortly after publishing Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*. It is not clear whether they marched off to war, were bombed, or simply folded. The following Laidlaw and Laidlaw publications are listed in their edition of *Tay John*: Donald Armour's *Swept and Garnished* (1938), Robert MacLaughlin's *The Axe Fell: The Story of the Cenci* (1938), Charles Bromfield's *To Walk Alone* (1939), Kenneth Gee's *The Dead Can't Hurt You* (1938), Edna O'Brien's *So I Went to Prison* (1938), Margaret Thomsen Raymond's *Sylvia, Inc.* (1938), Boyne Grainger's *The Jester's Reign* (1938), and Ezra Pound's *Gaudier-Brzeska* [1939].

Whatever the fate of Laidlaw and Laidlaw, their 1939 edition of *Tay John* provided the plates for Clarkson N. Potter's 1960 edition, and the Potter edition provided the plates for McClelland and Stewart's 1974 and 1989 reprints. A careful look at the Potter edition reveals darker type where revisions were made within the lines, either by an editor or, as seems most likely, by O'Hagan himself.<sup>1</sup> To Laidlaw and Laidlaw's credit, none of the revisions are obviously of misprints. Since publishers prefer to avoid the expense of such painstaking typesetting work for the sake of almost imperceptible changes in effect, it seems almost certain that O'Hagan was the source of the revisions. The fact that Clarkson N. Potter was O'Hagan's agent and friend (at least until problems with the Potter contract became clear) may explain why O'Hagan was allowed to do so much tinkering.

All of these changes are listed at the end of this article. Some seem to have been made simply to Americanize the text; for example, a reference to Charles's Wain has been changed to The Big Dipper (220; page references are the same in all published versions of the text), and

"back-cloth" has become "back-drop" (85). Other alterations seem to have been made in order to render details more concrete; so for example, the Laidlaw edition's "some horses," has been changed to "four horses" in the Potter edition (15; and see 14, 22). Twice in the 1939 version, horses wander off in search of "feeding"; this has been changed to "feed" in the 1960 edition (13, 119). One change seems to have required some knowledge, although not necessarily on O'Hagan's part: the "carrots" the Shuswap bake in the 1939 edition are "parsnips" in that of 1960 (22). A change that might have been made by an editor interested in simplifying the text, or perhaps by the author, occur in a description of Tay John's face: "It was in his face, too, long and keen as though shaped by the wind, and beardless as a boy's — those fellows ('*huch*' they are called) — seldom if ever have a beard" (83). The 1960 edition removes the parenthetical comment and what follows and replaces it with: "those fellows — I could see he was of mixed blood — are often lightly bearded" (83).

Several changes, however, seem to be of the sort that only an author would care or dare to make. For example, the first line of the novel changes from "The time of this *at* its beginning, in men's time" (1939) to "The time of this *in* its beginning, in men's time" (1960). The change moves the reader from the linear narrative of realism to the multilevel narrative of myth, where time is no longer a line, but an abyss. Echoed is the beginning of another work: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1.1). In John is also an allusion to what will become one of the controlling symbolic oppositions of the novel: "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1.5). In the first chapter of his gospel, John talks of a man who comes ahead, who is not the Messiah, who describes himself as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (1.23). *Tay John* contains the stories of the coming of several men to the Shuswap people and their land, such as Red Rorty, Father Rorty, Alf Dobble, and Tay John himself. All the stories of these men echo or parody the story of a leader sent by God, although none finally fulfills the promise. Jackie Denham, like John, has a gospel, a tall tale that he tells in the wilderness.

Another change that seems likely to have been authorial has been made to Tay John's account of his "spirit quest," during which, he reports, an old bear had slept near him, "for in the morning he left his shape *and shreds of fur* behind him" (49; emphasis added to show

alterations to manuscript). The added image ties in with O'Hagan's frequent allusions to hair: Tay John's remarkable head of gold, the hair of mountain goats or horses, or the fleece of sheep caught on trees — a trace of passage. Yet another example may be found where words have been added to the end of a sentence: ". . . it was a strong belief and gave its name to their district *and, in English, to the pass to the east*" (22; emphasis added to indicate added words). This change fits with the actual toponymy of the Yellowhead region. O'Hagan's detailed knowledge of the mountain terrain, and the importance he placed on getting it right, is again reflected in a revision of the location of Grande Cache (95). There are other minor revisions that seem likely to be authorial: Red Rorty does not kneel before "the" mountain in the 1960 edition, but before "a" mountain (23), and the rhythm has been improved in the sentence "Without a name no man is an individual, no individual a man" by the addition of the word "wholly": the 1960 edition reads, "no individual *wholly* a man" (87). The deletion of one letter from another passage completely alters its meaning. In the 1939 edition, "Kwakala, a man great in his magic, who cursed with his songs and his beaver-tooth rattle," "cures" with these things in the 1960 edition (25). This change creates an image that better fits the man's character.

Further, the second edition omits an introductory quotation, which apparently came from a San Francisco newspaper, and adds Harvey Fergusson's introduction (included in the 1974 McClelland and Stewart reprint, but dropped in the 1989 one). Although O'Hagan has maintained in profiles and interviews that he had never heard of a man cutting off his own hand (Roberts 45–46; see also Keith Maillard's interview with O'Hagan in this volume), the first edition contains, on the page facing the opening lines of chapter 7, the following extract, which may have inspired a central incident in the novel:

PRISONER USES AXE  
TO CHOP OFF  
HIS HAND

San Francisco, July 30

From Alcatraz Island came a story that one of the convicts in the prison had deliberately chopped off his own hand with an axe. The prisoner was named only as "Percival."

Secretly obtaining an axe, he filed the edge to razor-sharpness.

Then, a report says, he held the axe in his right hand and with a single stroke chopped off the left.

He is said to have handed the axe to another prisoner with the plea: "Cut off my right hand."

The second convict called guards.

James Johnston, warden of the federal institution, would neither deny nor confirm the story.

Fergusson's introduction is one of the main sources of the myth of Howard O'Hagan as uncomplicated mountain man, a myth that persists into contemporary criticism. Fergusson's name, either from his novels or from his Hollywood screenplays, was familiar to American readers,<sup>2</sup> but would have done nothing to promote *Tay John* in Great Britain.

O'Hagan spent the last years of his life trying to regain the copyright to his most famous novel.<sup>3</sup> The contract he had with Clarkson Potter lacked the customary reversion clause, that is, the clause that stipulates that if a work is out of print for a designated length of time, normally a year or less, the copyright reverts to the author. Clarkson Potter published 4,000 copies in 1960, at \$4.50 a copy. By 1965, the book was out of print, whether through sales or through remaindering is not clear. In 1974, McClelland and Stewart acquired Canadian paperback rights. For these they paid Clarkson Potter. O'Hagan said he received no royalties in his lifetime from these Canadian sales, although his contract with Clarkson Potter did oblige the publisher to pay them. Possibly, during the time to which O'Hagan refers, the owed royalties had still failed to offset an advance Potter paid to O'Hagan for the 1960 edition. Like other Canadian writers, such as Hugh MacLennan, O'Hagan found that his sales in Canada increased his fame far more than his bank balance.

♦ ♦ ♦

What follows is a list of changes to the 1939 edition. When a change was made, the whole line was generally replaced. In the list, I reproduce the entire line from the 1939 edition only. Where it seems helpful, the changed word or words have been italicized in the line quoted from the 1939 edition. Although the difference in the darkness of type cannot be seen very clearly in the McClelland and Stewart reprints, the lines in

them are identical to those in the 1960 edition, and those who do not have access to the first and second editions, which are fairly scarce, can use the reprints to set the text below in context.

# PAGE/LINE

11/1	1939	The time of this <i>at</i> its beginning, in men's time
	1960	in
13/7	1939	there was game and fish, <i>feeding</i> for their horses, and
	1960	feed
14/17	1939	edge of the clearing, <i>half a mile</i> from his door, was
	1960	ninety yards
15/6	1939	Athabaska Valley with <i>some horses</i> and the money he
	1960	four horses
16/1	1939	Christian soldiers," and " <i>Brighten the corner where</i>
1/2		<i>you are.</i> "
	1960	"Bright With All His Crowns"
22/6	1939	district.
	1960	district and, in English, to the pass to the east.
22/19	1939	and <i>carrots</i> , which they baked in an oven under the
	1960	parsnips
22/25	1939	Red Rorty walked for <i>many</i> days to come to them,
	1960	three
22/27	1939	longer steady and he found game hard to <i>seek</i> with his
	1960	hit
23/1	1939	grew along the trail. Sometimes he knelt before <i>the</i>
	1960	a
25/15	1939	Kwakala, a man great in his magic, who <i>cursed</i> with
	1960	cured
47/22	1939	face grown lean and hard with his journey gleamed
	1960	[comma added after "journey"] ,

- 49/23 1939 watch me, for in the morning he left his shape behind  
/24 him."  
1960 he left his shape and  
shreds of fur behind him."
- 80/17 1939 he would have surprised *a creator* at his work — for a  
1960 the Creator
- 83/17 1939 ties that *all* men search for. It was in his face, too, long  
1960 ["all" has been deleted]
- 83/19 1939 as a boy's — those fellows ('*huch*' they are called) —  
/20 seldom if ever have a beard. I felt I was an intruder,  
1960 — those fellows — I could see he was of mixed  
blood — are often lightly bearded.
- 85/3 1939 my benefit, with the forest and mountains for back-  
/4 cloth  
1960 drop
- 87/4 1939 name no man is an individual, no individual a man.  
1960 no individual wholly a man.
- 92/15 1939 light, making the silence about me something that I  
/16 could see — and hear.  
1960 making the silence about me visible. ["something  
I could see — and hear" has been deleted]
- 95/8 1939 of dark-skinned hill people, descendents of Crees of  
1960 and of
- 95/11 1939 at Grande Cache, more than a hundred miles *north* of  
1960 west on
- 96/8 1939 sides the grass was *for ever* green, the trees eternally in  
1960 forever
- 119/2 1939 legs, will wander far off the trail in search of *feeding* —  
1960 feed
- 119/9 1939 but Tay John did not return until summer *passed* and  
1960 had passed
- 213/17 1939 behind *us*? I was on my knees so I could not see  
1960 you?

- 214/27 1939 candle, moving great upon the wall above me, the  
1960 candle, moving great upon the wall. Above me, the
- 220/11 1939 Stars shone for a time. *Charles' Wain* wheeled  
1960 The Big Dipper
- 236/26 1939 on a hillside, tail sucked between his legs — darkness  
/27 made visible.  
1960 ["darkness made visible" has been deleted, and a full  
stop added after "legs"]
- 245/9 1939 saddles, had gone *on in* the freight the day before.  
1960 in on

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I thank Chris Petter for pointing out the darker type to me, and for explaining what it meant.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gish's biography of Harvey Fergusson, although it contains only a few passing references to O'Hagan, does cast some light on the California writing milieu they shared.

<sup>3</sup> I thank Karl Siegler of Talonbooks for telling me what he knew of O'Hagan's attempt to recover his copyright.

## WORKS CITED

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