Melting History: Defrosting Moments in Novels by Wayne Johnston, Michael Winter, and Robert Kroetsch

Owen D. Percy

Robert Kroetsch spoke for many writers of Canadian historical fiction when he explained in 1980 that "History as I knew it did not account for the world I lived in" ("On Being" 218). The historical novel in Canada does not, almost as a rule, attempt explicitly to 'account' for history; rather, it exults in the indeterminate space of this very impossibility. The genre's proliferation along these lines allows critics like Herb Wyile, writing in 2002, to suggest that many Canadian historical novelists demonstrate historical anxiety in their practices: "Their presentation of history is fragmented, self-conscious, and discursively and generically heterogeneous, reflecting a wariness about the terms of — even the possibility of — historical representation" (4). The rewriting of historical master narratives and the filling-in of historical gaps is not an attempt to account for history, or even to deny it. It is, rather, the reopening of the possibilities around the potential past. It is not an outright denial of history, truth, or fact, but it is an unseating of those abstractions as definitive. Linda Hutcheon's delineation of what we now comfortably call 'historiographic metafiction' nearly twenty years ago remains the foundation from which we not only study the past in novels but also "study how we know the past, how we *make* sense of it" (22). Much like the tenets of the many historical perspectives still thriving in the discipline of History itself (modernist love/hate, postmodernist denial, deconstructionist deconstruction, new-historicist re-examination, etc.), Hutcheon concedes the necessity of some form of popularly understood master narrative with which writers are able to begin. History, then, is unavoidable

in any cultural undertaking. Following in the footsteps of Raymond Williams, who "read literature as the history of what hadn't quite been said" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 62), we now believe that "literature itself can be read as counterhistory" (60). It is not truth, and it is not untruth; it is the possibility of truth. This possibility lies not in the stringing together of facts, nor the collection of artifacts or documents that might 'prove' one thing or another. It lies in the imagination of the reader who realizes that history is as slippery and vulnerable as ice.

In this paper I am interested in very specific and similar scenes or images in novels by Wayne Johnston, Michael Winter, and Robert Kroetsch, all of which reflect what I read as a process of resistance to History.[1] I argue that the self-consciousness of these Canadian historical novels as anecdotal rewritings of the master narratives of History is conveyed by similar acts of resistance to the closing of History within the metahistorical novels themselves. To borrow Hayden White's vocabulary, the content and the form of these books begin to emulate each other. Winter's Rockwell Kent suggests that "regret is hoping backwards" (330), though these novelists regret nothing. They exercise the power of literature to return to History in the hope of rewriting its possibilities. And its possibilities, I will suggest, are often encased in the icy subjects that populate many contemporary Canadian novels.

Things tend to freeze when exposed to the cold weather of the Canadian climate. It is not surprising, then, that many Canadian writers of recent historical fiction (and, suspiciously, more often male ones than female) have harkened back to the basic tenets of Atwood's *Survival* (or even Frye's "Conclusion" before it) in re-presenting the sub-zero Canadian clime as threatening or dangerous. Although the literary translation of the fear of freezing could be convincingly traced as far back as Franklin's journals, the more contemporary incarnations of that particular narrative (Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* or Atwood's "The Age of Lead") hold more resonance to this historiographical discussion precisely because they are contemporary works. That the weather has the ability to render a person frozen is still, it seems, a terrifying prospect.

An investigation into the *process* of freezing would admittedly trouble the tenets of my argument here as it would introduce a more gradual process of moving from being subject to being object, being animate to being inanimate, and, I suggest, from being able to resist History to

being reduced to fact by its master narratives. In Thomas Wharton's *Icefields*, one of the most compelling opening scenes in recent Canadian historical fiction depicts Doctor Edward Byrne slowly freezing into part of the glacier he has fallen into. Byrne's body actually begins to accumulate ice and his faculties of memory and reason desert him before he is rescued, much like Johnston's Smallwood blacks out before being rescued by Fielding (*Colony* 225). Although these bodies are presumably on the verge of becoming frozen, neither of these instances fall into the purview of my argument simply because the bodies are recovered from within Jasper's Arcturus glacier and the wilds of central Newfoundland.

Like *Icefields*, Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998), Winter's *The Big Why* (2004), and Krotesch's *The Man From the Creeks* (1998) are all tinged with an element of geographic exoticism. Johnston and Winter's Newfoundlands and Kroetsch's Klondike are all peripheral, dangerous, and foreign spaces on the hazy edges of mainstream Canada — places where we might be more inclined to believe that a person could freeze to death on the ice or be caught up in an unpredictable tidal wave of sliding snow; places where it might indeed seem cold enough to "freeze the balls off a brass monkey" and "freeze the nuts off an iron bridge," as Dan McGrew suggests of the Yukon (Kroetsch 267); places that we now might consider in the same light that Voltaire (in *Candide)* once considered the entire country: *quelques arpents de neige* — "a few acres of snow" (110). Most significantly, these are regions with little or no place in the master narratives and History of the nation. They are, then, wonderfully appropriate spaces from which to begin to fill in historical gaps because the gaps are almost all that exist. As Winter's Rockwell Kent admits, "the idea of being foreign appealed to me — I had lived most of my life in New York, and suddenly, with thirty rearing itself, the man-made surfaces bored me" (6). His journey into the foreignness of Newfoundland also proves to be a journey into the specific and anecdotal histories iced over by the mainstream History of Canada, but certainly not in the historiographic metafiction currently emerging from its past. Wiebe's recovery of Albert Johnson in *The Mad Trapper* locates this temperature-induced terror in the "nothingness" of the tundra. Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Last Crossing* performs a similar feat by presenting the survival of Simon Gaunt, who nestles himself into the slit-open belly of his dead horse in order to escape a deadly

prairie blizzard (8-9). Farley Mowat's *Lost in the Barrens*, along with most of his other work, uses the underlying fear of arctic weather as the thematic basis for his narrative practice. The History of Canadian literature, like the History of Canada as a nation, often lies and relies on familiar frozen ground.

In Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, the appropriately named Winter's *The Big Why*, and Kroetsch's *The Man From the Creeks*, the things that freeze are not things to begin with, but people. When the life is frozen out of them, they fall prey to becoming a fact, a statistic, a closed narrative within History — a voiceless object. Writer Stan Dragland admits, tongue firmly in cheek, that "fiction is not fact by definition" (197), though he refuses to privilege one over the other when it comes to (re)writing history. He rightly suggests that "there would *be* no *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* without the spadework of historians" and "sometimes it looks like we're all in the same business" (193, 192). The collection of facts (Joey Smallwood was born, he orchestrated Confederation for Newfoundland, he became the premier for a significant time, he died) — in other words, what is "knowable" — produces a popularly understood "web of connections to the past that holds a culture together" (Rosenstone 1175). This structure, however, is skeletal and rife with omissions. The aforementioned historical novels aim simultaneously to deconstruct and to strengthen that web by proposing further or alternative possible connections. The matter and material of these webs, although moved, altered, rewritten and re-placed, remains inescapably within the structure.

Johnston's Joe Smallwood, on a journalistic assignment to report about life on the seal hunt, comes upon "a strange statuary of the dead" (107) when the S.S. *Newfoundland* finally finds its missing crew frozen to death on the ice. This experience haunts him throughout the book's remaining 450-plus pages, and exists as perhaps "the novel's most striking moment" (Wyile 128). Winter's Rockwell Kent is witness to this same tragedy from a different perspective and at a different specific moment. He is on St. John's docks when the frozen bodies of the men of the *Newfoundland* are being offloaded "with no more care than if [they] had been seal[s]" (129). Although Kent is not as directly affected by this experience as Johnston's Smallwood, he laments that "it was wrong for all the majesty to be gone from the body" (129). In *The Man From the Creeks*, as the delirious protagonist surveys the victims of an avalanche,

he observes that "each body had been frozen into its own unique posture or shape" (102). Kroetsch's Peek (formerly known as the nameless piano player in Robert Service's "The Shooting of Dan McGrew") does not witness a sealing accident, or encounter victims of death-by-freezing; he meets the frozen body that was his father for the first and last time when a slide in the Chilkoot Pass asphyxiates dozens of would-be gold prospectors en route to Dawson City. It is, however, not the process of freezing that is important to my argument, but rather the encounter with the frozen and immobile body.

Early in *The Big Why*, Gerald Thayer's advice to Kent emulates the form of the novel in which it is located: "All is movement, Gerald has said. It's movement for the sake of making something new" (Winter 4). Indeed, the narrative moves along to tell the story of Kent's exploits and thoughts, and Winter manages to deliver a character resilient to the stagnancy and order of rural Newfoundland living. By making the possibilities around Kent move — by reviving his history — Winter is able to make something new of History: not necessarily more real or true, but new and possible. In Thayer's advice lies the crux of my argument; movement, being alive and engaged in life, as well as being aware of one's historical moment, is essential in resisting the reduction and paring down of History. When one ceases to move, when one becomes inanimate or completed by death — frozen — one can no longer dictate how one is (and will be) depicted by History. History quite literally closes such people's narrative, and they are powerless to alter or reopen it. History can be reopened by others — Smallwood's by Johnston, Kent's by Winter, Peek's by Kroetsch — but otherwise it claims ownership of them and authority over their stories by its very nature of relying only on what historians view as fact. Not only are Johnston, Winter and Kroetsch themselves reopening history through what Carolyn Porter calls "anecdotalization" (261), but within their novels their protagonists are as well. This is a process that will, I argue, "open history, or place it askew, so that literary texts c[an] find new points of insertion" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 52). Before discussing freezing in these novels, it might be pertinent to first elaborate on what is implied by the frozen body, and by History as a freezing agent.

If we seriously consider Hayden White's argument for the theoretical validity of 'historiophoty'[2] alongside historiography, we might begin to

think about the historical novel in alternative ways. Answering criticisms lodged against historical film, White suggests that

> no history, visual or verbal, "mirrors" all or even the greater part of the events or scenes of which it purports to be an account, and this is true even of the most narrowly restricted "micro-history." Every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced. (1194)

The way that language produces images in the historical novel, then, is equally effective and defective in its attempt to represent history. The novel relies not on the image as much as the imagination of the reader to create or invent an image based on its language. The benefit for novels like those of Johnston, Winter, and Kroetsch is that they make no claims of being capable or desirous of representing History in an authoritative way. All three are more intent on what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt call "encounter[s] with the singular, the specific, and the individual" in order to access a "touch of the real" (6, 49) — that is, some version of history that is more personally accessible to readers as being possible because of its filling in of the historical gaps between facts and so-called certainties.[3] By participating in the anecdotalization of history by giving readers accounts of sex lives, personal thoughts and reflections, motives, and personalities that History tends to gloss over on its way to recording accomplishments, facts, and statistics, these novels are able to suggest the 'realness' of history — the personal. They are acutely aware, and in fact exult in, White's notion, here articulated by Wyile, that "the emplotment of historical developments is necessarily selective and ideological" (130). By reclaiming stories from the realm of the supposedly objective, Johnston, Winter, and Kroetsch participate in History not by definitively upending its master narratives, but by critically adding to them with specific and conflicting possible *histories*. Their project is to prevent the freezing of History, and they pursue this by thawing out the apparent facts surrounding their three protagonists in order to propose what might also have existed before being erased by the ice of time.

In his own discussion on the philosophy and theory of cinema, Gilles Deleuze reconsiders Henri Bergson and suggests the following about movement:

> Space covered is past, movement is present, the act of covering. The space covered is divisible, indeed infinitely divisible, whilst movement is indivisible, or cannot be divided without changing qualitatively each time it is divided. This already presupposes a more complex idea: the spaces covered all belong to a single, identical, homogeneous space, while the movements are heterogeneous, irreducible among themselves. (*Cinema 1* 1)

If we consider that the "space covered" is what we popularly think of as History, we are able to see just how divisible and closed History becomes once it actually becomes "the past," the "place we've already been," or the "space already covered." Movement then is resistance to this susceptibility. It is resistance to freezing.[4] Winter's aging Kent announces, "My only belief now is that if you keep moving, perhaps the laws of nature will forget how old you are" (359). The movement of Johnston's Joe Smallwood along the railroad tracks is a revisitation of History's version of Smallwood's accomplishments, precisely because it is not factually accurate. Thus Smallwood's description of the "statuary of the dead" portrays the sealers' deaths in a still-life image out on the frozen ocean. Deleuze reminds us that "a still life cannot be confused with a landscape. An empty space owes its importance above all to the absence of a possible content, whilst the still life is defined by the presence and composition of objects which are wrapped up in themselves or become their own container" (*Cinema 2* 16). The frozen men here are literally wrapped up in themselves, huddled for warmth or companionship in death, much like Peek's father's frozen embrace, but it is not the positions or expressions of the dead that signify relegation to History: it is their lack of movement. Again, Deleuze posits that "the still life is time, for everything that changes is in time, but time does not itself change, it could itself change only in another time, indefinitely" (*Cinema 2* 17). The movement and tyranny of time (and thus History) is inevitable. In fact, against the reopening of History "there is no other crime than time itself" (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 37). Echoing this, Winter's Rockwell Kent remarks "there's something dead in the telling of time" (95). In resisting History by rewriting a history or by trying to enable a frozen man to resist History, we combat the vagaries of time, if only for an instant. This fight, however, is suggestive of the anxiety writers and their characters share over being eventually relegated to voicelessness.

The instant in Johnston's novel with which I am presently con-

cerned, which Hans Bak ironically describes as "one of the book's most *moving* scenes" (226; emphasis added), brings Johnston's Smallwood face to face with the indisputable intersection of the weather and the human, and the underlying question of History-in-the-making:

> For several minutes after the ship stopped, no one disembarked. I saw what I had not been able to see through my binoculars: that these were not survivors but a strange statuary of the dead. I was not repulsed by what I saw. I could not take my eyes away.
>
> Two men knelt side by side, one man with his arm around the other, whose head was resting on his shoulder in a pose of tenderness between two men that I had never seen in life.
>
> Three men stood huddled in a circle, arms about each other's shoulders, heads together like schoolboys conferring on a football field.
>
> A man stood hugging himself, his hands on his arms, shoulders hunched, in the manner of someone who has momentarily stepped out of his house into the cold in shirtsleeves to bid a guest goodbye.
>
> One man knelt, sitting back on his heels, while another stood behind him, his hands on his shoulders, as if they were posing for a photograph.
>
> Two sealers stood in a fierce embrace, the taller man with both arms wrapped round the other, holding him against his chest, while the arms of the shorter man hung rigid at his sides. …
>
> They had been transformed by their passion on the ice. Each had assumed in death some posture emblematic of his life. Or else they were refined to men that no one knew, as if in each face and posture was inscrutably depicted the essence of the person they had been. (107-08)

The horror that Johnston's Smallwood experiences here is largely due to the lack of movement in the scene. He states earlier that "there was never a time when the ship was idle" (100), so this suddenly still scene comes as a sharp juxtaposition to normalcy. The images that he describes strike him, and presumably the reader, as eerie because the men are frozen in positions that seem to betray the clean fact of their death — they are fruitlessly trying to combat the immobility of death-by-freezing, and thus freeze into images that display their humanity. Deleuze reminds us that "the essence of a thing never appears at the outset, but in the middle, in the course of its development, when its strength is assured"

(*Cinema 1* 3). The sealers are frozen in the midst of actions and movement, so what Smallwood witnesses in this statuary is "a touch of the real" that the representation through History can never account for. Much of what resonates in him is this inability to possibly represent the scene. He laments, "I could not write about the men I had seen on the ice. I tried to but I could not" (114), and that despite having been a veritable witness to the disaster, in the days following, he "and all the newspaper reporters of St. John's pieced together the story of the men of the S.S. *Newfoundland*" (113). The impossibility of representing the specific humanity surrounding this fact has become painfully evident to Smallwood, though Johnston here has unfrozen History in order to refreeze the men in a more specific and horrifyingly personal context.

Aside from the numbness and awe Smallwood feels in the face of this experience, his reaction to it mirrors the relationship that Johnston's novel has with the master narrative of History as a whole. A significant disconnection between mind and body develops in Smallwood's consciousness:[5] "Something deep within me, which I hadn't known was there, gave way. My body grieved but not my mind. I felt as though someone who was sitting right beside me was crying, and though I wanted to console him, I could not" (109). Tellingly, this particular experience revisits him later, at the very moment when his wife is experiencing an orgasm which he still has no idea how to prompt: "I had the sensation I was watching something I was not a part of, as I had when my body cried for the men of the *Newfoundland* while my mind looked on" (247). The fissure between reason and emotion in Smallwood is analogous to the disconnect between the facts of History and the imagination of the novel. Both are reactions, and it is here that Smallwood realizes that he cannot reconcile the two. *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* has recognized this at its outset. As a novel, it uses the anecdote to rewrite the story of the sealers, it "chip[s] away at the familiar edifices and make[s] plastered-over cracks appear" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 52). These cracks are where the "real" and specific elements of History reside, and where History falls impossibly short. Smallwood's resistance to this freezing comes in the form of his inexplicable tears, as well as leading him into a life of socialist, labour-based politics in hopes of preventing such future disasters.

Other instances of freezing speckle the novel, and although they are

briefer and more plot-driven, they display a similar fear of immobility. They recognize what Wyile refers to as "the crushing weight of history but also the crippling effects of trying to repress the past" ("Historical" 90), when the pitched tome, D.W. Prowse's *The History of Newfoundland,* very literally begins "the avalanche of history" that buries an innocent bystander (Johnston, "My Treatment"). Notably, the man is unknown even to his neighbours — his name unfamiliar to the characters until someone uncovers the fact that he was "'Mr. Mercer,' who they said lived on the Brow by himself. His eyes and mouth were wide open, his mouth stuffed with snow" (72). Without having seen Mr. Mercer alive, no one is able to construct his history aside from the fact of his name and approximate address. Frozen, both literally and figuratively, by History, he falls victim to the reducing and totalizing tendency inherent in discussing the past which *Colony* as a whole works against. When Smallwood himself nearly freezes to death during his railroad odyssey, he again recalls the sealers: "I was dressed as well for a blizzard as the men of the *Newfoundland* had been dressed. And without the reserves of strength that even the weakest of them had had" (224). His only salvation, as often proves to be the case, is Fielding, who amazingly saves him from freezing into History and brings him back to life with a warm bath. "He is not dead whose good name lives" (227), she quips to him, though Johnston suggests that Smallwood desires more than the fact of his name to survive.[6] He displays his fear of becoming Mr. Mercer, known only by his facts and not his "reality."

As the S.S. *Newfoundland* returns to St. John's, the people gathered at the docks get a brief glimpse into what Johnston's Smallwood now understands of the history that imbricates the facts they have undoubtedly gathered: "Only when a pair of sealers rashly took it upon themselves to roll back the tarpaulin that covered the hold did those at the front of the crowd see what the company that owned the S.S. *Newfoundland* had ordered that no one be allowed to see" (Johnston 112). In *The Big Why*, Winter's Rockwell Kent experiences this moment from the perspective of the onlooking crowd, though he describes many similar images and notions. Winter himself also demonstrates his "ability to capture a vivid image with a few deft and economical sentences" (MacFarlane D8). From the docks in the St. John's harbour, Kent witnesses the off-loading of the frozen victims:

> Men were pulling at the tarpaulin, rope had iced onto the deck. They levered the stiff carcass of a big seal with blunt hatchets. They carried the frozen seal to the side as the *Bellaventure* moored. But the seal was not a seal. It was the pelt of a seal, and inside the pelt was a frozen man. You could see a sliver of his body through the open belly of the seal. His hands together, as if in prayer. They handled this body with no more care than if it had been a seal, for the men knew only one way to offload cargo. It frightened them to touch this half seal, half man, they were nervous around unlucky things. The hard, buckled body slid from ropes and thudded to the apron with the shock of a hollow weight. It was wrong for all the majesty to be gone from the body… .
>
> The dead men were laid out in the basement of the King George Institute. The corpses were covered in sheets along theatre chairs and on the floor of an empty swimming pool. They brought bathtubs from all over St. John's. Nurses were thawing the bodies in tubs of warm water. Their knitted caps still frozen to their foreheads. In one tub they were coaxing the thawed seal pelt away from the dead man. Yes, thawing allows the human to return. (129-30)

From the moment that Kent and Bob Bartlett hear that the men of the S.S. *Newfoundland* are in trouble (122), they understand that even supposed facts are mutable. The initial report is that fifty men have perished, but the next day the number has risen to seventy (see 124, 125). When they are there to witness the frozen men themselves there is, at least for Kent, a lack of comprehension similar to that which Johnston's Smallwood experiences. He cannot at first differentiate between a frozen pelt and a frozen man. Similarly, the sealers cannot change their work methods: the frozen men become objects that have lost any humanity they once held. When Kent remarks that it was "wrong" for the majesty to be gone from the body, he is echoing the problem of representing this event. Even their fellow sealers have lost the ability to consider the frozen men human. They become statistics, aligned with the number of pelts brought in: hard fact to be recorded by historians, and little else. There is, however, a suggestion of resistance to this loss of the "real" in these bodies. It seems possible to come back from being frozen — to challenge one's relegation to fact — as a feverish sealer howls on the docks: "I was froze for two days and now I'm on fire" (129). Unlike Smallwood, who would rather not see the frozen men disturbed, Kent observes (and embodies) the notion that I am proposing Johnston, Winter, and Kroetsch convey in their novels: that reinscribing the *grand*

récit of History with these personal and human *petit récits* reopens the possibilities of History to represent the "real."[7] Kent *and* Winter write, "This is my book, this will to know" (74). The act of recovering these bodies from their frozen state allows us to separate and differentiate between object (pelt) and human, and it allows the human to return. In the way that *The Big Why* reclaims Rockwell Kent's history to create the personal anecdotes which lead to the Historical facts, Kent and the nurses reclaim the humanity of the frozen men from the dehumanizing effects of History.

The Big Why is perhaps the most frozen of these three novels in its sustained winter imagery, attention to weather, and perhaps even in its style. Winter even seems to speak directly to Voltaire's famous dismissal of Canada[8] when he writes of the "dark blue acre of snow slanting down to the water" (90) or describes Brigus harbour as "a quilt of white acres stitched with blue" (114). As a painter, Winter's Kent, like Winter the author, freezes images for a living. Before he even reaches his new destination Kent realizes that he is in a place where freezing is common. The train gets frozen on the tracks by a snowstorm (26), though Kent continues moving. The Georgian house he is meant to live in has been invaded by snow and ice and is uninhabitable (32), and the house he eventually inhabits is regularly described as frozen (73, 118). Ice is dangerous and ubiquitous: "You couldn't see the ice, but you *felt* it in your breath in the mornings" (95; emphasis added). It sinks Bartlett's ship full of coal because his hubris allows him to try to break through it (64). In another striking scene in the novel, Robert and Tom Dobie fall through the ice on a river while tracking a caribou and are encased in a spectacular glacial dome from which they must escape (89). Although Winter's Kent explains that "I accept inertia and I can live within it for a long time" (30), there is perpetual movement in the novel with the large exception of the frozen sealers. The fear of freezing is ever-present. Kent even attempts to unfreeze the figurehead that he and Tom Dobie dig up from under the snow on the Pomeroy's garden by repainting it, and by rewriting its history as an artifact (92).

Like Johnston's Smallwood, Winter's Kent has a more singular experience with a frozen body. When Tom Dobie and Tony Loveys return home late one night from fishing, Kent knows that there is a problem. He rushes down to the dory and discovers "the corpse of the barefooted Stan Pomeroy rimed in a crust of ice. Stiff" (186). Like the frightened

sealers off-loading the bodies of their former mates, Kent initially falls prey to the same acceptance of the frozen body as inhuman: "I hoisted myself down, and from there the fish turned into the stiffened body of Stan Pomeroy. He was white and frozen flat, with a gaff mark in his jaw. He was dead and half-naked in the shaky light. He looked like he'd been dead all his life" (185). This contradictory last sentence emphasizes my point: without the anecdotes and personal history surrounding Stan, he can only exist as a dead man. All History could record of him was that he lived, he fished, and he died. The story and various implications surrounding that death are reliant on the imaginations of Winter, of Kent, and of the reader, and this is exactly how the historical novel resists the icing-over of History. Just as Winter looks upon the story of Rockwell Kent, Stan's mother looks at his body "as if she had a plan to revive him yet. To dip Stan in warm water. Thaw him alive again, gently" (185). When Tom Dobie nervously describes an even more specific narrative about the drowning to Kent, the painter nods understandingly at Tom's frantic attempts to prepare Stan's frozen appearance by saying, "you want to achieve less the image of a corpse" (354) so as to allow Stan Pomeroy to exist outside of the facts of his life and death. This further filling-in of the gap between event and representation allows Kent to know both Tom and Stan slightly more personally, in much the same way that Kroetsch introduces his narrator — the young Peek — to his frozen father in *The Man From the Creeks*.

Kroetsch's speaker experiences his interaction with the frozen body while ravaged by a fever and illness that confined him to bed and thus likely saved him, his mother Lou, and their companion Ben from being themselves buried in the Chilkoot avalanche. After Lou has stunned him with the news that his father not only exists (or rather existed) but that he has been killed in the slide, Peek eagerly makes his way up to the recovery site:

> They had laid out the bodies in crooked rows as they brought them in. Each body had been frozen into its own unique posture or shape, up there on the slope, after the avalanche did its thing. Some of the men looked as if they were wrestling with figures you couldn't see. They were folded up like dough in a bakery or twisted up like pretzels. Their faces were full of different looks, some still trying to scream, some trying to call out for help. Some were in pain, you could see. You could almost feel the pain. Some were peaceful-looking.…

> I didn't feel like crying, partly because his mouth seemed to invite me to smile. [My father] looked as if he was preparing to have his picture taken and was only for the moment holding still. His arms were frozen in the shape of an embrace. One of his mitts was missing. I wanted to take off one of my own and pull it over his naked hand, there in that fierce weather.…
> It was then I gave him a little poke with the toe of my right moccasin, as if he might speak up and do some answering. I stubbed my toe. The whole entire body was frozen stiff as a board. That's when I said to Lou, without looking away from the frozen corpse, "I guess you aren't a married woman any more." (102-04)

The immediate similarities between this description and those of Johnston and Winter are evident, though Kroetsch's oral storytelling style allows this interaction to remain relatively lighthearted compared to the sense of fatality that underlies the encounters of Johnston's Smallwood and Winter's Kent. Still, the veritable display and parade of frozen bodies that Peek witnesses provides him with the haunting suggestion of the "real" that exists underneath the fact of the corpses. It is interesting that Peek does not feel like crying, just as Johnston's Smallwood does not realize that he actually is weeping: Peek seems more interested in the image for personal and familial reasons than anything else. Also like Johnston's Smallwood, Peek (at first) resists the urge to alter the frozen body — he does not give up his mitt for the comfort of a now-inanimate object, but he suggests an initial desire to do so. He is also able to immediately compute the implications of this newly complete chapter in his and Lou's history when he notes that she is no longer married.

Interestingly, these frozen men do become, in a sense, mobile when they are loaded onto the packtrain to be taken away. They remain immobile but gain mobility only through the actions and re-placement of their bodies by the survivors of "the avalanche of history":

> The first packtrain started out with the first fifteen corpses, each in the posture it had assumed in the slide. Some of the corpses weren't covered at all. I mean with blankets or tarps. For that matter, some of them had been deprived of their parkas and boots. One was seated backwards, as if he was studying the horse's rear end. One man was seated upright wearing nothing but his winter underwear and an old pair of boots that no one wanted. One fellow looked as if he was flapping his arms and trying to fly. Another seemed to

> be examining his own private parts for crab lice, which weren't too hard to find in that camp. (106-07)

Unlike the off-loading of the frozen sealers of the S.S. *Newfoundland*, this handling of frozen bodies creates a series of comical and absurd images: men checking for crab lice, flapping their arms like birds, inspecting a horse's rear end. Kroetsch's suggestion of the sheer and potentially ridiculous subjectivity of historical representation is difficult to miss here.

Strangely, Claire Omhovère describes the avalanche as "an ambiguous welcome sign from an otherwise impenetrable Nature" (26), though I have difficulty reading it as ambiguous either naturally or historically. On the one hand, it is the ice and snow that allow Peek to know his father in any capacity, and on the other they eliminate the potential to know him beyond the fact of his name, his appearance, Lou's reticent and selective recollections of him, and an envelope with his former address on it. This particular instance of the icing-over of History is exemplary of what the novels of Johnston, Winter, and Kroetsch are resisting: Peek is stuck with the fact that J Badger existed, and although desirous of the anecdotes with which to build a human conception of his father, Badger's frozen body remains unable to reveal its history. If we, for reasons Kroetsch creates for us, similarly desire to know what really happened the night that Dan McGrew was killed in the Malamute Saloon, we need someone like Peek (or by extension Kroetsch) to provide the possibilities for us. Like Winter's Kent, Peek demonstrates a desire, albeit less direct than Kent's, to prevent or reverse the freezing: to make the human return. When he nudges the body and half-expects it to speak or move, Peek is attempting to save his father from his relegation to fact. This process proves an impossibility, of course, but Peek's gesture towards this retrieval demonstrates his desire for a more specific and thoroughly imagined and anecdotalized father. Not so strange, then, is his burial of Lou in the permafrost beneath the floorboards of his cabin (305), because he has orchestrated this specificity himself.

This brings me to an interesting point about *The Man From the Creeks,* and a concluding re-emphasis of the (dis)regard with which History is held by these historical novelists. Rockwell Kent was, according to fact, at some point a living person. So, certainly, was Joey Smallwood. Kroetsch's Peek is a fabrication of a fabrication — springing from the imagination of Robert Service to the imagination of Robert

Kroetsch, to the imagination of the reader, he is a bit of an anomaly in Canadian historical fiction.[9] Still, Hutcheon reminds us that "all of Kroetsch's novels play off the tension between the oral and the written" (161), and thus we find in Peek a colourful storytelling streak, with which he leads us on a "geohistorical trek through the rich territory of our past" (Gugeler par. 2). Paradoxically, this fictional boy is dead set on righting the poet's historical wrongs. He asks, "Why do poets fail, ever, to look at the facts themselves?" (278). And he declares his purpose early in the narrative: "What I want to get straight before I kick the bucket is the matter of Mr. Robert Service and his saying that Lou pinched the stranger's poke — the corpse's poke — and all that was in it. Poets are liars. We know that" (17). Here, perhaps more that in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* or *The Big Why*, "we are lured into a world of imagination only to be confronted with the world of history" (Hutcheon 17). Despite his proclaimed and staunch dedication to restoring the facts of Lou's story, Peek appeals to the reader's sense of history entirely through the imagination. Because he has no factual referent, he exists in the history that he is able to convince his reader exists. Although historical facts surround Peek and the narrative of the Klondike, they become secondary to the specific story of his experience.

Herbert Butterfield wrote in 1924 that "history cannot come so near to human hearts and human passions as a good novel can; its very fidelity to facts makes it not perhaps less true to life, but farther away from the heart of things" (18). Similarly, Stan Dragland gestures to some of the historical inaccuracies of Johnston's novel[10] but concludes that "Smallwood was not on the *Newfoundland*, but the sealing disaster is much nearer the heart of Newfoundland" (202), and thus Johnston's novel remains "real." Johnston himself, called to defend his manipulation of facts in his novel, reiterates that "fiction like *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* does not pursue and is not based upon the kind of truth pursued by biographers and historians. Adherence to the 'facts' will not lead you safely through the labyrinthine pathways of the human heart" ("My Treatment"). These three examples of recent Canadian historical fiction do not deny facts or History, but they certainly demonstrate their incredulity towards them. Winter's Rockwell Kent at one point exclaims, "I believe in the hybrid, I'm convinced that new things come from the merging of tradition and new thought" (212). History here works in much the same way: it works alongside the various pos-

sible histories that fiction affords the writer and reader. I have argued that the specific examples of encountering the frozen body in these three novels work to resist History by unfreezing it, though I of course recognize that the rewriting of a history is a simultaneous refreezing of its possibilities. I believe, though, that Johnston, Winter, and Kroetsch, based on the historical unruliness of their respective protagonists, would love nothing more than to continue this perpetual reformulation of the impossible past.

Notes

[1] I have capitalized "History" in this case in order to denote its popular or assumed understanding. Where I continue this practice throughout the essay, I am referring to the master narratives of history — the facts and the popular stories that surround them — what we comfortably call the *grand récits* of history. In this case, then, I am suggesting that the protagonists in question portray a recognition of the totalizing and closing of a time period into history, which thus makes it inaccessible and final, and that they, like Johnston, Winter, and Kroetsch themselves, actively resist this notion of History. Where the word remains uncapitalized, I mean to refer to the anecdotes and specific historiographic metafictive narratives proposed by the writers as well as their protagonists.

[2] White describes "historiophoty" as "the representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse," as compared to the more familiar "historiography," briefly described as "the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse" (1193).

[3] White elaborates on the impossible task of accurately representing any thing or person within History or history: "Even in written history, we are often forced to represent some agents only as 'character types,' that is, as individuals known only by their general social attributes or by the kinds of actions that their 'roles' in a given historical event permitted them to play, rather than as full-blown 'characters,' individuals with many known attributes, proper names, and a range of known actions that permit us to draw fuller portraits of them than we can draw of their more 'anonymous' counterparts" (1199).

[4] Deleuze elaborates: "Movement always relates to a change, migration to a seasonal variation. And this is equally true of bodies: the fall of a body presupposes another one which attracts it, and expresses a change in the whole which encompasses them both" (*Cinema 1* 8); "Movement in space expresses a whole which changes.... Everywhere that a movement is established between things and persons, a variation or a change is established in time, that is, in an open whole which includes them and into which they plunge" (*Cinema 2* 237).

[5] There is much evidence that the haunting that Johnston's Smallwood experiences comes as a result of the sublime experience of witnessing the frozen men. Danielle Fuller describes the incident as "awe-inspiring" for Smallwood (28), and although it does not fit comfortably under Kant's natural sublime because of the human element, Smallwood's shock does manifest itself as something that he finds "unpresentable" (Lyotard 78). Emily Lutzker describes an evolved postmodern sublime that "now manifests itself in an intangible gap between consciousness and the material world" (par. 9), which might explain the rift between Smallwood's inability to understand his own physical reaction to the scene.

Lutzker continues: "The gap between what is being shown (occurring within our reason) and what is happening (a manifestation of imagination) is the sublime" (par. 10) and that the sublime experience now resides not specifically in nature, but in the human experience "this event is what our consciousness cannot formulate. What does not mentally solidify is that something happens. The something that happens is the event of the sublime" (par. 11). She concludes, "The sublime is what 'dismantles consciousness,' and leaves us only with imagination. To experience the contradiction of the sublime is pure imagination" (par. 15). The fissure between Smallwood's reason and his imagination is where the sublime experience of his frozen encounter exists.

[6] On the eve of Confederation, Johnston's Smallwood confides to the reader, "It seemed to me that unless I did something that historians thought was worth recording, it would be as if I had never lived, that all the histories in the world together formed one book, not to warrant inclusion in which was to have wasted one's life" (454).

[7] Gallagher and Greenblatt write that "any *petit récit* would puncture the historical *grand récit* into which it was inserted" (49).

[8] In the oft-quoted twenty-third chapter of *Candide* (1759), Martin explains why the English are just as deluded about Canada as the French: "You realize, of course, that these two nations are fighting over a few acres of snow on the borders of Canada, and that they spend more money on this glorious war than the whole of Canada is worth" (110).

[9] "Kroetsch's narrator could not be more earnest when he considers Service's poem as a hard fact. Peek is painfully aware of the value of words. If a loose textual mesh fails to capture the real, subtle arrangements do end up constructing the very simulacrum we then construe as reality, in much the same way as Service's *Songs of a Sourdough* (re)created the Klondike for those who had missed the boat" (Omhovère 24).

[10] Most worthy of mention here is the fact that for Johnston, the S.S. *Newfoundland* had some form of wireless communication, otherwise Smallwood could not have filed his stories on a daily basis. For Winter, however, the ship had been stripped of all wireless communication devices in order for the owners to save money — a point upon which he bases his brief socialist invective against Thomas Connors and other sealing captains (136).

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