To the uninstructed visitor there remained no sign of the old community. Bushes and young trees crowded the edge of the road, and a deep hush hung over the countryside. Ernest pointed out sites of houses, but they were invisible to us.

(Bissell 20)

Ernest Redmond Buckler matured, worked, wrote, and retired in the heart of the Annapolis Valley. With the exception of a thirteen year period in his youth, he spent the whole of his seventy five years within a ten mile radius of his birthplace in West Dalhousie. Many writers before and after Buckler have celebrated the beauties and complexities of Nova Scotia’s tidal valley, but none have so firmly anchored their vision and their work in this rural landscape. The nurturing power of the Valley’s rural environment, the degradation it suffered from the encroaching power of the modern city, and the need to preserve the traditional agrarian world, if only in the pages of memory, became the central tenets of his literary work.
Buckler’s sensitivity to the way in which his rural landscape was transformed in the first half of the twentieth century, and his determination to both record and evaluate those shifts established him as the seminal modernist voice in Maritime literature. Buckler’s relationship with modernism was complex. On the one hand, his sensitivity to the cultural, historic, and economic shifts of the early twentieth century made him one of the first writers to be fully informed by a modernist sensibility. But if he was fully cognizant of the emerging power of modernism, he was also one of the region’s most vocal opponents of the changes modernity introduced. Like other conservative writers of the early twentieth century, he found himself in the paradoxical role of being a modern/anti-modernist writer. He was aware of the inevitable loses suffered by his changing world, but choose to stay and defend his home.

While many Maritime writers have chosen or been forced to move within or beyond the region in order to survive as artists, Buckler remained rooted in one place, his farm in Centrelea, and the surrounding landscape became a touchstone within his three major works of prose fiction. His first novel, *The Mountain and the Valley*, was published in 1952, and focuses on the gradual disintegration of the Canaan family, whose farm in the fictional community of Entremont is a recreation of the lands around Buckler’s own childhood home. In 1963 Buckler
published *The Cruelest Month*, a novel which explores the spiritual and psychological wounds inflicted on a group of urban dwellers by the modern world. The characters and their conversation may be urbane, but the setting remains resolutely rural as the lost crew seek refuge in Paul Creed’s Annapolis Valley guest home Endlaw, a self-conscious anagram for Emerson’s Walden. Buckler’s final long prose work was the 1967 memoir entitled *Ox Bells and Fireflies*. This pastoral idyll attends to the lives of traditional country folk, and their fictional community of Norstead is once again clearly modeled after Buckler’s own rural world. The Annapolis Valley functions as the dominant landscape of Buckler’s fiction not because the writer suffered from a kind of geographic myopia, but because he found, in that setting, a flexible and evocative land through which he could explore the central concerns and anxieties which lie at the heart of his anti-modernist, tragic, and pastoral visions of the world.

Buckler’s love of the Annapolis Valley and his tendency to defend his ideals and values through his depictions of rural landscapes is rooted first in his conviction that the agrarian world provides the only viable living space in a modern era when expanding urban landscapes diminish and cripple the human spirit. As an ideologically conservative writer, Buckler insists that individuals can
live a whole and satisfying life only when they are in a productive relationship with a secure, hierarchical, traditional community. Conservatives in general, and Buckler in particular, emphasize the importance of tradition and hold that "virtue, stability, and civilization" depend on the continuity of long established institutions and cultural practices; they are innately hostile to "radical social change" (Minogue 195-6). Indeed, though Buckler rarely represents urban landscapes in his fiction, the urban environments play an important role in his texts as the embodiment of cultural instability and unceasing change: the “capitalist city” embodies “modernity, ... that ever-in-flux, shifting, moving, cultural space..., where lived experience is shaped by this “unremitting process of rapid change and its social consequences”” (Kristiansen 242). Cities loom on the edges of all Buckler’s rural landscapes as an ever-present shadow which must be examined, criticized and refuted. The inherently inhospitable city space is destructive to the urban inhabitants themselves, and a threat to those rural men and women who increasingly come in contact with its ever-expanding borders.

Unlike Hugh MacLennan or Thomas Raddall, Buckler hesitates to include city-scapes within his fictions. In his best known novel, The Mountain and The Valley, Buckler waits until the final quarter of the narrative before he describes the city of Halifax which has had such a destructive influence on his hero’s rural
home. When he finally describes the urban space, Buckler condemns the metropolis itself for its dehumanizing power. In a passage echoing T.S. Eliot's "The Preludes," the narrator forgoes his usually effusive style and uses a series of spare, concrete images to describe the elements that seem particularly dismal to Anna Canaan:

The row of ashcans in the rain. The impersonal clink of milk bottles in the delivery boy's basket ... A foul word of adult knowingness from the mouth of a child in a narrow street. The laugh of a friend at some joke that only had a mechanical catchphrase humour in it. A little whirlwind drawing up the chewing-gum wrappers and scraps of newspaper from the sidewalk. The unembarrassed silence of the woman next door as they hung out their clothes from adjoining balconies. (MV 229)

Emotionally, spiritually, and stylistically, the urban world is a wasteland, and through Anna's unhappiness within Halifax, the text develops its critique of the shallow, superficial materialism of modernity (Creelman, 93-94).

Buckler dislikes the city because of its tendency to disconnect people from their past, and consequently from themselves and each other. Any one who lives in a city or has come from a city is diminished by the fragmenting, alienating, dehumanizing processes of industrial capitalism. In *The Mountain and the Valley,*
David immediately recognizes that the city people with whom he has hitched a ride do not “permeate each other all the time, like his mother and father did. They were merely sitting there side by side” (MV 162). David’s pen-pal from the city, Toby Richmond, proves to be a shallow man lacking the capacity to forge deep emotional bonds and without the sense of memory which would allow him to locate himself in a real community. In Buckler’s second novel, *The Cruelest Month*, Rex Giorno is the unhappy product of a modern industrial environment; a man whose spiritual capacity has been so stunted that he is described as being “like a child” sixteen times in the course of the novel. “Buckler’s vision is of reified urban residents, [who] “move no less blindly than things.” With a nightmarish quality, Buckler sees the isolated islands of city dwellers as centres of some sort of cosmic disenchantment... this dehumanization springs from the social, economic and cultural organization of the modern city” (Kristiansen 247).

The city is a negative place not just because it numbs its inhabitants, but because its defective cultural practices spread beyond its borders, as its economic influences touch the rural marketplace. Country folk who go to the city are diminished. Anna Canaan in *The Mountain and the Valley* is lonely and lost. In *The Cruelest Month*, Bruce Mansfield’s wife and son come face to face, literally, with the engines of progress, and are killed. Their car slips on a “long, blind, icy
Buckler’s city not only kills those rural folk who are drawn by its promise of opportunity, the city also infects the countryside as it consumes the rural world’s raw resources and offers the local farmers alienating and false material goods in return. In *The Mountain and the Valley*, the industrial forces of capitalism lay claim to and disrupt the rural landscape as a “big American company... bought these farms solely for their timber... The people had moved to town” (MV 247). In *The Cruelest Month* the nearby town is full of pretentious individuals who long to copy the fashions of the city and manage only to recreate the barren city settings down to the littered roadways: “across the yard to the gutter of the pavement where the chewing-gum wrappers were dammed up, like sodden leaves by a branch across a brook. In the street an empty beer carton gave yet another death twitch each time a car passed over it” (CM 23). By the time he published *Nova Scotia: Windows on the Sea* in 1973, Buckler had so firmly demonized the urban world that even a shred of cloth, “a strip of imitation velvet (from a shawl a cousin in the city had once sent her),” once hooked into a rug, is enough to spoil the effect of the whole and must be raveled back out (107).

The worst thing about the urban world is that its encroachment seems inevitable and unstoppable. “For Buckler, the penetration of the marketplace into
the countryside meant that rural Nova Scotia could no longer be truly rural... . He was painfully aware of the devastating incursions of the commodity: the reduction of human relationships to market transactions, and the intensification of this whole process of commodification by the culture.” (Kristiansen 243). Anna and her family immediately recognize that once she is given an opportunity to further her education by boarding with a family in Halifax, she “would have to go” (MV 124). In *The Cruelest Month*, Paul realizes that his loneliness has been carefully forged within the modern and urban sensibility, but once shaped his isolation is unavoidable and inescapable. Though Buckler rarely represents the city in his fiction, that barren urban world is essential to understanding his rural landscape. The presence of the city provides the defining parameters of the country; and then it further divides that rural world into two temporal units. For Buckler the rural world is doubled: there exists the ironic, even tragic landscape of the present day and there is also the idealized, pastoral, Arcadia of the past.

When Buckler returned from his sojourn in Toronto, in 1936, he recognized that the Valley to which he returned was no longer the insulated and secure community of his youth. After the economic collapse of 1930, the value of agricultural products dropped 39 percent and many farms were reduced to
subsistence operations. The Second World War bolstered the national economy and secured steady markets for some food stuffs, but enlistment and the demand for labourers in wartime industries further increased the out-migration of young people from rural areas. Even after the war, the Annapolis Valley continued to experience rapid change (Creelman, 85). The closure of the British market, which had absorbed up to 80 percent of the valley's apple production before the war, meant that many farmers "were obliged to uproot their orchards, close their warehouses, and nail 'For Sale' signs on their property" (Forbes 324). The farmers, like Buckler, who chose to remain, made a passable living by adopting the technologies of the new mass-consumer culture, but many regretted seeing the "old order based on scarcity and hard work" disappear (Forbes 383). In his fiction, Buckler recognizes that the rural world has endured in the face of modernization, but the loss of traditional community structures means that the transformation of the rural is both deeply tragic and ironic.

Not surprisingly, Buckler does not dwell excessively on the rural world of the present day. In the Prologue of The Mountain and the Valley, the adult David looks out on his wintering fields, and the reader recognizes that however rich his past might have been, his present has faded into “the light not only of common day but of sterility absolute” (Spettigue 50). If the Canaan’s orchards were once
symbols of fertility, David now sees only "twisted apple trees and ... bushes along
the line fence" that are "locked and separate ... all their life had fled" (MV 8).
When describing the present day rural landscape, Buckler incorporates more
figurative devices than he uses when developing his cityscapes, but the metaphors,
similes, and personifications are grim as the land is compared to empty vessels,
exhausted natural objects, and wounded individuals:

Islands of milk-ice speckled the brown fields where the withered after grass
held the snow longest, and in the ploughed land gravel was frozen into the
lips of the brown sod like stones in a setting. Sockets of rocks which the
plough had dislodged were frozen smooth as moulds. Honeycombs of ice
stood white in the valleys of adjacent rows. In the flat dead furrows the ice
shone enamelled and colourless in the glance of the sun that slanted without
warmth, from the bruised lids of the sky. (MV 8)
The valley used to be a secure haven, but the modern world has disrupted the
traditional order and eviscerated the heart of the rural life. Indeed, the shape of the
landscape itself re-enforces the idea that individuals should not attempt to depart
from the safe bounds of the agrarian world. The valley which nourishes Entremont
is surrounded by two mountains which act as protective barriers sheltering the
established system. Though mountains are usually archetypes of spiritual
enlightenment and personal transcendence, in Buckler’s world the hills are dangerous borders across which individuals should not attempt to pass. Those who attempt to leave the valley and climb the mountain invariably meet death. On three separate occasions members of the Canaan family ascend the mountain to either mark-off or cut “the keel-piece,” the part of the mountain which is destined to leave the protected local world and go “across the seas to the far parts of the world” (MV 168). Yet each venture toward the keel is interrupted by either a death or a vision of death, and at the conclusion of the novel, David himself perishes after climbing outside the valley’s confines. Even the exhausted landscape of the present rural world is more sustaining than any space that lies outside its boundaries.

In *The Cruelest Month*, the landscape of the present is similarly problematic. As the guests leave their summer retreat, a cigarette, dropped carelessly by Rex Giorno, ignites a forest fire which nearly consumes Paul and Letty, the only two figures who were determined to stay at Endlaw. The fire is successfully resisted by the two protagonists and in its aftermath Paul acknowledges that the burned out land will soon be green again, and the “fresh, sweet, rain emancipated air” reflects his own sense of personal liberation and emotional awakening. But these closing images of rejuvenation are conditioned by the knowledge that his heart disease will
eventually kill him, and will do so probably sooner than later. Even the healing power of the natural world is conditional in the modern age. Buckler is among the first of the Maritime writers to recognize the ironic and often tragic condition of the inhabitants of the modern rural world. Alert to the true potential the traditional rural communities offered, but trapped in a modern era which makes the reproduction of those values impossible, Buckler’s protagonists find themselves in a modernist and even a “postcolonial limbo” (Willmott 160). They experience “the modern freedom of self-development” but recognize that this leads to “the intolerability of the socio-economic development in which this very self-development is grounded” (Willmott, 160). In the exhausted landscape of the present, the inhabitant of the fragmented rural world, the “urbanized countryperson... must always look Janus-faced in two mirrors: that of the differential underdevelopment and that of the modernizing landscape and social space” (Willmott 161). Buckler finds no merit in the city, and little comfort in the contemporary modernized country. And so he must turn to his final landscape, the rural place of the past, to find the ideological and philosophical securities he craves.
The landscape which ultimately dominates Ernest Buckler’s work, the setting for which he is best known, is the rural world located in the past, an agrarian space which is not lost and irrecoverable, but remains accessible through the power of memory. “For Buckler, [this] countryside was a haven from the pressures of modernity” (Kristiansen 243). In the past, the land was open and sustaining, and a community willing to live at a subsistence level, apart from the false aspirations of a materialist and capitalism society, was rewarded with a sense of rootedness and security which cannot be offered outside the protected realm of tradition. Each of Buckler’s fictions turn at some point toward the conventions of the pastoral idyll, through which the Valley of his childhood is by turn elegized and idealized. This tendency is evident even by the names Buckler employed. While he is willing to name and condemn such urban centers as Halifax, Montreal, and New York, and though he will identify such towns as Yarmouth which lie outside the Valley’s perimeter, he rarely uses the actual place names of the Annapolis Valley and instead creates names which echo a receding Utopian tradition. Just as Thomas More removed the opening vowels from the words Eutopos and Outopos to create the word Utopian, meaning both “good place,” and “no place,” so Buckler uses the name Norstead, in Ox Bells and Fireflies, to signal that this textual version of Dalhousie West is both secure and steady and currently
non-existent. But if the names signal that Buckler is prepared to idealize the rural world of the past, his effusive and deeply evocative style indicates just how far he is willing to go to remind the reader that the rural past is truly the answer to modernism’s ennui.

After the opening prologue’s reminders that the present day farm is sterile, *The Mountain and the Valley* rolls back the years and the first half of the novel returns the reader to an earlier time when the family, the community, and the land itself was replete and whole. David may feel the initial affects of his imaginative and linguistic capacities - the aspects of his personality which will eventually distance him from the other inhabitants of the Valley - but Buckler insists the rural world itself exists in a unique state of plenitude. As he describes the Canaan’s farm his style becomes rich and even effusive. In the opening pages of the fourteenth chapter, as he describes a perfect summer season, Buckler uses personification nine times and employs fifteen similes and six metaphors in order to capture the rich intimacy of the land. Most of these tropes connect human attributes or activities to the earth itself in order to re-enforce the notion that the human community is at one with the larger rural environment: “This summer each night’s dew was reviving as sleep. Little hairnets of it clung to the glistening grass in the early mornings when Joseph went to the barn... The swamps cracked open like a buttermilk pie. Bugs
tented in the alders and gauzed their leaves” (MV 96). Buckler’s insistence that the rural space is perfect is an essential component of his conservative plea for people to turn from their barren urban environments and re-embrace traditional social structures. Given the ideological importance of the project it is not surprising that the style is occasionally over-determined and lapses into tautology. Such is the case with an earlier description of summer when Buckler attempts to record the variety of greens present in the valley and details the “white green of the poplars and the oat field and the river: the storm-green of the orchard and the spruce mountain: the black green of the potatoes tops: the green-green of the garden” (MV 47). But such slips rarely occur and only signal the urgency of Buckler’s message as he attempts to remind his readers of the natural beauty of an agrarian world.

The rural landscape of the past in not only aesthetically rich, it is also a potential source of healing. In The Cruelest Month most of the urban characters find at least a temporary solace if they are able to reconnect with the forests and fields surrounding Endlaw. Though Rex Giorno is too fragmented a product of the modern world to benefit from the retreat - indeed, he uses the “sentinel pines in a perfect row on the edge of the trees” for target practice - the others are more attuned to nature’s power. Morse Halliday recognizes that even driving from Yarmouth to Granfort is like stepping into the past: “It washes you clean of
whatever your chronic mood. This is the very soil where settlers from the Old World first set foot on the New. You really feel it.... Shell-coloured buildings pocketed in the living green above it still catch the light from another time” (CM 11). Bruce Mansfield experiences the most significant sense of rejuvenation, for he is not just turning toward nature, but returning to the farm of his childhood. Of the various characters who populate the narrative, Bruce is by far the most thoroughly historicized figure. Only as he revisits the lands of his childhood and the homestead of his wife’s family is Bruce able to confront the painful memories of his failures as a husband and father and begin to forgive himself. His emotional healing is completed when he can once again dare to love another, and it is appropriate that his capacity to love is restored as he and Sheila enter the woods: “The first turn of the path beyond the field left Time behind. The first drooping branch they stooped to pass beneath brushed the packs off their shoulders like dry scabs. Where the past was grimed into their consciousness the April woods-air rinsed it clear” (CM 208). Not all the insights gained by the characters will survive the return to the urban world, but Buckler celebrates the power of the rural landscape to enlighten and mend the blinded modern souls at least long enough for them to modify their current unhappy lives.
Of Buckler’s three long texts, his final narrative, *Ox Bells and Fireflies*, provides his most complete celebration of the rural world. Subtitled *A Memoir*, the book, as Alan Young notes in his introduction, “manages to evoke that universal desire to return to some lost paradise world, the memory of which appears to live within our collective subconscious, providing a model against which the spiritual poverty of our present existence may be evaluated” (Young xii). The rural landscape in this text has all the richness of the settings represented in the early fictions, but if possible life is even more complete as memory fuses with the farmland. Throughout the narrative the interdependence of the individual and the land is emphasized as the local topographical features acquire the names of the people who have inhabited and reshaped the land. The narrator points out, as if to a new resident of the community, that “just beyond the knot of houses were the cool Lattimore Hill, named for Steve Lattimore... and then you came to the bridge over Tim’s Brook.... and then you came to Grandmother’s Hollow. Grandmother Wentworth was a matriarch who put every penny the family could save into more and more acres of Crown Land” (OBF 24, 25). As in his other fiction, his descriptions of the landscape are poetic, but in his fictional memoir, Buckler suggests that the land begins to take on a deeper philosophical significance.
In her book *Ernest Buckler: Rediscovery and Reassessment*, Marta Dvorak argues convincingly that *Ox Bells and Fireflies* forges an explicit connection between the land and human consciousness. The rural landscape of the past is not just able to heal the human spirit, it becomes the embodiment of a philosophic commitment to the ideals of pantheism and neo-platonism. Noting Buckler’s interest in Emerson’s writings, Dvorak suggests that both writers are committed to the “the transcendental belief in a universal soul of which everything is a part, in which “every man’s particular being is contained and made one with the all other”” (71). In his later writings, Buckler infuses the rural landscape with a kind of divinity and edges close to pantheism as the natural world takes on a spiritual dimension. In the closing chapter of *Ox Bells and Fireflies*, “the boy narrator wanders through “the Sabbath naves” and sees “the holiness in the August light” (296), sees “the entire Mystery in the crows,” and feels “the oracle” in the moss beneath his feet” (297) [Dvorak, *Ernest Buckler*, 69]. The pastoral world of the previous era is so powerful that it takes on aspects of the divine.

Buckler not only senses that nature is infused with the divine, his text adheres to neoplatonic ideals as the separate elements of the land become embodiments of platonic forms and enter into a relationship with the One through which all things are given their essence: “Buckler’s philosophy is grounded in
neoplatonic concept that the beauty of the world is a reflection and projection of the ideal Beauty, and it involves apprehending the supernatural connections that exist between the object and the cosmos” (Dvorak, Ernest Buckler, 127). As Buckler thus paints his rural landscapes they become an ideal which is not just an antidote for modernist despair, but a conceptual space capable of supporting our full philosophical and ideological needs. What more does a person need than a land of complete plenitude:

Each object and all its case inflexions - the slope of a hill, the curve of the road, the up-and-downness of the trees, the back-and-forthness of clapboards on the house - bask in being exactly themselves.... The air smells of sunlight and grass. Of cup towels on the line and the clean angles of the gable roofs. Of warm-rock breath and the cloth over rising bread. Of tree sap and leaf spine.... Of the imminence of apples and the hair of children.

(OFB 27)

Of course, the sense of stability which Buckler constructs as he idealizes the rural world of the past, comes with a cost. First of all, as Marta Dvorak has noted, the occasions when language can fully express or capture the plenitude of this lost world are few. While Buckler is able to convey the “magic moment of the oneness, of perfection, of revelation and knowledge, such moments of connectedness are
difficult to capture in language (Dvorak “Ernest Buckler” 10). Secondly, as Janice Kulyk Keefer points out, the memoir is aware of the fact that the world he hopes to support, is already fading: “Buckler is celebrating an idyllic world and at the same time lamenting its erosion and disappearance” (202). Moreover, the traditional agrarian world anchored on a pantheist and neoplatonic philosophic base may have the weight to withstand the destructive forces of the modern, capitalist, industrial city, but this traditional society carries with it its own political agenda. The importance of a single body of cultural traditions, the need to connect the individual to the expectations of the collective, and especially the reliance on a clear patriarchal hierarchy to maintain stability are all stressed in this fictional memoir. The text's masculinist impulse is so strong that, although the narrator frequently adopts a first- and second-person voice in order to draw close to the reader, a feminine point of view is rarely employed and the depictions of women are never presented in anything but the remote third-person voice. The land becomes a place in which the masculine reigns supreme, and the feminine when present, views the rural world through the barrier of the kitchen window. Problematic as this ideological position is for many readers, Buckler is willing to authorize the masculine if it means that a desperate defense against the destructive urban world can be maintained.
As he places all his hopes in the collective society’s memory, and anchors himself in the past, Buckler is aware that he may be binding himself to vision already in retreat. As the epigraph of this paper, culled from the Bissell’s memoirs, notes, Buckler can point out the “sites of houses” and yet they may remain “invisible to us.” Buckler himself recognizes the tentativeness of his solution, in the concluding paragraphs of *Nova Scotia: Window on the Sea*:

Faith... must look too to the young. Here as elsewhere they are often labelled slovenly, rootless, nothing but destructive... all that. But the best of them (who are the greatest majority) have seen through the trinkets of material success, have (with their acute ear) heard the rattle of dry bones in the sepulchral vaults where “familiars” of the megamachine reside, and are not prepared to buy with their lives the fat and fictions of the plush-lined occupation.... Not many will go back to the plough, for sure; and yet their stand is not too implausible an echo of the ploughman’s whose touch stone is the candid and the candid only. With these assorted armies to defend it, the essential Nova Scotia may yet survive. Or may not. (126-7)

Buckler would like think that his community will heed his call and anchor themselves in the secure lands of the past, but he himself has mapped out the
dangers associated with the urban landscape and traced its affect on the rural world of the present-day, and thus his final call for solidarity cannot help but also sound a tentative tone.

In the end, Ernest Buckler’s ability to find, in the landscapes of the valley, both the tragic and the hopeful, the ironic and the essentialist, explains why his fiction now stands as a significant turning point in the region’s literature. As part of the last generation to emerge from the traditional rural culture and having experienced that community's transformation and disintegration, Buckler was also the last writer to chronicle, eulogize, and elegize the rich heritage of the Annapolis Valley. After Buckler, no writer would represent the fading rural world with quite the same intense sense of longing and celebration. Buckler was also one of the first who turned his eye to document what the Valley was becoming, and his texts push further than any before him to meticulously reproduce the emerging influence of the industrial urbanscape. By addressing the full range of contemporary experience, he moved the region’s literature more firmly into the modernist currents of the twentieth century and opened the door for such later writers as Alden Nowlan, David Adams Richards, and Lynn Coady who represent the disruptions of the region’s heritage while presenting a less idyllic vision of the past.
Notes

1. Buckler’s three best known prose fictions are available through McClelland and Stewart’s New Canadian Library Series. I have used the NCL editions and the parenthetic references employ the initials MV, CM and OBF to refer to *The Mountain and the Valley*, *The Cruelest Month*, and *Oxbells and Fireflies* respectively.

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