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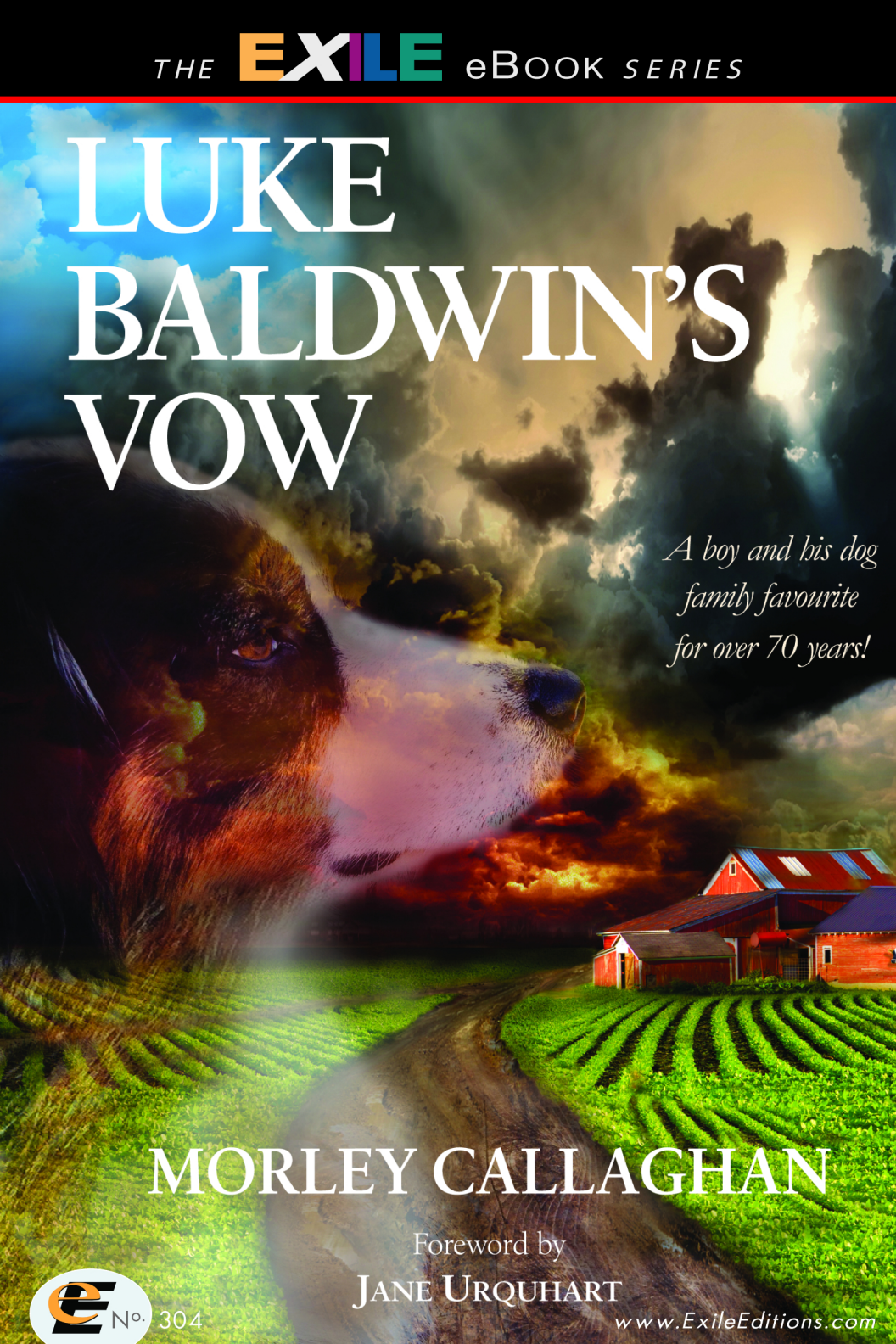

MORLEY CALLAGHAN

Foreword by

JANE URQUHART

No. 304

www.ExileEditions.com

The
Vow

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THE EXILE CLASSICS SERIES, NUMBER TWENTY-EIGHT

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EXILE editions

Publishers of Singular
Fiction, Poetry, Nonfiction, Drama, Translations and Graphic Books

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Callaghan, Morley, 1903-1990, author
Luke Baldwin's vow / Morley Callaghan ; introduction by Jane Urquhart.

(Exile classics series ; number 28)

ISBN 978-1-55096-604-6

.-- I. Urquhart, Jane, 1949-, writer of introduction II. Title.
III. Series: Exile classics ; no. 28

PS8505.A43L8 2016 jC813'.52 C2016-904912-4
C2016-904913-2

eBooks
ISBN 978-1-55096-606-0 (epub)
ISBN 978-1-55096-608-4 (mobi)
ISBN 978-1-55096-610-7 (pdf)

Published by Exile Editions Ltd ~ www.ExileEditions.com
144483 Southgate Road 14 – GD, Holstein, Ontario, N0G 2A0
PDF, ePUB and MOBI versions by Melissa Campos Mendivil

We gratefully acknowledge, for their support toward our publishing activities, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Ontario Media Development Corporation.

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Foreword

by Jane Urquhart

As a much younger reader I came to know – quite intimately – the Emilys and Annes and Jos and Beths, and yes, the Nancys, who populated the books I read and with whom, therefore, I was spending a great deal of my spare time. I was well acquainted with the shape of their hands, the colour of their hair, the freckles on their faces, and I knew all about their anxieties concerning school and friends and whether or not they were "pretty." But, more important than this, I was given access, through language, to the intriguing world of their inner lives; their fears and dreams, their hopes and disappointments. And, most wonderfully, as a result of my entrance into their private worlds, I was able to examine, in a way that was almost voyeuristic, the way their imaginations worked – for often these young women were creative in some way or another: they wanted to be writers, or musicians, or painters. Even the Nancys wanted to solve mysteries, an ambition that required an eye for detail and a singular view of the way in which events unfolded, a view held in opposition to the way that events appeared to unfold, and most particularly in opposition to the way that adults in their lives felt that events *should* unfold.

This was a peculiarly feminine world, I now realize, so much so that by the time I was twelve, and in spite of the fact that I had read Dickens, I unconsciously (and erroneously) believed that the whole notion of reading and writing and the imaginary development of narrative in childhood play remained almost solely in the custody of the female sex. As a result, boys didn't interest me much at the time. I could not imagine that they cared about – or even knew about – the

kinds of things that I (and Beth and Anne) cared about, and I did not believe that they could be wounded, as I (and Jo and Emily) were wounded by the way the world could suddenly turn dark in the middle of a bright day, or delighted by how life could become abruptly joyous and magical just when one had given up altogether. Boys showed no signs of vulnerability. Their feelings, if indeed they had any feelings, seemed to me to be impenetrable and unbruisable. To be brutally honest, the roles they played in the life I was living and in the books I was reading were mostly minor and almost always irritating.

Too bad, then, that in the course of my early reading I never came to know Luke Baldwin, for here is a very masculine boy with a vivid and entirely plausible inner life. Grieving for the loss of his sensitive and intelligent father whose death has caused him both sorrow and anger, he is nevertheless very aware of the legacy his father has left him:

> The explanations about the world, the legends told again and again, and the agreement that the world was bright and mysterious and not to be easily understood.

He is also cognizant of his own powerlessness in the custody of adults who, for reasons that are most often lost on him, make decisions that cause unhappiness, and yet he is able to value the steady and practical rules by which these adults manage their own lives as well as the lives of others. As his business-minded Uncle Henry tells him:

> "You've got to know what's useful and what's not useful and learn not to be taken in by the first appearance. That's the great trick, Luke. And the only way to be smart about it is to have the facts at your fingertips."

Here we have the two, apparently conflicting points of view with which Luke's own psyche will have to contend. Although there is a practical, obedient side to his personality, Luke has an imagination as vivid as Anne's or Jo's. He reads "fairy stories" and develops complicated fantasies when he is "playing" by himself or with the old dog to whom he has become so attached, fantasies concerning pirates and explorers, lieutenants and ships. Moreover, in his daily life, much like Emily and Anne, he is drawn to eccentrics and confused when he is told to steer clear of them:

> Lying in the grass and listening, Luke stroked the collie's head and watched the strange forbidden house and was filled with discontent because all the wild happiness contained in that house was never to be touched by him.

And, again like Emily or Anne, he is greatly moved by the beauty of the natural world in a way that seems utterly convincing to the reader, given the boy's character:

> A few stars were out. Beyond the mouth of the river was the smooth, glowing line of the lake. In that light the lake always glowed; and when darkness deepened, the glowing line faded into the horizon and, when he moon came out, there was the long glowing ladder of moonlight.

Luke has such thoughts in the course of what is otherwise the ordinary course of a boy's day, one filled with schoolwork and bicycles, chores and the odd adult lecture. There are moments when he himself becomes almost uncomfortable with the direction his mind is taking, but mostly he savours such experiences and interprets them as a kind of communion with his dead father who has told him on his deathbed, "I'll

never be far away from you, son. Here and there . . . not far away." And Luke believes that it is through nature that he will find his absent parent:

> Somewhere in the woods, in some cool grove where there was only a slant of sunlight, or maybe on a spot by the side of the river which would be secret and silent, he expected to draw close to his father.

In 1949, at the time of the writing of this book, Luke's creator, celebrated Canadian author Morley Callaghan, was already a legend in the development of Canadian fiction. Admired by the likes of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Edmund Wilson, and published to acclaim in the capitals of culture (at a moment, I should add, when the very notion of a serious Canadian Literature seemed unlikely at best), he was a household word in the colonial country where he was born. He had already produced several important novels and collections of short stories when he began to write this book, and was undoubtedly at work on another work of adult fiction. One cannot help but wonder, then, since he did this only once, why he would take the decision to develop a book for younger readers, one in which the insecurities and reverses of a sensitive, imaginative boy would come to be described with such clarity and empathy.

The answer can only be that he had had such an imagination himself when he was a child, and that he had also had the confusing, painful experiences in his daily life that, along with great joy, such an imagination sometimes engenders – particularly if that imagination resides in the mind of a young boy. Girls are encouraged to look at sunsets, read fairy stories, and respond with sympathy to the plight of animals. Boys are not, necessarily. In the small-town Canada of the 1940s, or, as in

the case of Callaghan's own childhood, the Canada of the turn-of-the-century, it would have been even less likely that a boy would not be scorned in some way or another were he to reveal this side of his nature. It would have to remain a secret, one that might be shared with an old dog, perhaps, but a lonely secret nevertheless. If you were such a boy, however, or even if you were an imaginative girl, reading this book would have the effect of making you feel considerably less alone.

So this book was, and continues to be, a kind of gift from Callaghan to a newer generation of creative young people; young people who are readers and dreamers and who walk just outside the circle of the crowd. But there are other things in this story to relish as well. The description, for example, of the bustling lumber-town of Collingwood, Ontario, in the 1940s, is both vivid and instructive, and the characterization of various adults as seen through the eyes of the boy is lucid and insightful without being either ungenerous or stereotypical. Father is not entirely perfect. Uncle Henry is never fully hateful, and often shows, almost in spite of himself, a kindness and concern for the boy.

In the end, then, *Luke Baldwin's Vow** is a narrative driven by affection; the affection between people with very different natures, the affection between a boy and his lost father, and the affection between a boy and nature as exemplified by the love of an animal on the one hand, and a connection to landscape on the other. But above all, it reminds us of the affection held by one Canadian author for the young people that might well follow him, the affection of a mature writer toward a younger generation.

* After the book had been in circulation for years, Morley from time to time wondered among friends whether he shouldn't have simply called the novel *The Vow*.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SEPARATION

That morning in the second week of May when it was raining so hard, Dr. Baldwin got a call from old Mrs. Wilson. It was her third call in two days, and the doctor's housekeeper, Mrs. Jackson, a gray-haired, thin, gruff woman, said tartly, "Doctor, you know as well as I do there's nothing the matter with that woman. She's seventy-nine years old and she'd have you holding her hand every time she coughs a little. You've been out twice during the night and it's raining cats and dogs now. Why don't you get some sleep and let Mrs. Wilson wait?"

But the doctor, chuckling as if he liked being scolded by his housekeeper, winked at Luke, who was sitting there at the breakfast table with him.

"Why, the poor woman may be dying," he said. "And besides, she's been counting on me all these years. Isn't that right, Luke?"

"Yeah, that's right," the doctor's son said.

"So out into the rain I go," he said cheerfully, with the slow easy smile his son liked too much. A thin dark man with a gentle, scholarly face, he was careless with his accounts and yet took an extraordinary interest in the petty ailments of his patients. His scolding housekeeper often insisted that he should have married again and got a wife who would have taken a sensible interest in his affairs. Yet she really would

have hated to see a sensible woman there in the house twisting and ordering the doctor's life around.

So that morning the doctor put on his raincoat and his old brown felt hat and went out to his car, which he had left parked in front of his house all night.

Luke, who had gone to the front window, watched his father stand for a moment in the heavy rain. When he himself grew older, Luke wanted to have his father's easy, relaxed manner and his quiet strength. Even now people said he looked like his father, though he was fair and slight and small for his age and his blue eyes were a bit too serious. In some ways he was old for his age because he spent so much time with his father, but in other ways, particularly when he was with bigger and rougher boys, he seemed young and reticent.

There at the window he waited to see the car pull away before he got ready to go to school. But the doctor seemed to have trouble with the car. The starter spun, and spun again, and then spun steadily for almost a minute. The battery weakened, and soon the slow heavy spin was hardly turning the engine over.

Then the doctor got out of the car and stood in the rain with his hands in his pockets. Turning, he looked at the window and shrugged and grinned at Luke. After he had lifted the hood and peered in at the engine, he turned again to the window with the same slow smile.

Luke waved his hand encouragingly, for the doctor had been able to make him believe they should always encourage each other. It was as if they had the one life in common; whenever they were together, whether they were fishing on a weekend or talking for an hour at night before Luke went to

bed, they were able to talk as if they were at one time two boys and at another time two men.

And the doctor there in the rain, looking thoughtfully at the car and then again at the window, finally came to a decision; he made motions with his hand to Luke, who opened the window.

"Hey, son, how would you like to put on your raincoat and come out here for a minute?" he called.

"Sure I will," Luke said eagerly. Getting his raincoat he hurried out. "What is it, Dad?" he asked.

"Luke, you get in the car there in the front seat," the doctor said. "I'm going to have you help me start the car."

"Okay," Luke said quickly. He was excited and a little afraid and yet was full of eagerness. Many times he had sat in the front seat working the gears, and his father had promised that when Luke's legs got long enough to reach the pedals he would let him really start the car. He was too small now to push down the brake or press the accelerator without shoving himself down behind the wheel, and knowing this, his father got into the car beside him, released the clutch, put the car in gear and turned on the ignition. "Here's all I want you to do, Luke," he said, with his easy smile that always gave Luke confidence. "Keep your foot pressed down on the clutch, and when I yell, lift your foot off. Understand? You see, son, if I push the car just ten feet or so we're on the hill, then the car will roll down itself and start. I'll jump in. Understand?"

"Okay, it'll be easy," Luke said. Once before Luke had seen his father start the car in this way. But that other day his father had called out to a sixteen-year-old boy across the street and Luke had been disappointed that he himself had been considered too small to help his father.

Now Luke sat proudly behind the wheel, hoping neighbors would be watching at their windows. All that made him nervous was that the rain blurred the windshield even though the wipers were swinging back and forth. The glistening street looked slippery. In the steadily falling rain nothing seemed to be quite normal. The rain splashed on the car and on the doctor's hunched-up shoulders as he stood beside the car, one strong hand on the door handle, leaning his weight and pushing, his feet slipping a little as the car hardly moved. Resting, he wiped the rain off his face with his handkerchief and then began to push again.

The car moved a little and Luke, staring raptly down the slope, his hands tight on the wheel, his heart pounding, heard his father gasping for breath. But the front wheels were getting a little closer to the edge of the slope. The gasping became a little louder; the car was no longer moving. One strange gasp had come from the doctor as Luke waited. Then he thought he heard a whisper, "Luke," from down near the wheels. When he turned and couldn't see his father he got scared. Taking his foot off the clutch he yelled, "Aren't you pushing, Dad? It isn't moving at all."

When his father didn't answer, Luke jumped out and there was his father sitting in a pool of water beside the back wheel, with one leg hooked under him and the other leg, the right one, stretched out stiffly. The wet hat had fallen off his head. The gray-black hair was wet and matted and raindrops were streaming down his gray wet face. His eyes were closed but his lips were moving. "Get someone, Luke," he whispered, and then his head sagged back against the wheel of the car.

Screaming "Mrs. Jackson! Oh, please hurry, Mrs. Jackson!" Luke ran toward the house.

Mrs. Jackson came out in her white apron, crying, "Oh, dear!" As she raised her hands to her head she knocked off her glasses and stumbled around in a circle. Luke picked up the glasses for her, but they were wet and muddied and she had to wipe them on her apron. Then she hurried into the house next door, and Mr. Hunter, a plump man, a lawyer, came out and with another neighbor, Mr. Willenski, carried Dr. Baldwin into the house while Mrs. Jackson phoned for another doctor.

The old doctor who lived three blocks away and who came within twenty minutes said that Dr. Baldwin had had a heart attack. This doctor made disgusted clucking noises with his tongue, and he said to Mrs. Jackson as he stood in the hall putting on his coat, "To push a car. What a foolish gesture for any man his age. I can't understand it. It's simply irrational."

Now that Dr. Baldwin had regained consciousness and was safe in his own bed, Mrs. Jackson was more at ease. "He's the best-hearted man on this earth, is the doctor," she muttered. "But so utterly impractical. Now why should he have wasted his time bothering to see that silly old Mrs. Wilson? I told him not to bother."

Luke, who had been listening, scowled, for he didn't like the way she was talking about his father, and he didn't like this old doctor's superior tone, and it seemed to him they were trying to make themselves important by making a fuss over his father.

Nor did he like it when Aunt Helen, who as the wife of his father's brother, came that night to stay with them for a few days. Her husband, Uncle Henry, who had a sawmill just outside Collingwood on the Georgian Bay, had insisted she stay with them both until Luke's father was much better.

Not that Aunt Helen wasn't a kind and friendly woman, but she knew too well exactly what should be done, and to Luke she was a stranger in the house. Aunt Helen had a bright bustling cheerful manner. She was a small plump woman with brown hair and a glowing pink skin, a pink throat and plump hands, and she smelled of freshly laundered clothes and sensible soap. And she soon had old Mrs. Jackson hustling around the house and muttering glumly to herself.

The next Thursday Dr. Baldwin had another heart attack, which came suddenly when he was sitting up in the bed.

From that time on Luke knew that his father was expected to die. He knew it because two other doctors who had come to the house whispered together and looked grave, and Mrs. Jackson hurrying to her room with Luke tiptoeing after her had wept quietly on her bed, and Luke listening at her door had felt bewildered. Mrs. Jackson had always seemed like a stern scolding sensible woman who would never cry. When she came out of the room she put her arms around him. It frightened him. Other little things also began to convince Luke, and he would whisper to himself stupidly, "They think Dad is dying," as if he were getting used to the sound of the word, which had no meaning for him; he couldn't imagine that his father would ever really die and go away from him.

In these days of loneliness Luke wanted companionship more than anything; but he wanted a kind of companionship these women could not offer him. He found himself longing again for Mike, the little Irish terrier – Mike, who had been killed by a milk wagon only three months ago. Luke's father had wanted to get him another dog at once, but Luke would not let him. He had believed they were only trying to make him forget his own dog.

So he kept to himself while Aunt Helen sent telegrams and whispered endlessly with Mrs. Jackson. And sometimes he asked, "Why can't I talk to my father?" "Be a good boy, Luke," Aunt Helen said. That was all she would say and Luke was angry. It was good to be able to feel angry.

Only the doctors went into the bedroom until the last day; then Aunt Helen, looking flustered and unhappy in her new brown dress, was permitted to talk to her brother-in-law. As Luke waited in his own room he didn't like the lonely call of the nighthawks swooping among the tress and the chimneys of the houses. So he walked along the hall to his father's room. In his imagination he could see every detail of the room, the big chair by the window, the carved mahogany bed that had belonged to his grandmother and the bureau, hand-carved and mahogany too; thinking of these familiar things, seeing them so clearly in his mind, made him feel better.

The young doctor from the hospital, who was very precise and clean and who looked like a smart young businessman in his double-breasted gray suit, came out of the bedroom and took Luke by the arm.

"Luke," he said in a confidential tone as if they were both the same age, "your father wants to have a little talk with you. He's asked for you. It must be a very short talk, Luke. Understand? A big fellow like you will know how to take it easy, eh?"

"Yes, sir," Luke said.

"Come on now, son," the young doctor said, and he led Luke into the bedroom.

But the familiar things in the bedroom all ceased to be familiar as soon as Luke entered the room. His father didn't turn his head. Aunt Helen and the doctor remained there, and