

THE EXPLORER IN WESTERN CANADIAN LITERATURE

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The first fact we notice in this territory is how infrequently the names of the historical explorers occur. When we do encounter them, it is their limitations, their disappointed expectations, that have engaged the writer. We find Newlove's Samuel Heame, shaken by the cold and filth of the northern landscape yet finding this cold "impossible to describe," and himself, when his Indian guides execute an Eskimo girl, "helpless before his helpers."¹ We see Birney's Captain Cook sailing

north from the Golden Gate
to where nothing was certain on the maps
except that lance-straight giant's channel
cleaving the continent from Brobdingnag
to Hudson's Bay and home

He encounters only

. . . kelp snakes
writhing ship-long on the water
a coast coldly smoldering
Over the drowned peaks heaved the seals
Land was a meaningless tramping of trees
a pike-staffed army pacing them all summer

The words tell us of a landscape that is angry, dangerous, and much larger than Cook's ability to ascribe meaning. The one "lance-straight" reality he encounters is ironically not the Strait of Anian which he expected but the Hawaiian spear in the back which sends him "to explore his last reef."² We are given the explorer as corpse, and given thereby a large hint about the futility of his earlier explorations.

¹John Newlove, "Samuel Heame in Wintertime," *The Fat Man* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p. 61.

²Earle Birney, "Captain Cook," *Selected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), pp. 4-5.

offer no grail, it was no grail
he was after, he was not
sailing with that kind of purity.

He stopped to dine on the silver plates
of the Spanish, Quadra saw no
Celt there, but Vancouver, the reformed
Dutchman, a young sailor
with an appetite. (p. 39)

The real for Bowering is what is discovered rather than sought, it is sexual and botanical rather than conceptual. The only grail or Strait of Anian that Vancouver enters is in making love to an Indian woman who welcomes him "like an inlet / of warm water." The other successful explorer of his expedition is his botanist, Robert Menzies, a man who "never thinks / about the king's / northwest passage," who instead "pulls the weed out of the ground / to poke around at its roots (p. 26), and produces drawings of Indian weeds which are "some surety, an illustration of a leaf / with only a thousand lines in it" (p. 5).

The myth that arises in these poems is of the power and mystery of the land that resists "Romance" in Newlove, "certainty" in Birney, and human "fancy" in Bowering. Concurrently the poems imply as false myth the explorer as would-be Parsifal, exploration as quest-romance, landscape as holy-grail. Within these poems there is a collision between European tradition and expectation and North American landscape, between Brobdingnag and the drowned peaks of the northern islands, between the romantic image and human manure, between the Strait of Anian and Cook's Inlet reproduced in Vancouver's meticulous chart-making on the cover of *George, Vancouver*. Implicit is the idea that the land is massively more important and vital than its explorer — an idea which perhaps explains why in all the landscape-rich work of Laurence, Wiebe, Livesay, Marlatt, Lane, Mitchell, Ross, and Grove so little mention of early exploration is made. As in Birney's "Down the Mammoth Corridors," the geologic extravagances of "howling summits" and "fresh-hewn alps" dwarfs

... those first compulsive whites the Searchers
for gold absolution furs or mere difference
[who] came hurtling in improbable canoes heavy with liquor
and fear bearing their beads and syphilis
muzzleloaders and god.⁴

⁴Earle Birney, *Rag and Bone Shop* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), p. 12.

Implicit also is the question of who the explorer is, or should be: a Parsifal or an Odysseus, a quester or a "sailor / with an appetite." We find an objection to goal-directed exploration, the search for gold, for an overland route to the Pacific, for furs, for the Strait of Anian, and by further implication to Columbus' quest for the Indies or Franklin's for the northwest passage. In the major western treatment of the Odysseus story, Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man*, Hazard Lepage's quest to breed the perfect horse is viewed as absurd and mistaken — a refusal, as Ann Mandel has argued, of the body, of life, or sexuality, as well as death, and overall a parody of Odysseus's wanderings.⁵

Latent within these various accounts of wrong-headed, goal-oriented exploration would seem to be an assertion of the Odyssean wanderer as the better model. The clearest examples of such an assertion are Kroetsch's novels, particularly *Badlands*, a novel specifically about exploration. The protagonist, William Dawe, leader of the William Dawe Expedition into the Alberta Badlands in search of museum-quality dinosaur skeletons, is a quester — and Orpheus whose Eurydice is his fantasized Daweosaurus which he dreams of retrieving from his Badlands descent:

From seventy million years deep in the black matrix of the past the bones must leap to light. Must loose themselves from the bentonite. Must make their finders rich and famous, The bone that must satisfy their finders.⁶

Dawe's determination to make the past live is a denial of death, a denial of the contemporaneity of his own sexuality, and a rejection of the woman who offers herself to him; it renders him "indifferent to all the real and natural world" (p. 56). His particular grail, or in Bowering's terms, his 'fancy,' is history; it is history, things which have died, which obsesses him and blinds him to the human present. Yet paradoxically it is not his questing will which allows him his three discoveries of the past; it is the accidents of the unstructured and appetite-directed present. He discovers his first skeleton as a result of a visit by one of his workmen to a whiskey-still; the second through looking for a shortcut back to camp while thinking wistfully of his Ontario wife; the third through his Indian mistress's stumbling upon it

⁵"Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism in the Novels of Robert Kroetsch," *Open Letter* (Third Series), no. 8 (Spring 1978), pp. 52-71.

⁶(Toronto: Paperjacks, 1975), p. 31.

while fornicating with another man in a thunder storm. The message is that successful exploration requires what William Dawe most lacks — a quick responsiveness to event, openness to experience and sexuality. Instead Dawe stubbornly remains committed, in his daughter Anna Dawe's words, to "shutting out instead of letting in" (p. 269), and in his mistress Anna Yellowbird's more graphic words — which also invoke Birney's contrast in scale between nature and man — to "pissing in the ocean." Ultimately, the true explorers in *Badlands* are not any quest-driven men but the two Annas with whom the book ends, who hurl William Dawe's field notes and photographs into a lake, and who refuse "dinosaurs or men or their discipline or their courage or their goddamned honour or their goddamned fucking fame or their goddamned fucking death-fucking death," who refuse to "look back, not once, ever" (p. 270).

In these women we see again the counter-myth of the explorer as receptive adventurer. Their forerunner in Western-Canadian fiction is Topaz Edgeworth of Ethel Wilson's 1949 novel *The Innocent Traveller*. In this recounting of the emigration of three elderly British women to Vancouver in the late nineteenth century, we find Topaz part of another contrast between preconception and reality — as when her older sister becomes upset by the very concept of a buffalo, and relieved to see Ontario sheep grazing "in an international manner":

They did not seem to know or care they were Canadian sheep and should perhaps behave differently in a characteristic way, like the bison. They might indeed have been sheep of Staffordshire. Neither were the cows different from the English beasts in their behavior, the dear familiar cows.⁷

Topaz, who has been the one who troubled her sister by her enthusiastic account of the bison, also upsets her by exploring the gentlemen's smoking-room on the train and claiming that in Canada one has "to be less conventional," and throughout the journey has to be prevented by the porter at each stop from naively "getting off the train to 'walk upon the prairie'" (p. 115).

In all these works exploration becomes a metaphor for life and, by implication, for the writing process itself. Newlove, Birney, and Bowering all juxtapose the explorer's world with the twentieth

⁷(Toronto: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 110-111.

century and with their own lives. In "Samuel Heame in Wintertime," Newlove sees his own sick children as embodiments of the sickly Indian children Heame saw in the winter encampments, and both situations as calling on man to do more "than endure." In *George, Vancouver*, the title simultaneously denotes the explorer, the tensions between George III and the explorer, and the presence of the poet, George Bowering, in the city Vancouver. The exploration is concurrently Vancouver's of the lower B.C. coast and Bowering's of both that exploration and of the nature of exploration itself. The final poem reads as both Bowering's and Vancouver's:

Let us say
this is as far as I, George,
have travelled. (p. 39)

Birney's "Down the Mammoth Corridors," makes no distinction between "those first compulsive whites" and the contemporary skid-road businessmen — "the spastic traffic / of buyers and bought pedlars of weed and soap / of acid and snow of work and wonder/ in skidrow's lanes."⁸ And in "Pacific Door" Birney recalls "dying Bering lost in Fog" and "Drake's crewmen" who "scribbled here their paradise," and then proposes the ineffectuality and isolation of the explorer as symbolic of the limitations of a race:

Here Spaniards and Vancouver's boatmen scrawled
the problem that is ours and yours
that there is no clear Strait of Anian
to lead us back to Europe
that men are isled in oceans or in ice
and only joined by long endeavour to be joined.⁹

For Kroetsch and Wilson also the explorer embodies the problem of how to live — innocently or cautiously in *The Innocent Traveller*, openly or narrowly in *Badlands*. The goal of 'exploration' for these novelists is not merely Newlove's of "Samuel Heame in Wintertime" "to know," or Bowering's of *George, Vancouver* to make "the eye's charter, the diary of Menzies, botanist, illustrator, practical man, curious,"¹⁰ but impulsiveness and laughter. All five writers see the explorer as an artist whose works vary in

⁸*Rag and Bone Shop*, p. 11.

⁹*Selected Poems*, p. 142.

¹⁰P. 30. We note that "curious" later becomes the title of another Bowering book in which he explores his images of contemporary Canadian and U. S. writers.

quality with the openness of his methods. In the first chapter of *The Innocent Traveller*, Topaz as a young child is already the family poet, irrepressibly reciting her verses to the visiting Matthew Arnold, and infuriating her businessman father with both her poems and her gay description of the family's new water closet. William Dawe for Kroetsch is the anti-artist, obsessed with recovering and rebuilding the past to the exclusion of the living present so real to Wilson's Topaz. Both Bowering and Newlove, by identifying their circumstances with Vancouver and Heame, make the explorer's task a metaphor for that of the writer, for Newlove that task becoming "to know, to do a job,¹¹ for Bowering the "trusting" of oneself "to the Inland Sea / forgetting stories of the Strait of Anian, / setting foot among actual salmonberries."¹² Bowering in fact subtitles *George, Vancouver* "a discovery poem."

Not surprisingly, exploration is also a metaphor in much west-coast aesthetic theory, particularly in Newlove, Bowering, and Daphne Marlatt. Newlove writes

Ride off any horizon
and let the measure fall
where it may¹³

and with the pun on "measure" links the explorer's chart to the poet's line. The explorer is mapmaker, as the cover of Bowering's *George, Vancouver* reminds us, and Bowering in a recent interview remarks that poetry is "trying to find out where you are." Referring to his use of the term 'locus,' he says "It implies I'm trying to locate myself."¹⁴ Marlatt, in commenting on her book *Rings*, describes it as an act "of charting a territory that was unknown, that I found myself in, and having to map it out to discover who I was."¹⁵

Much of Marlatt's use of exploration of a metaphor for art involves what we might call temporal mapping. In *Badlands* two of Kroetsch's explorers were inadequate because they ignored time — Dawe by trying to preserve the dead, the photographer Sinnott by photographing the "vanishing" instant. A third, the minor character

¹¹*The Fat Man*, p. 63.

¹²*George, Vancouver*, p. 15.

¹³"Ride off Any Horizon," *The Fat Man*, p. 41.

¹⁴*Outposts*, ed. Caroline Bayard and Jack David (Erin, Ont.: Press Pocepic, 1978), p. 79.

¹⁵"Given this Body," interview with George Bowering, *Open Letter* (Fourth Series), no. 3 (Winter, 1979). p. 63.

Web, has the correct theory but even while theorizing cannot act upon it.

There was no past, never. He would not let go, remembered with long deliberation the endless swoop and marvel of swallows . . . ; gone now. Time. Remembered the last cactus
(p. 235)

As if responding to Kroetsch, Marlatt says photographs "are unreal because the real is the constant streaming of time, and they try to take a fix on it."¹⁶ And as if responding to Bowering's and Birney's criticisms of Cook's expectations of a Strait of Anian, says

The trouble with consciousness is that it gets tied up in the world. Which means that you're willing how things are going to turn out. Which means that your cutting out . . . most of the field that we're involved in . . . you can put it in electromagnetic terms: we're under an electromagnetic grid which we aren't even aware of most of the time. But its the very basis for everything that comes in. I'm trying to be as aware of all that I'm in the midst of as I can. (p. 42)

In Marlatt's major 'exploration' poem, *Steveston* — another book with a map on its cover — it is not just place but time and place, or place in time, which are to be explored and mapped.

Daily lives that shift, the floor does, ground or
under sea, to cast, at low tide what lies uncaught, uncovered
traces only, of sun & the moon's pull.
Unsure, how lives run
from place to place, . . .

But the place itself, mapt out, a web, was grass:
tall, bent grass swaying heavy with seed. Cottonwood whose
seeds make a web in the wind.¹⁷

The inhabitants of *Steveston* become implicit explorers because moment by moment geography changes as the sandbanks shift, the winds rise, the seas roll.

In gumboots
on deck with rubber apron ("it's no dance dress"), she'll take
all that the river gives, willing only to stand her ground (rolling
with it, right under her feet, her life, rolling, out from under,
right on out to sea . . . (p. 74)

¹⁶"Given this Body," p. 46.

¹⁷(Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), p. 85.

The model that emerges from these works is of an explorer or artist who is engaged not in history or in an anticipated future but in Marlatt's "continuous present"; who works not with design or premeditation but in response to what is encountered — Newlove's letting "the measure fall / where it may," who interacts with shifting "ground." It is the model provided by Kroetsch's Anna Dawe and Anna Yellowbird discarding the fifty-six-year outdated photos and field notes to "stumble" their own "way by the light of the stars."¹⁸ Throughout, the implications for form — structure, simile, metaphor, symbol — are that it is to be stumbled upon like the two Annas' future. Marlatt has articulated this view particularly clearly — first speaking of simile and metaphor,

We don't get similes, we don't get those laid-on metaphors but rather the discovered ones in rime . . . And etymology.¹⁹

And then speaking of structure,

I've often had a feeling when I'm writing that it's like trails through the woods, & that there are all these branching-off places, & some of these simply peter out. They don't get anywhere, so then you have to backtrack. That's when you delete & edit, because you realize, okay, that's a dead-end, & those are traps. I really believe that you can't get straight from here to there; you have to in some way be led. But you never know if what's leading you isn't going to lead you to a dead-end, so you have to be watchful. (p. 50)

Bill Bissett has argued similarly for a process of composition that is more a mapping than a construct of fancy.

each pome has within its happening its own ordering
its own rule sometimes evn takes thru a lot uv trubul to make
it . . . look like what it is its energy transmittid without any
forcing that isn't in the pome.²⁰

Of symbolism, Robert Kroetsch tells us,

. . . you have to work from your observed, literal world. You can't go through after [,] putting in the symbols.²¹

¹⁸Badlands, p. 270.

¹⁹"Given this Body," p. 43.

²⁰Outposts, p. 63.

²¹"A Conversation with Margaret Laurence," in Robert Kroetsch, ed., *Creation* (Toronto: New Press, 1970), p. 58.

Certainly in these writers there is a strong sense that the explorer metaphor for the writer has become internalized, often both in terms of exploring experience and exploring language. Terms such as *mapping*, *discovering*, *grounds*, *lines*, *trails* have become part of the aesthetic vocabulary. The map on the cover of the book — as in *Steveston, George, Vancouver*, Roy Kiyooka's *Trans-Canada Letters*, Gerry Gilbert's *May 1931* — becomes a metaphor in turn for the accuracy aspired to by the text within. Many of the texts — notably Marlatt's *Steveston* and *Zocalo*, Kroetsch's *Stone-Hammer Poems*, Bowering's *Autobiology*, Gilbert's *Journal to the East*, Andreas Schroeder's *File of Uncertainties*, J. Michael Yates' "Hunt in an Unmapped Interior" and *Great Bear Lake Meditations*, and Newlove's "Crazy Riel" — claim the unconditioned structure of the journal or ship's log, or of ongoing recollection, or even of speech made to fill silence. In Marlatt's work, in addition, we encounter a shifting plurisignative syntax that corresponds to the shifting 'grounds' — *Rings*' "our grounds, even the grounds dispersed,"²² *Steveston*'s "lives that shift, the floor does, ground or under sea" (p. 85), "persistent bending windswept lines of force" (p. 86), "town down stream in its own downpour" (p. 48) — that the experiences rest on.

Further examination of the texts to determine the extent of realization of these structural and sometimes syntactic principles is outside the scope of this paper. What is clear is that from Earle Birney and Ethel Wilson to the present, the explorer as chartmaker and wanderer has engaged the western Canadian literary imagination — to the point of becoming a metaphor for the writer. In such metaphor the explorer represents not only an accurate responsiveness to experience but also the immense and creative force of the grounds, lines, tides, and winds which limit his 'fancy' and will.

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²²(Vancouver: Georgia Straight Writing Series, 1971).