# A Man for All Seasons: Fluidity of Perspective in Samuel Hearne's *Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean*

Paul Johnson Byrne

More than two centuries have passed since a twenty-four-year-old Samuel Hearne first set out from the northernmost outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company in search of as yet unexploited beds of copper ore in what was then known to all but the vast majority of its inhabitants as Rupert's Land (Carter 42). Today, Hearne remains one of but a handful of non-natives to have traversed overland the vast expanse of the Barren Grounds, an area comprising some 360,000 square kilometres of permafrost frozen to depths of hundreds of feet and of which, as recently as only a few decades ago, official maps carried warnings of incomplete, potentially inaccurate topographical and relief data (Speck xxii). Without doubt, few environments on earth are more forbidding or hostile to human habitation than the Barrens and their sparsely timbered forest belt.

Although the credibility of Hearne's published account of his travels has been assailed from various quarters in recent decades, rare indeed is the critic or scholar who has seen fit to question the magnitude of his achievement in crossing the Barrens using rudimentary navigational equipment which, twice smashing to pieces, seems a convenient symbol of the resistance of the land to European intentions (Greenfield 201). Inevitably, some have taken a more cynical view than others, even attempting to cheapen Hearne's feat by pointing out that he reached his destination on the Arctic coast only when, "after two unsuccessful expeditions, he attached himself to a group of Indians who went there in the course of their normal migrations" (Greenfield 194). Nevertheless, the prevailing — and I think correct — view is more in line with that of historian John Bartlet Brebner, for whom Hearne's odyssey constitutes "some of the most remarkable exploration in the long North American record" (326).

Notwithstanding the relative unanimity on this point, however, the critical history of Hearne's posthumously published *Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean* has proved far more controversial than its author likely ever anticipated. Factual objections to many of Hearne's geographical calculations, which were indeed often little more than guesswork, were raised against the original journals even before he ventured into print, leading him to preface the finished manuscript with an apologia in which the charges are extenuated on the grounds that the text was prepared "not so much for the information of those who are critics in geography, as for the amusement of candid and indulgent readers" (xlix). The degree to which the British Royal Navy was prepared to accept Hearne's conclusions refuting the existence of a navigable salt-water channel through the continent and into the South Sea is evidenced by the commission in 1791 of an expedition under Captain George Vancouver, who carried instructions to seek out that quintessentially European conception, so dear to the heart of English imperialism, the mythic Strait of Anián.

In his preface to the 1911 edition of the *Journey*, the geologist J.B. Tyrrell chidingly noted that, "in the warmth of dispute, when endeavouring to overcome the criticisms or objections of others," Hearne, though dependable in the main, was liable not only "to be carried beyond the points of strict accuracy" but even to "fill in blanks in his record from his imagination" (15). More recently, a trend originating with I.S. MacLaren's pioneering bibliographic study of the transcripts of Hearne's original field notes has questioned the extent to which Hearne sacrificed truth to the "aesthetically justified lie" of a profit-minded publisher concerned only to abide by popular tastes and prejudices (34). In demonstrating that Hearne's famous account of the massacre of some twenty-two Copper Inuit by his Dene companions at Bloody Fall was not only expanded from a terse field note but also reshaped in a conspicuously Gothic literary vein, MacLaren effectively put an end to the notion of Hearne's text as a strictly faithful historical document. Following MacLaren, subsequent commentators have since made much of Hearne's instructions to his publisher that "anything in reason shall be allowed to the person that prepares the Work for the Press" (qtd. in Beattie 157), though it seems unclear whether Hearne here refers to editorial license or perhaps simply to the compositor's fee.

Geiger and Beattie accuse Hearne of a tendency toward self-aggrandizement, charging that, as with the massacre at Bloody Fall, he "Gothicized" his account of the ghastly last days of the Knight expedition in order that he might have in Captain James Knight a foil "to underscore the magnitude of his considerable geographical accomplishments and to emphasize his role in bringing about a transformation in the manner of exploration" (158). Likewise indebted to MacLaren, Sarah Carter suggests that, since many of Hearne's "negative projections of women were elaborated upon and made more numerous . . . in the published journal," such representations — far from any inherent anthropological or ethnographic interest they may contain — "were possibly added on or emphasized to enhance sales of the publication" (45). Other likeminded critics have cited Hearne's rudimentary education in support of the surmise that he lacked the native resources to produce unaided a work that argues on the part of its creator such "judicious literary artistry" (Brebner 326). Germaine Warkentin, for one, finds that the text as a whole bears the unmistakable stamp of a defter hand, nominating as the most likely candidate either Dr. John Douglas, Bishop of Salisbury, or the astronomer William Wales (168).

The disputed status of Hearne's *Journey* is perhaps to be expected given its manifold nature: it is at once a narrative of exploration and discovery; a document in geography, zoology, botany, and ethnography; and a kind of field manual for prospective adventurers. Moreover, the way in which Hearne experiences and understands his surroundings frequently shifts throughout the text, a fluidity of perspective that reflects both his ambivalent relation to the nature he at once documents and inhabits, as well as his dual — and at times duelling — identities of imperial prospector and disinterested man of science. Indeed, Hearne's perspective throughout much of the *Journey* is fundamentally double: his impressions of the land and its inhabitants are shaped, on the one hand, by his attachment to the Hudson's Bay Company as a dutiful servant of its economic interests, and, on the other, by his sense of himself as a traveller of impartial observation, impatient of "marvellous tales, however smoothly they may be told, or however boldly they may be asserted" (*Journey* 149), and intent on recording reliable data that will "stand the test of experiment, and the skill of the most competent judges" (130).

Similarly, Hearne's perceptions are filtered both through his "civilized" European frame of reference as a curious observer of a foreign nature, and through his "experienced Hudsonian" frame of reference as a knowledgeable long-time inhabitant of the land. Such dualities are in turn compounded at the level of composition, for Hearne was faced not only with the task of presenting his findings in such a way as to satisfy the expectations of his employers and to "answer the purpose which they had in view" (xlix), namely, the continued prosecution of the Company's commercial designs; but he was also required to expand and recast his crude Company narrative of facts and figures, longitudes and latitudes, according to certain conventions of exploration literature so as to "afford amusement" to a more general readership (xlix). As Bruce Greenfield has observed, the uniqueness of the *Journey* largely resides in Hearne's sense of his conflicting roles (194), but whereas Greenfield is chiefly concerned with the rhetorical difficulties that Hearne faced when attempting to uphold the conventions of contemporary narratives of conquest and discovery, I propose to focus instead on Hearne's capacity for ironic detachment and the resultant variability of his perspective, for in the confluence of his shifting points of view he often achieves a surprisingly balanced distance of remove from which he is able at once to perceive the intrinsic reasonableness of a foreign culture within its local context and to interrogate his own cultural knowledge and values.

Just as one may trace in the history of response to the *Journey* a fluctuating current of skepticism and uneasiness, so too is the position that Hearne occupies in relation to his critics and judges — "those gentlemen who have made natural history their chief study" (130) — troubled and ambivalent, now timidly deferential, now coyly amused, even vaguely disdainful by turns. It is difficult not to detect at least a trace of Hearne's signature irony in his description of his shrillest critic, Alexander Dalrymple, as that "ingenious and indefatigable" geographer (xlix). Though Hearne speaks dismissively of any author whose comments reveal him to be but "little acquainted with the subject" (148), he reserves utmost contempt for "the romancing traveller" (149) who attempts "to impose on the credulous, by representing the greatest falsehoods as real facts" (148). He evidently took great pride, and not a little satisfaction, in setting the record straight at every opportunity. He gives no quarter, for instance, to "the Compiler of the Wonders of Nature and Art," whose account of the beaver he declares so outrageous that "little

remains to be added . . . beside a vocabulary of their language, a code of their laws, and a sketch of their religion" (149). Although Hearne generally avoids ostentatious shows of learning, he did not hesitate to do credit to his own considerable powers of observation by singling out what seem like venial faults in the work of others, as for instance when he writes, "Mr. Dragge observes, in his North West Passage, that when the partridges began to change colour, the first brown feathers appear in the rump; but this is so far from being a general rule, that an experienced Hudsonian must smile at the idea" (267n).

As a Hudsonian of some twenty years' experience, Hearne seems not only to be smiling but fairly laughing up his sleeve when he observes of such men as Dragge that, "if their researches are of any real utility to mankind, it is surely to be regretted that Providence should have placed the greatest part of them too remote from want to be obliged to travel for ocular proofs of what they assert in their publications" (130). These idle armchair natural historians, he continues, bristling with the pride of one who has quite literally dirtied his hands in the field of natural history, "are therefore wisely content to stay at home, and enjoy the blessings with which they are endowed, resting satisfied to collect such information for their own amusement, and the gratification of the public, as those who are necessitated to be travellers are able or willing to give them" (130).

With characteristic self-deprecation and a subtle undercurrent of irony, Hearne expresses his regret that he "come[s] under the latter description" (130) of traveller, yet he clearly considers it a marked advantage, if not an essential prerequisite, to have unmediated access to the nature one proposes to describe. In much the same spirit, he slyly gestures towards the dependency of natural historians upon travellers for raw information: without individuals like him to record and compile data so assiduously, "critics in geography" (xlix) and assorted other "people of little observation" (292) would be left only to conjecture and hypothesize. It is plain to see in his preface to the journal that Hearne was, in his own muted phrase, "rather hurt" by Dalrymple's "peremptory" objections to certain of his findings (l), and there is likewise detectable in those pages an aggrieved sense that, in consideration of "the hardships and fatigue which I underwent in procuring the information" (li), his readers ought perhaps to take a more lenient view of the *Journey*'s shortcomings. But though Hearne seems not unreasonably to

have expected of his readers at least "some measure" of gratitude for having brought before them "the face of a country . . . , which has hitherto been entirely unknown to every European except myself" (xlix), he also clearly enjoyed the distinction of being in such a position of precedence, affording him as it did initial control over the new knowledge that he gathered and could then transmit — at his discretion and in his own terms — to the remote centre of control in the London archives of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Indeed, as a vanguard knowledge-gatherer in what Bruno Latour would recognize as a classic cycle of accumulation, Hearne is very much the envoy of an expansionist England, charged with protecting its commercial stake in the fur trade by establishing an expedient "friendship of peace" with the natives in order "to persuade them as much as possible from going to war with each other, to encourage them to exert themselves in procuring furrs and other articles for trade, and to assure them of good payment for them at the Company's Factory" (lxvii). To that extent, his perspective is undoubtedly inflected by imperialist preoccupations. The very subtitle to the *Journey* succinctly articulates the aims of the greater imperialist project underway, serving as a frank reminder of the context in which the text ought to be situated (Hutchings 49). After all, the venture was *Undertaken by Order of the Hudson's Bay Company for the Discovery of Copper Mines, A North West Passage, &c.*, where "&c." is to be understood as denoting anything that "is likely to be of any utility" to the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company (lxix). In the English colonial imagination, the great white interior of unknown dimension extending indefinitely to the northwest of Hudson Bay was not only literally — that is, topographically — but figuratively or cartographically a blank, a territory waiting to be "discovered," claimed, and inscribed, aptly figured in the parchment map upon which Hearne "sketched all the West coast of the Bay . . . , but left the interior parts blank, to be filled up during my Journey" (lxxi-lxxii).

As Latour points out, there is a very real sense in which no discovery can be accomplished or gain in significance until a written record of it exists to be integrated into a broader context of existing knowledge (216). As a Hudson's Bay Company apologist determined to restore its reputation after almost a century in which, contrary to the provisions of its charter, it had made little effort to establish itself in the interior, subordinating inland exploration to trade while profit margins at its

bayside posts remained satisfactory, Hearne would doubtless have liked nothing more than to silence the critics with a momentous discovery. Nevertheless, it is not only unfair to Hearne but deeply false to the spirit of the *Journey* as a whole to suggest that it is "a handmaiden of European colonialism," a document in a broader intellectual strategy to assume possession of an uninscribed space and to assert symbolic dominion over its inhabitants (Carter 44). This view is of a piece with Terry Goldie's notion that, in European narratives of exploration, the aboriginal is typically reduced to "a semiotic pawn on a chess board under the control of the white signmaker," a position consistent with Edward Parkinson's characterization of the *Journey* as a text "in which all aspects of cultural representation are inescapably overdetermined by the power of Hearne's controlling narrative gaze" (qtd. in Hutchings 50, 51). But such an assertion misleadingly implies that Hearne's "gaze" is unified and internally consistent, ignoring what Keith Harrison has described as Hearne's "half-conscious drift into multicultural flux" and the attendant "inconsistencies in point of view" (651).

Kevin Hutchings usefully distinguishes between what he calls "humanist" and "discourse-oriented" approaches to exploration literature, the one emphasizing the sensibility of the explorer as a sympathetic observer over his participation "in the great and complex power-play of Empire," the other firmly grounded in the notion that "there cannot be much room in the experience or textual representation of exploration for any kind of substantial intercultural negotiation. The writing explorer, constituted discursively as a cultural subject, inevitably textualizes and reproduces an oppressive and impenetrable discourse of European imperialism" (51). Although Hearne's text clearly reflects certain imperialist interests — it could scarcely be otherwise in view of his professional affiliation — his fluid, consistently dual perspective makes possible a considerable degree of intercultural negotiation. Hearne is not primarily concerned with justifying British commercial enterprise in the so-called New World, and his accounts of the aboriginals are not always refracted through the distorting lens of prejudice or the progressivist assumption that indigenous peoples might be raised up to a higher plane of social and cultural development through contact with the "civilizing" influence of a commercially based culture (Hutchings 53). Indeed, inasmuch as it is a narrative of exploration and discovery, the individual journal entries that make up the body of Hearne's text are often curiously silent

on the imperial objectives heralded in its subtitle. When referred to at all, such matters are typically mentioned only parenthetically within the broader context of the struggle to survive.

To be sure, the physical nature represented in the journal is not rendered through a telescoped imperial gaze that sees in the broad vistas of wilderness only opportunities for further settlement and expansion and in the natives only prospective helots in the Hudson's Bay Company fur empire. Hearne does not aspire to conquer the land, or even to set the stage for conquest by his successors: he is much too preoccupied with the more immediate problem of how to endure it. In revising his notes for publication, Hearne seems to have constantly had before him the image of a self-possessed and intrepid traveller boldly venturing off the edge of the known world. He seldom admits anything more than an intimation of the doubts and anxieties that must have stalked him during "scarce times" (lxxi), pointing out that circumstances, though often "very alarming, would not permit us to spend much time in reflection" (4). Whereas he writes with paternal solicitude of the Englishmen Isbester and Merriman that he "was under some apprehensions of their being starved to death" (lxxi), he rarely reports of himself anything more than a troubled night's sleep, adopting on the whole the same stoic disposition to bear hardship without complaint that he so admires in his Chipewyan companions.

Nevertheless, though Hearne has undoubtedly organized his narrative according to the loosely digressive structure that T.D. MacLulich identifies as characteristic of odyssean exploration literature, he has also integrated elements more typical of what MacLulich calls ordeal narratives, notably their emphasis of "the human capacity to endure privation" (74). Hearne's frequent ruminations on hunger betray his fear "of the griping hand of famine" (52) and acknowledge its particular dreadfulness in a region composed largely of "extensive tracts of land . . . incapable of affording support to any number of the human race even during the short time they are passing through them" (47). It is scarcely surprising, then, that his nature is above all consumable and utilitarian: very little is recorded that cannot be turned to some immediate practical advantage in making a defence against the elements or holding hunger in abeyance. Although a general impression of the starkness of the land emerges in the intermittent passing references to its "bleak hills" (2), "small patches of low scrubby woods" (2), "stunted pines," "barren hills and marshes" (107),

and the "rough and stony" (3) surfaces "destitute of every kind of herbage" (26) that typify "those dreary parts of the world" (39), Hearne writes that he "viewed with inattention things that were not of immediate use" (293). His duty to the Company naturally prevented him from losing sight of his objectives altogether, yet he concedes somewhat apologetically that his empirical researches were necessarily constrained by the struggle for self-preservation, "the first law of Nature" (190). Thus for instance does he explain that "the vegetable productions of this country by no means engaged my attention so much as the animal creation; which is the less to be wondered at, as so few of them are useful for the support of man" (289).

The question of the "usefulness" of his discoveries seems to have weighed heavily on Hearne, who concludes his narrative with the resigned admission that, "though my discoveries are not likely to prove of any material advantage to the Nation at large, or indeed to the Hudson's Bay Company, yet I have the pleasure to think that I have fully complied with the orders of my Masters, and that it has put a final end to all disputes concerning a North West Passage through Hudson's Bay" (195). Although in what Latour calls the "cycle of accumulation" (220) the explorer whose findings enable those who succeed him on subsequent probes to escape hardship and expense is at least as valuable to his employers as he who opens up an entire region for exploitation (Brebner 326), Hearne is sheepishly aware of the anticlimactic outcome of his expeditions, the first two of which set out under seven-gun salutes but — to his "great mortification" (7, 29) — were aborted within weeks. Certainly he was not able to deliver the result his employers had hoped for and perhaps expected. Since even the completed third expedition culminated in the refutation of the cherished belief in the Strait of Anián, Hearne takes great pains to adduce vindicating proof "of the Company's being perfectly satisfied with my conduct while on that Journey" (lxv n), reproducing in full the letter of his instructions to demonstrate "how far those orders have been complied with" (lxvi).

Thus is it, no doubt, that in reshaping his journals for publication, not the outcome but the process and accompanying anthropological observations were granted pride of place. As the greater part of this material was by and large incidental to the commercial aims of Hearne's Hudson's Bay Company financiers, it naturally does not appear in the original field notes. And yet, it is precisely these observations that now

constitute the chief interest of the *Journey*, for it is here, in his accounts of the "modes of living, manners, and customs of the natives" (l) among whom he travelled for some two years, that the effects of his dual perspective register most remarkably. In stark contrast to his identity as a Company man, Hearne faithfully records how as a journeyman natural historian and amateur ethnographer he was frequently reduced to an impotent passivity unbecoming even the humblest of heroic explorers (Greenfield 197). Time and again he acknowledges that he owes his survival in no small part to the Dene, upon whom he depended for guidance, protection, and an irregular subsistence, and indeed at times whose captive he seems to be. And though he periodically invokes his sense of enlightened European "civility" in decrying what he characterizes as the inhumanity and wantonness of his companions, European culture and nominally civilized values do not always prosper by comparison with the culture and values of the Dene. It is much to Hearne's credit that he is often able to negotiate a cultural middle ground, and, by means of his fluid perspective, to occupy an intermediate position at what is at times a startlingly balanced distance of remove.

One of the most fascinating perspectival shifts in the text occurs as Hearne and his party are met on their arrival at the Congecathawhachaga River by a group of Yellowknife Dene. The Yellowknife are so struck by the appearance of the Englishman, "the first whom they had ever seen, and in all probability . . . the last" (78), that they proceed in the spirit of scientific inquiry to examine him "from top to toe, as an European Naturalist would a non-descript animal" (78). There follows an extraordinary reversal in which, as the inquisitive gaze of natural history is unexpectedly inverted, Hearne is confronted with the realization of his own otherness: "I was viewed as so great a curiosity in this part of the world, that during my stay there, whenever I combed my head, some or other of them never failed to ask for the hairs that came off, which they carefully wrapped up" (78). It is Hearne who has now become the object of scientific scrutiny as the Yellowknife gather up fallen strands of hair as if collecting specimens for subsequent analysis and cataloguing.

Pinned under his own microscope, Hearne obligingly submits to their investigations, and, having himself already dispassionately itemized the features typical in Chipewyan women — the "broad flat face, small eyes, high cheek-bones, three or four broad black lines a-cross each cheek, a low forehead, a large broad chin, a clumsy hook-nose,

a tawny hide, and breasts hanging down to the belt" (57) — he now patiently endures the same treatment with amused self-consciousness. As the natives take an inventory of his features, Hearne effectively re-imagines the initial intercultural encounter from the point of view of the Other (Hutchings 62). Indeed, without giving him undue credit, this turning of the tables would seem to suggest that, as Cheryl Cundell points out, Hearne has at some level fundamentally grasped that his own "observational perspective" is a distinctly European construct that is not necessarily any more authoritative than other ways of perceiving the ways and shapes of the world (112-13). Hearne has already learned that the "whiteness of [his] skin" does not command obeisance in this land; yet, far from being tokens of racial superiority, his European features are here disarmingly likened in a series of deflating comparisons to qualities one might sooner expect in "a non-descript animal":

> They . . . found and pronounced me a perfect human being, except in the colour of my hair and eyes: the former, they said, was like the stained hair of a buffaloe's tail, and the latter, being light, were like those of a gull. The whiteness of my skin also was, in their opinion, no ornament, as they said it resembled meat which had been sodden in water till all the blood was extracted. (78)

To the extent that his situation will admit, Hearne generally takes great care to preserve his European identity and to uphold traditional "civilized" values, occasionally remonstrating with the natives in an effort to rehabilitate those "national customs" (76) that he finds most objectionable. He is particularly ill at ease with what he describes as their wanton destructiveness: "they were so accustomed to kill every thing that came within their reach, that few of them could pass by a small bird's nest, without slaying the young ones, or destroying the eggs" (76). This practice of indiscriminate killing seems to offend Hearne's sense of the necessity for moderation in a land that is characterized either by "all feasting, or all famine" (21). However, at another level, it seems that Hearne the Company man may be concerned for the sustainability of the fur trade. Thus for instance does he reflect uneasily that "the great destruction which is made of the deer in those parts at this season of the year only, is almost incredible; and as they are never known to have

more than one young one at a time, it is wonderful they do not become scarce" (127).

After all, no "animal of the furr kind" is merely a source of food, raiment, or sport in the colonial fur-trade economy, in which, "for the more correctly keeping their accounts, the Hudson's Bay Company have made a full-grown beaver-skin the standard by which they rate all other furrs, according to their respective values" (114-15n). Such animals have become commodities whose skins represent a potentially "valuable acquisition" as a "principal article of trade" (146). Hearne's attempts to regulate hunting practice, as well as his unwillingness to credit the natives when "they insisted . . . that killing plenty of deer and other game in one part of the country, could never make them scarcer in another" (76), seems to be informed at least in part by commercial concerns. As he elsewhere observes on the same subject: "it has been always thought impolitic to encourage the natives to kill . . . valuable animals at a time when their skins are not in season" (155).

Nevertheless, Hearne evidently overcame his reservations, for such objections tend to occur primarily in the forepart of the journal. As he becomes better acquainted with the nature and cycles of the land, he increasingly comes to accept such practices as necessary and well adapted to circumstance, ultimately even warning against the dangers of a too-rigid economy in a passage whose tone distinctly recalls that of a field guide: "In fact, after twenty years residence in this country, I am persuaded that whoever relies much on the produce of the different seasons, will frequently be deceived, and occasionally expose himself and men to great want. To remedy this evil, it is most prudent for those in command to avail themselves of plentiful seasons" (254).

Indeed, Hearne consistently demonstrates an ability to "g[e]t the better of prejudice" (204) by abdicating a nominally civilized perspective and its corresponding standard of morality. He seems almost to delight in describing certain customs in a graphic, anti-aesthetic manner sure to produce in the implied reader a reaction of physical or moral revulsion, only then to shift his perspective and situate the practice within the context of the land so as to demonstrate its innate propriety. Of Chipewyan women, for instance, he writes that he considers them to be "as destitute of real beauty as any nation I ever saw" (56), adducing in support of his claim a summary caricature of their features. However, he then effects an unexpected reversal by taking up another vantage point

that comprehends the unreasonableness of his original position: "In a country like this, where a partner in excessive hard labour is the chief motive for the union, and the softer endearments of a conjugal life are only considered as a secondary object, there seems to be great propriety in such a choice" (56).

Much the same can be observed of Hearne's account of "the common, and indeed the constant practice" of abandoning the sick and the elderly when they are grown so ill or infirm as to be incapable of supporting themselves. Though he initially remains detached and withholds judgment, he knows that his civilized readership can only abhor such a custom, and he accordingly takes care as a civilized observer to distance himself from "those Indians": "*they say* it is better to leave one who is past recovery, than for the whole family to sit down by them and starve to death; well knowing that they cannot be of any service to the afflicted" (131; emphasis added). Here as before, however, Hearne proceeds to shift his initial orientation by adopting a perspective rooted in the land and alive to its exigencies:

> A custom apparently so unnatural is perhaps not to be found among any other of the human race: if properly considered, however, it may with justice be ascribed to necessity and self-preservation, rather than to the want of humanity and social feeling, which ought to be the characteristic of men, as the noblest part of the creation. Necessity, added to national custom, contributes principally to make scenes of this kind less shocking to those people, than they must appear to the more civilized part of mankind. (132)

Hearne's use of the word *unnatural* in such a context is telling: it suggests not only that which is contrary to human nature as he understands it, but also — and perhaps above all — that which is contrary to the physical nature of the land. Hearne insists that this troubling custom is not a consequence of a moral defect in a more primitive people, for though the natives have grown inured to the practice, he makes a point of reporting that they "walk away crying" (131); the harshness of the land, in other words, has not diminished their humanity or deadened their social feeling. Though Hearne would surely grant that, in a just society, the weak ought rather to be protected than abandoned, he also seems to apprehend that the rationality of civilized ideals ceases to be self-evident once those ideals are removed from the traditional, authorizing context that sustains them. A foreign frame of reference simply

ignores the conditions on the Barrens, where extreme want and severity of climate can reduce one to dire necessity. In such a place, it would be unnatural indeed to expose the health of the many to grave risk by attempting to provide for the illness of a few.

Of course, this is not to suggest that Hearne has miraculously escaped the imprint of his age and transcended his imperialist conceptual framework to arrive at a higher plane of intercultural understanding and accommodation; Neatby undoubtedly goes too far when he declares Hearne a man "void of prejudice" (qtd. in McGoogan 295). Frequently Hearne does not suspend judgment or relinquish the presumption of moral authority; and yet, the fluidity of his observational perspective allows him to incorporate into his narrative other points of view that are distinctly at odds with his own, even when he thereby becomes the object of a joke or the values that inform his worldview are challenged. While Hearne ultimately retains discursive authority as writer and translator (Hutchings 51), he nevertheless often withholds editorial commentary when reporting native speech, allowing the voices of his companions into the narrative record without interpolation (Cundell 113). Consider, for instance, his account of the reception of the European practice of midwifery among native women, who observed "'that the many hump-backs, bandy-legs, and other deformities, so frequent among the English, were undoubtedly owing to the great skill of the persons who assisted in bringing them into the world'" (59). One might reasonably ask how Hearne's companions came to be so well informed on the subject of anatomical irregularities among the English; but though he may have doctored their speech in order to make sport of his readers, his evident willingness to sacrifice any pretension to European superiority by offering himself and his countrymen up as figures of fun suggests that, as Cundell points out, he is in many respects "open to other ways of seeing" (114).

Indeed, time and again Hearne comes either to adopt certain of the "rude" customs of the Chipewyan or at least to recognize that, "however shocking and unnatural [they] may appear" (*Journey* 221), such customs, once "properly considered," are often singularly "well adapted to their situation and manner of life" (80). Of the frequent need to eat his meals uncooked Hearne observes with philosophic calm that "necessity . . . has no law," and, once he has been "initiated into the method of eating raw meat" (20), he comes by degrees to relish it: "even to this

day, I give the preference to trout, salmon, and the brown tittemeg, when they are not warm at the bone" (203). As his journal testifies in virtually every page, Hearne was well acquainted with necessity, yet he knew that "the relation of such hardships may perhaps gain little credit in Europe" (22), for without direct experience, a civilized perspective cannot possibly comprehend the extremity that is often a fact of life on the Barrens.

In one of the most arresting instances of Hearne's ability to hold two distinct if not contrary perspectives simultaneously, he offers what amounts to an apology for cannibalism, the epitome of the European notion of the savage, and a practice "universally detested" even among the natives (22n). Proceeding from his basic premise that necessity has no law, Hearne extenuates the practice on the grounds of the ghastly hunger that he himself had known and to which anyone who travels on the Barrens is almost constantly susceptible. In what is surely one of the most remarkable passages in exploration literature, Hearne imaginatively takes the part of a "poor creature" who has been reduced to cannibalism, an extraordinary shift in perspective whereby he implicitly accuses civilized morality of the very inhumanity for which it would condemn "the poor inoffensive wretch" whose only "crime," Hearne insists, was to travel "two hundred miles by himself, unassisted by firearms for support in his journey." "'Why do you despise me for my misfortunes?'" he writes in the accusatory voice of the cannibal. "'The period is probably not far distant, when you may be driven to the like necessity!'" (22n).

Perhaps more subversive still are Hearne's remarks on the aboriginal method of hunting caribou in enclosed "pounds," a passage that leads to a troubled rumination on the consequences of the fur trade for those natives who court the favour and respect of Company factors by establishing a regular commerce with their posts. Hearne initially takes a critical view aligned with the official position of the Company, declaring that caribou pounds are apt to corrupt a potentially productive workforce by fostering "a habitual indolence in the young and active" and so discouraging them from becoming "masters of any thing for trade" (51). According to this logic, only those natives who exert themselves in a spirit of industry are of any real value to his employers, "as it is from them the furrs are procured which compose the greatest part of Churchill trade" (51). Such reflections no doubt induced nods of

approval among the members of the Company's London committee and its shareholders.

However, Hearne subsequently shifts his perspective in such a way as to undermine these assumptions and call into question the legitimacy of his original interpretative framework (Greenfield 196). His knowledge of the nature of the land compels him to admit that, in the process of transporting their goods to Company factories, the annual traders not only "run great risques of being starved to death," but that they also receive an outrageously disproportionate return in view of the risks they undertake, for "all that they can possibly get there for the furrs they procure after a year's toil, seldom amounts to more than is sufficient to yield a bare subsistence, and a few furrs for the ensuing year's market" (52). Though Hearne rarely passes up an opportunity to commend the benevolent "liberality" of the Hudson's Bay Company (253), he is at the same time acutely aware of the human cost of the Company's pursuit of commercial gain.

Hearne not only attains to a troubled consciousness that he might be complicit in a highly suspect and perhaps culpable enterprise (Hutchings 72), but he also refuses to take refuge in evasion as a lesser human being would have done by claiming merely to have been following Company orders "to encourage a spirit of industry among the natives, and to use every means . . . to induce them to procure furrs and other commodities for trade" (52). Instead, he confesses in no uncertain terms that "such conduct is by no means for the real benefit of the poor Indians; it being well known that those who have the least intercourse with the Factories, are by far the happiest" (52). Whereas he initially attacks indolence and praises industry from the vantage point of vested commercial interest, he proceeds in a remarkable about-face to reverse his original position, adopting a perspective sensitive to the nature of the land and the challenges it holds for its inhabitants:

> what do the more industrious gain by giving themselves all this additional trouble? The real wants of these people are few, and easily supplied; a hatchet, an ice-chissel, a file, and a knife, are all that is required to enable them, with a little industry, to procure a comfortable livelihood; and those who endeavour to possess more, are always the most unhappy, and may, in fact, be said to be only slaves and carriers to the rest. (51)

Hearne's thorough knowledge of the region enables him to perceive the "real wants" of its inhabitants as distinct from the distresses they incur in the course of pursuing commodities for trade. He recognizes that it is the "indolent" who are "the most happy, and, in truth, the most independent also" (52), while the annual traders are effectively reduced to a slavish dependency within a fur-trade economy that exploits their labour and reckons their personal worth in proportion only to the goods they carry each year to the factories. Although he stops considerably short of frank denunciation, it seems likely that, in his uneasy reflections on the ethical implications of his own role in these high and just proceedings, Hearne was likewise troubled by the complicity of the Company in the deaths of those who perished en route to its factories. He observes, for instance, that those most at risk on such journeys — "the aged and infirm, the women and children" — were able to "procure a comfortable livelihood" (51) from the caribou pounds and, in this way, to "live generally in a state of plenty, without trouble or risque" (52). Hearne also alludes to the spirit of acquisitiveness that the establishment of the fur-trade economy seems to have fostered among the natives. He cites the example of Captain Keelshies, who plundered a group "heavy laden with the most valuable furrs" (117) that was making the perilous trek to the Fort for the first time while under his charge, as well as the similar case of an unnamed Chipewyan who would have succeeded in marooning one of his fellows and "gladly have possessed the bundle of furrs at the expence of the poor man's life" (118) had Matonabbee not intervened to save him.

Hearne's perspectival shifts are often accomplished through his pointed use of irony to achieve a distance of remove, a technique that has proved more subtle than many of his detractors have been able to recognize, or willing to admit. In spite of his anticlimactic discovery that any mining venture on the northern Arctic coast would be as little feasible as profitable, Beattie and Geiger nevertheless maintain that "the notion of triumphant discovery still dominates his narrative" (158). They argue that this exalted spirit of heroic achievement reaches a kind of rhetorical crescendo in Hearne's account of how, having arrived at last at "that long wished-for spot" (*Journey* 93), he erected at the mouth of the Coppermine River a memorial to take "possession of the coast, on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company" (106), an act, they observe, "notably unrecorded in surviving copies of his field notes" (Beattie 158).

However, the authors have strategically omitted a key phrase that sheds important light on Hearne's view of the entire venture, and which, being but one instance among several, has broader implications for the text as a whole: "*For the sake of form*, however, after having had some consultation with the Indians, I erected a mark, and took possession of the coast, on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company" (106; emphasis added). To be sure, Hearne knew full well the meaninglessness of such a gesture, which is not the expression of a conqueror's righteous sense of entitlement and solitary will but rather the result of a cursory and pro forma "consultation with the Indians." Beattie and Geiger question "how he intended to enforce this extravagant territorial claim" (158), but they seem to have missed the joke: Hearne evidently realized that, since "neither the river nor sea were likely to be of any use" (*Journey* 106), his declaration of title, accomplished with so little ceremony and carved not in stone but on a piece of wood, was scarcely worth the trouble and expense it would require to enforce it (Greenfield 205).

It is undoubtedly in Hearne's characteristic use of irony that his own personality declares itself most distinctly. Though much has already been written of the massacre at Bloody Fall, no critic appears to have addressed Hearne's use of irony as a means both of distancing himself from the grisly proceedings and of registering his disapproval. Following the slaughter, he once again attributes to the natives a mock spirit of clinical investigation, though in a tone far darker than that of the amusing example of his Yellowknife examiners: "The brutish manner in which these savages used the bodies they had so cruelly bereaved of life was so shocking, that it would be indecent to describe it; particularly their curiosity in examining, and the remarks they made, on the formation of the women; which, they pretended to say, differed materially from that of their own" (100). In his description of their crude postmortem researches, Hearne emphasizes his own sense of disgust when he writes with cutting ironic understatement, "for my own part I must acknowledge, that however favourable the opportunity for determining that point might have been, yet my thoughts at the time were too much agitated to admit of any such remarks" (100).

In much the same way, Hearne also speaks sardonically of the "utmost uniformity of sentiment" and "reciprocity of interest" that united his companions in the bloody business at hand (97, 98); the irony

that they should be so full of charity and goodwill in plotting an act of such terrific cruelty was evidently not lost on him. Indeed, far from resorting to a literary primitivism that portrays aboriginals as childlike naïfs, simple in spirit and innocent of greed or envy, Hearne often goes out of his way to emphasize that "the Northern Indians are so covetous, and pay so little regard to private property as to take every advantage of bodily strength to rob their neighbours, not only of their goods, but of their wives" (69). As a prelude to the murderous undertaking, he caustically observes that "if ever the spirit of disinterested friendship expanded the heart of a Northern Indian, it was exhibited here in the most extensive meaning of the word. Property of every kind that could be of general use now ceased to be private, and every one who had any thing which came under that description, seemed proud of an opportunity of giving it, or lending it to those who had none" (98).

It is plain to see that Hearne was repelled by the "inhuman design" of his companions, and, though he knew it was impossible to prevent their carrying it forth, he takes pains to assure the reader that he objected strenuously. In the end, realizing that his personal safety "depended in a great measure on the favourable opinion" the natives entertained of him (74), he pragmatically surrendered the moral high ground and left off his entreaties for fear that he should be thought a coward. At the same time, although by emphasizing the long history of their enmity Hearne presumably intends to persuade the reader that he alone was powerless to broker a peace, he also seems to have understood that, as a foreigner, it was not his place to intercede and "attempt to turn the current of a national prejudice which had subsisted between those two nations from the earliest periods, or at least as long as they had been acquainted with the existence of each other" (75).

If one excepts the final two chapters, which seem to have been added as appendices (Neatby xxv), the massacre at Bloody Fall occurs at almost the precise centre of the *Journey*, as if appointed to serve as its climax. Cundell has suggested that Hearne "parallels his quest with the goal of the Chipewyan" – the massacre of the Copper Inuit – in order to reflect the shared nature of the experience and thus to acknowledge "the dependency of the British upon the assistance of Native peoples" (115, 117). However, in reshaping his original journals into a narrative of exploration, Hearne seems to have deliberately expanded the murderous

episode in order to counterpoint — and perhaps in some measure to offset — the expedition's culminating disappointment, namely, that the Empire would have to seek a Northwest Passage elsewhere, and that the copper mine at the mouth of the eponymous river proved in the event "no more than an entire jumble of rocks and gravel" (*Journey* 112). But in spite of its bitter anticlimax, Hearne's journey must in other respects finally be judged a success, for it produced what is surely "one of the classics of the literature of exploration" (Brebner 326). Ultimately, it is not so much Hearne's "judicious literary artistry" that distinguishes his text as his remarkably perceptive ability to apprehend the nature of the land he documents, as well as his capacity to recognize the problems inherent in imposing an uncompromisingly rigid European or putatively civilized perspective on a foreign nature and its local populations and cultures.

Alfred Bailey has suggested that Hearne's was the first in a series of "major narratives, notably by Mackenzie, Henry, Harmon, Thompson, and Ross, all conforming more or less to a pattern" in that "they are written in the first person, are factual, and derive their interest from the novelty of their material, their story of endurance, adventure, and discovery, and the incidental insight given into the character of the author" (26). However, such a categorization unjustly discounts important distinctions between these texts, as does any approach that regards the characters of their authors as "incidental" or that reduces them to single-minded agents of empire whose subjectivities are entirely determined by an imperialist cultural framework and a totalizing discourse of domination. To approach the *Journey* solely as a literary artifact would be to ignore the importance of the colonial context that produced and informs it, but an excessively "discourse-oriented" approach is liable to diminish Hearne's individuality and to overlook the ways in which his observations frequently reveal as much about his own nature as the nature of the place he was commissioned to explore. As Greenfield has observed, there is little doubt that "when Hearne and others like him came to write about their travels, their task was to translate what they had learned from experience and from Indian peoples into knowledge that was comprehensible and useful to European imperialists" (194). Nevertheless, Hearne was not writing purely to supply an imperialist demand for exploitable knowledge; the published account of his travels

seems calculated to appeal at least as much to readers who shared his own natural curiosity. Indeed, the case with Hearne is not as black and white as certain critics let on, for Hearne's at times conflicted sense of his dual roles as Company man and amateur natural historian frequently occasion perspectival shifts that, together with his ironical intelligence, enabled him to achieve an often surprisingly balanced distance of remove and inclusive point of view that is neither categorically imperialist nor altogether humanist but, finally, thoroughly and distinctly Hearnean.

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