HISTORY, MYTH, AND TIME IN ROBERT KROETSCH'S **BADLANDS**

Arnold E. Davidson

> God help us we are a people, raised not on love letters or lyric poems or even cries of rebellion or ectsasy or pain or regret, but rather old hoards of field notes.[1]

If the field notes left to his daughter by William Dawe represent a paleontologist's only love letter to his only descendent, that missive also looks two ways. It asserts a claim; it abrogates a relationship. In this latter sense the notes are really Dawe's threefold "dear John" letter: the husband writes to his wife; the father to his daughter; the scientist to the living world he left behind in his search for bones. Enjoying the pose of sacrificing savant, Dawe goes on writing. His daughter, one of the narrators of *Badlands,* informs us near the end of her story that her father had "kept making field notes for the twenty years after his last trip into the field" (p. 269). Furthermore, the real field notes — that is, those written in the field — are neither complete nor honest. The events that occur during Dawe's journey down the Red Deer River and through the Alberta Badlands are transmogrified into evidence that either "documents" the life of that vanishing breed, the bone-hunter, or "demonstrates" the capability of that heroic leader, Dawe. Other entries are not events at all. Dawe can record, for example, his dream of his wife and her lover: *"He invited you in swimming. You saw a snake in the water and panicked and drowned"* (p. 34). He here images his sense of his loss — as proved through her imagined fall (the real lover came before Dawe) while he, the imagined hero, is exiled by science from the garden of love. In these entries, too, he attempts to create the myth of himself. His field notes are all, in short, aimed at posterity.

He does not entirely miss that mark. His legacy to his daughter is not just the notes. It is also his covert insistence that he has become mythic — or, at least, historic — and the concomitant

[1]Robert Kroetsch, *Badlands* (Don Mills, Ontario: Paper Jacks, 1975), p. 2. Future references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

implied demand that she should spend her days unravelling the tracks of his past, just as he has spent his days tracking giant reptiles long extinct. In the case of each quest, the result is a history distorted by the limited vision of the historian. William Dawe, an early twentieth-century trailer after the great nineteenth-century bone-hunters, is not "deterred by a mere error in chronology" (p. 138). Although "born one generation too late," he still seeks, as did his forerunners, complete skeletons of huge dinosaurs — preferably a dinosaur hitherto undiscovered, a Daweosaurus of his very own. He is not at all interested in gaining an accurate picture of the total environment that existed during that dark pre-historic time to which he naively believes his search will carry him. Until the final pages of the novel, Anna Dawe also looks for her own imagined dinosaur. She postulates a sometimes demonic, sometimes heroic, giant who conceived her; who once came to her bed, kissed her breasts, and almost claimed the virginity that thirty years later she still has not shed; who once scolded her, but who mostly ignored her. Her revelation is that William Dawe has cast a scant shadow over her life precisely because he was a small man.

Short and hunchbacked, William Dawe was stunted and twisted emotionally too. He was, for example, happier in the bowels of a museum than in his own home. He evaded life at every turn by dedicating himself to uncovering death, unburying corpses. But his recapturing of things past through the sacrificing of possibilities present raises real questions about fathers and historians. What, Kroetsch asks in *Badlands,* ties the past to the present, the forefather to the descendent? Those questions are given further point by the fact that they never occur to Dawe. His quest, he is quite positive, is heroism of the highest order and the conquering of time. All of which is to say that *Badlands* offers certain premises about the interplay of life and time. The best student of that complex process, Kroetsch subtly suggests, is not the paleontologist, looking for an ossified past and ossifying his own present in dry bones and dusty field notes. Rather, the real historian is the novelist, the true myth-maker, who knows that history, like life, must be fleshed out — and in — with marrow and red meat.

The two epigraphs to the novel provide Kroetsch's first hint that he is concerned with the process of making — in both senses of the word — history. They also provide a perspective on time that counters the different, more simple view set forth in the

"Chronology" which immediately follows the epigraphs. The first of these epigraphs, taken from the Nez Perce story of "Coyote and the Shadow People," seemingly sounds a warning to those who attempt to reach out too directly to the past. Coyote, overjoyed to have his resurrected wife come back to him, does not heed her warning and rushes to embrace her. The effect is disastrous. She returns, with his touch, to the realm of the dead, to "shadowland." As Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* observes, the story is a common one and is best known to western readers in the Orpheus and Euridice version:

> The Greek myth of Orpheus and Euridice, and hundreds of analogous tales throughout the world, suggest . . . that in spite of the failure recorded, a possibility exists of a return of the lover with his lost love from beyond the terrible threshold. It is always some little fault, some slight yet critical symptom of human frailty, that makes impossible the open interrelationship between the worlds; so that one is tempted to believe, almost, that if the small, marring accident could be avoided, all would be well.[2]

But of course the "small, marring accident" can never be avoided. So the wife of Coyote is a second time — and this time irrevocably — lost: "And just as he touched her body she vanished. She disappeared — returned to shadowland."

We have here a metaphor for the novel. William Dawe finds his "Daweosaurus," yet that success is in several ways marred. It is first paid for, and thereby largely cancelled out, by the death of Tune, Dawe's surrgate son. That adolescent had once spent two weeks as a coal-miner, which, for Dawe, makes Tune a demolition expert. Engineered into taking charge of the explosives, Tune buries himself with the blast that uncovers the prize skeleton. *"It was an unfortunate accident,"* Dawe writes in his notes, only to cross out the *"unfortunate"* and begin again. *"No doubt the boy was. Careless. Didn't follow"* (p. 241). With these disconnected fragments, Dawe seeks to cover over the disaster. But he has touched the intangible in his endeavor to transcend time and his triumph is mocked by his failure. The dark underside of the skeleton of Daweosaurus must henceforth shadow forth his incapability as the leader of William Dawe Badlands Expedition. Neither can he live by or even retain the

[2]Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), p. 206.

uncertain sign of his uncertain success. His last years are spent in a shadowland of uncatalogued bones. Much against his wishes, Daweosaurus is taken from Ontario and returned to Alberta. With the loss of his dinosaur — which, obviously, was not his — he goes to a self-inflicted death by drowning. The old man, burying himself in the waters that should be life-sustaining, finally inversely images the boy who was buried in the death-preserving clay, and thereby achieves the defeat that was implicit in his victory all along.

The second epigraph, from a bp Nichol poem, "Martyrology," also implies the interpenetration of the temporal and the timeless. Of course, the very study of dead martyrs establishes a parodox regarding time and history. One examines the lives of martyrs to see how they died in order to live forever, in the Christian paradise and also — as the modern cynic would insist — in the earthly realm of hagiography. The three lines of the poem imply a similar paradox:

> this is a strange country
> desert flows around us death &
> breath makes us wary

Altering in time, the landscape becomes the flowing desert, the river of life as well as the Heracletian river of time. We have here a double image of life and death: a desert arid and life-denying is also all-encompassing, flowing. Death *and* breath make us wary; possibly because death and breath are both more similar and more different than we mortals commonly imagine. So we construct our myths — as Campbell would insist — and our martyrologies — as Nichol suggests — to convince ourselves that, in rare moments, we can transcend time and reach beyond the "badlands" of disordered life to grasp the "shadowland" of structured eternity.

To enter the order of history: that is, of course, what William Dawe desperately desires and what, in a sense, Anna Dawe also seeks as she looks, over fifty years later, for her namesake, Anna Yellowbird, the sole survivor of the 1916 Dawe Expedition down the Red Deer River. Anna, like her father, hopes to uncover a vanished past in order to redeem the futility of her own present. Like her father, she searches for a worthy progenitor, one who will justify both the search and the seeker:

> For in that summer of his glory my father became not only what he had always implicitly been, but what he explicitly wanted to

> be. After that he was a man without a history. . . . [He] went on, annually if not endlessly, collecting evidence of Cretacious and then Jurassic and then Triassic life; while he persisted as if he must one happy morning get back to the source itself, the root moment when the glory of reptiles, destined to dominate the world magnificently for one hundred million years, was focussed in one boy creature, one Adam-seed burrowing in the green slime —
>
> But it was left always with the mystery of his own first season. For in his summer of 1916, in the Badlands of the Red Deer River, discovering the Mesozoic era, with all of Europe filling its earth with the bones of its young — he removed himself from time. (Pp. 138-9)

That parallel between the 1916 Badlands of western Canada and the very different contemporaneous wasteland of western Europe brings us back to the novel's "chronology" and another perspective on time. Seven bare dates, ranging from Summer 1916 to Summer 1972, provide the parameters of the action and remind the reader that the Dawes' search for a time beyond time takes place in time, in history. The Expedition begins in the Summer of 1916. While most of the young men of Ontario leave for the East and battle, the thirty-five year old Dawe (yet a virgin) marries and, in the fashion of the day, leaves his wife behind — but to go West, to find bones, not to lend his own bones to the chaos of World War. In the wilderness of the Badlands, he meets the fifteen-year old Anna Yellowbird. She has been guided by a shaman to the strange hunchbacked man who, she believes, will lead her to the boneland, to the place where her husband — also sacrificed to civilization's answer to apocalypse — must, she feels, still reside. From this point the "Chronology" continues. Starting with October 1916, William Dawe returns annually to his wife's bed. In October 1926, he stays three days instead of the usual two, and in July 1927 she bears the daughter that is given Anna's name. In October 1942, when that daughter is the same age that the first Anna was in 1916 and while another war rages, "Dawe goes home to visit not his dying wife but his daughter." Twenty years later he dies and ten years after that the two Annas partly retrace Dawe's journey through the Badlands. Paleontology, mythology, martyrology, chronology: different ways of preserving the past, of marking time.

But these different ways are not all equivalent. As earlier suggested, one of Kroetsch's objectives in *Badlands* is to contrast concepts of time. Particularly pertinent in this respect is Michael

Sinnott, the photographer incongruously encountered in the middle of the Badlands, his Model T in the middle of the river on the remnants of a ford washed away in a recent flood. This self-appointed historian of the defunct does not distinguish the present from the past. "Everything is vanishing here," he insists, "every form of life," from Indians to homesteaders to "bone-hunters too" (p. 117). "Nothing vanishes. Everything goes on. Life goes on," Dawe immediately counters but not very convincingly. As Sinnott points out, Dawe's bones "are sometimes only mineral replacements of what the living bones were" (p. 128) and so bear the same relationship to reality as do Sinnott's negatives. Furthermore, as Sinnott's practice implies, the picture is made real by naming it. Thus his portrait of Dawe becomes definite when it is christened "The Charlatan Being Himself" (p. 128). The justice of that title and the invalidity of Dawe's belief that he "recovers" and gives life to the past are also proved at the end of the novel. The daughter recalls how her father, in the notes of his field books that he kept to the end of his life, rescued from time only "each day's tedium and trivia. Shutting out instead of letting in. Concealing" (p. 269).

The other character who especially counters Dawe is Web. This key crewman on the boat that will sail millions of years down the river into the past as they pass from one geological formation to another, early insists, "There is no such thing as a past" (p. 4) and again, much later, "There was no past, never" (p. 235). But we question his strident denial when we learn of his actual past. The father had insisted on his son's independence. In a last gesture before making his way alone, Web went back to his father's shack, put a match to it, and "left again before he found out if his old man got out dead or alive, and then, his way lighted by the burning shack, headed down the road and kept going" (p. 4). In his own personal history, Web finds his reasons for denying history.

Priapic Web, who is as obsessed with "bones" as Dawe is (the bawdy pun is Kroetsch's), is the man most given to, in Anna's term, the "mythologies of the flesh" (p. 94). So Web invents himself too. He turns his fiasco in the whorehouse "into magnificent success"; his modest success with Anna Yellowbird in the rain into an X-rated exploit of an amorous Pecos Bill copulating as he rides a tornado. In brief, he dreams as dubiously as Dawe does. It is not then surprising that these opposites and brothers have a love-hate relationship and conduct a relentless war of wills. Nor is it surprising that, despite his

denial of the past, Web carries out Dawe's desire to unearth the past when Dawe himself is incapacitated. Web even finds, accidentally, the Daweosaurus that will carry the other's name. That is part of the war and Web's way of affirming his imperfect vision against Dawe's different one. As Anna at one point notes, "my father, years later, could fly into a rage remembering Web's indifference about the past they were seeking together" (p. 162). And as a final salvo in the war of mythologies, when Web joined the army in the fall of 1916 and went overseas, he gave William Dawe's name as his only next of kin. Web's apparent death affirms and denies his present and his past. The would-be hero killed in a ridiculous war represents a Pyrrhic victory for both men.

The three other voyagers are also defined more or less in terms of their relationship to their present and their past. There is, first, Claude McBride, a local resident who joins the expedition because he "wanted to make a few dollars, a summer's wages, then return to his homestead at Red Deer Crossing, to his wife, his four kids, the crop that was supposed to grow and ripen while he was away" (pp. 12-13). McBride has no real commitment to Dawe or to discovering dinosaurs. Still, he joins the expedition not just for money: "in his forties [he] was too old for this folly, and yet not old enough not to be tempted" (p. 17). But a few incidents early in the journey serve to convince him that he should be elsewhere. He falls overboard when they hit the first rapids and is found later riding, naked and stinking, in a floating pig trough. One close call with both death and a polecat is quite enough. It is better, he decides, to be skunked literally by nature than figuratively by the river of time. He prepares the boat for its future trials and, then, even though he is the only capable navigator — perhaps because he *is* the only capable navigator — he abandons ship. Or as Anna Dawe sees it: "In the Western yarn those men were trying to tell each other, he was the only one with the ability to become a hero, the wisdom not to. Home was a word he understood and heroes cannot afford that understanding" (p. 45).

History had tended toward myth. McBride, however, rejects the proffered roles of historic witness or mythic hero in order to fulfill himself in the present comfort of his home. One can hardly blame him. Considering Dawe's ambiguous quest — more governed by "happenstance" than design — McBride raises a voice rarely heard in the novel, and affirms sanity and good sense. The fact that he chooses survival is underscored when we learn the fate of his

replacement. The man who resists the temptation of the journey, "too old for this folly," is replaced by Tune, the adolescent boy found playing blues piano in a Drumheller whorehouse. Still too young to do anything in that establishment save play the piano, Tune is, nevertheless, old enough and romantic enough to believe that a foolish crew led by a hunchback is on a brave and important mission. Tune would also discover his future through Dawe's sally into the past. But his quest, under the tutelage of this guide, for his own mature, heroic self ends, as previously noted, with a tragic bang and Dawe's extended whimper. He is buried alive, under a mountain of clay. The whorehouse provided a more likely escape, and certainly a more pleasant one, from the dangers of the mine.

The final member of this unlikely crew is Grizzly, an inscrutable Oriental who can forget at will that he understands English; who prefers to speak only when *not* spoken to; and who, in many ways, is the backbone of the expedition. He is the cook, catching goldeyes out of the Red Deer River, feeding the others. But despite his essential function, he is generally unnoticed. The "man whose name they would not bother to learn" (p. 13) takes his nickname from an unclear story that he attempts to tell on the first night of the journey into the Badlands. It is a "jumbled tale" of a close encounter with a pie-eating grizzly bear that occurred somewhere near the source of the Red Deer River while Grizzly was the cook for a topographical survey crew. However garbled, his account provides the others — especially Web — with a vision of the cold mountain source of their "flatlands river." Grizzly, however, although he stays mostly on the boat, is the one least committed to the river. Unheeded by his companions, he helps Anna Yellowbird, builds her bone teepee, and shares it with her while they are all still pretending that a fifteen year old woman-child has not come along on their man's adventure. It is also Grizzly whom Anna, years later, remembers most fondly. "Little Grizzly, he wasn't like that Billy, crying out 'Mamma!' in the middle of it all" (p. 263). And later, "He never talked about it that old man with the pigtail. . . . Just did it" (p. 264). Those who lived badly, by the word, apparently "loved," when they went through the motions, much the same way.

Anna's fond recollection of Grizzly as a lover provides a turning point in the novel. The younger Anna has just told of the almost incest that occurred when she was fifteen and then asks a climactic question: "What was he like?" (p. 263). Anna Dawe, searching

for an enemy and a father, really finds a friend and a mother. Her question is deliberately misunderstood. Fully knowing which "he" is meant, the other Anna describes "Little Grizzly's" prowess. The daughter is thereby "saved" by the wrong history:

> In that instant [she] had brought me back, turned me around, somehow. She had let me say it, and beyond that, beyond even the saying, she had let me see that I had had nothing to fear. And maybe even nothing to regret. . . . And I was ready to laugh then. I was not laughing, but I was ready to laugh. Not the pained uneasy and nervous laughter of a lifetime of wondering, of trying to recover and then reshape and then relive a life that wasn't quite a life. I was ready for real laughter. (Pp. 263-64)

It is at that point that the two women decide to abandon their journey through the Badlands which was to recapitulate the history and recapture the myth of the man who had touched them both. They will go instead to the mountains, to "the Badlands upside down" (p. 265) and "the high source of the river" (p. 264). "Let's do it for Web," the younger suggested, still tied to the past and in need of, if not a guide, at least an excuse. "Fuck Web," the other replies, "Let's do it for us" (p. 264). And they do. Sustained by beer and gin, they make their way up into the mountains to the Red Deer Lakes. That day's hike, a journey supposedly too far for two middle-aged women, is not "too far for two drunken women" (p. 265). Their perseverance is rewarded by the strange sight of a bear borne by a helicopter away from the garbage and the tourists, a "great, hunched, shaggy beast . . . about to be born into a new life" (p. 268). This sight finally prompts the laughter that Anna Dawe earlier only felt and provides the epiphany that ends her search.

Most obviously, the grizzly defecating through the sky, is highly ridiculous:

> He was running in the air, straight overhead, so comically human and male. . . . I held out my arms, my fists, to the galloping, flying bear; we laughed ourselves into a tear-glazed vision of the awakened old grizzly, lifted into the sun, his prick and testicles hung over us like a handful of dead-ripe berries. (Pp. 268-69)

The many incongruities — the drunk, aged, bawdy Indian with her then equally inebriated, middle-aged, long prissy, virgin namesake; the flying, running bear, manlike, "his testicles following crazily after"

(p. 268) as he makes his mad dash through the sky — bring the two women the release and relief of hysterical laughter.

This dazed grizzly, perhaps a descendant of that other bear mythologized in Grizzly's jumbled tale, has other prototypes in the novel besides his possible ancestor. As a sexual animal, he is Grizzly. As a "hunched" ridiculous creature rushing through his improper element, he is Dawe. It is this last manifestation that both Annas recognize. The former mistress, laughing, flings the photographs that she has saved for fifty-six years at the bear's balls. The daughter then throws the final field book that she "had carried like a curse for ten years" after the photos and watches it too "fall into the lake where it too [like the photos and the man] might drown" (pp. 269-70). Each is finally free from the past that has held her prisoner. They walk out "by the light of the stars," and in the light of "those billions of years of light," they both realize the futility of their own recent search for the past and the silliness of Dawe's earlier more protracted quest:

> Anna looked at the stars and then at me, and she did not mention 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. (p. 270)

Breaking unspoken taboos with her litany of obscenities ("male" words), Anna Dawes also breaks from her proper past as a dutiful female. With those obscenities, she properly judges the father and so need no longer serve as a questing daughter. Anna Yellowbird, "who had never seen the ocean," more explicitly sums up the senselessness of a relentless search for the past: "Like pissing in the ocean." The women, arm in arm, walked down the mountain, singing. "We walked all the way out. And we did not once look back, not once, ever" (p. 270).

On that note the novel ends. The invocation is to look ahead, to walk up mountains and down them, to sing, to join hands, to escape prisons of the past, the archeology of old lives, borrowed visions, stale dreams. One should "come to the end of words" in love, as Grizzly did, not to die dishonestly — "the fucking bastard had let me prepare the canoe" (p. 269) — as did Dawe. It is love, and sex, that transcends time, not the search for dry bones. So Grizzly or Web or Sinnott or one of a host of others, may have fathered Anna's first Billy. But "Billy" Dawe, judging by Anna's hysterical laughter when the question is put to her, did not. The man who desperately desired

a male heir to carry on a dynasty and conquer time future as well as time past, fails here too. He fails similarly in other ways. He also loses Tune, his surrogate son, and Anna, his real daughter.

William Dawe, the would-be man of myth, is, for all his pretensions, finally shrunk down to his proper puny size. Anna Dawe, the woman who also tried to reach back in time, learns to look ahead. Governing these progressions is the novelist, the one character in *Badlands* who transcends chronology to achieve the cyclic vision hinted at in the epigraphs. Kroetsch moves forward and backward in time, speaks in many voices, gives us parallel histories, the truth of correspondences, fully human characters, and a setting rich in bones. Perhaps only in such a fiction do we have the real history and the living myuthology of the vast and still largely empty Badlands.

Elmhurst College
Elmhurst, Ill. USA