

THE GOOSE 2 (SPRING 2006)

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

As I thought about writing the introductory note to the spring issue of *The Goose*, a passage from Frances Brooke's epistolary novel *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) kept coming to mind. In his letter to the Earl of --- dated April 20, 1767, William Fermor, a character in Brooke's novel, describes the breaking of the ice on a stretch of the St. Lawrence River:

Before I saw the breaking up of the vast body of ice, which forms what is here called the bridge, from Quebec to Point Levi, I imagined there could be nothing in it worth attention; that the ice would pass away, or dissolve gradually, day after day, as the influence of the sun, and warmth of the air and earth increased; and that we should see the river open, without having observed by what degrees it became so.

But . . . [s]ublimity is the characteristic of this western world; the loftiness of the mountains, the grandeur of the lakes and rivers, the majesty of the rocks shaded with a picturesque variety of beautiful

trees and shrubs, and crowned with the noblest of the offspring of the forest, which form the banks of the latter, are as much beyond the power of fancy as that of description . . .

The ice before the town . . . being of a thickness not less than five feet, a league in length, and more than half a mile broad, resists for a long time the rapid tide that attempts to force it from the banks.

We are prepared by many previous circumstances to expect something extraordinary in this event, if I may so call it: every increase of heat in the weather for near a month before the ice leaves the banks; every warm day gives you terror for those you see venturing to pass it in carioles; yet one frosty night makes it again so strong, that even the ladies, and the timid amongst them, still venture themselves over in parties of pleasure; though greatly alarmed at their return, if a few hours of uncommon warmth intervene.

. . . From the time the ice is no longer a bridge on which you see crowds driving with such vivacity on business or pleasure, every one is looking eagerly for its breaking away, to remove the bar to the continually wished and expected event, of the arrival of ships from that world from whence we have seemed so long in a manner excluded.

. . . We stood waiting with all the eagerness of expectation; the tide came rushing with an amazing impetuosity; the bridge seemed to shake, yet resisted the force of the waters; the tide recoiled, it made a pause, it stood still, it returned with redoubled fury, the immense mass of ice gave way.

A vast plain appeared in motion; it advanced with solemn and majestic pace: the points of land on the banks of the river for a few moments stopped its progress; but the immense weight of so prodigious a body, carried along by a rapid current, bore down all opposition with a force irresistible.

There is no describing how beautiful the opening river appears, every moment gaining on the sight, till, in a time less than can possibly be imagined, the ice passing Point Levi, [sic] is hid in one moment by the projecting land, and all is once more a clear plain before you; giving at once the pleasing, but unconnected, ideas of that direct intercourse with Europe from which we have been so many months excluded, and of the earth's again opening her fertile bosom, to feast our eyes and imagination with her various verdant and flowery productions.

I find Fermor's purple prose and his portrait of the timid ladies venturing forth in "parties of pleasure" endearing. Although the piece is dated, it nonetheless captures the sense of anticipation that will always, I hope, herald the arrival of spring.

Fermor's description of the landscapes of Quebec is inflected by the aesthetics of sublimity, but Canadian weather, as it transitions from the iron grip of winter to the spectacular thunderstorms of spring and on into the sultry days of summer, is indeed a study in contrasts. Those contrasts are more insidious now: the winter of 2005 was the warmest on record according to a NASA study, and the season of, in Fermor's words, "uncommon warmth" continues: The Weather Network forecasts temperatures exceeding historical average daily highs in Quebec, Yellowknife, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Ottawa, and St. John's over the next two weeks.

Thaw may no longer be an accurate indicator of seasonal change, but April remains a time for celebrations, migrations, and correspondences. Like the first ship of the season freighted with goods and news—or, more accurately, like one of the Centreville swan rides featured in one of The Tragically Hip's videos—The Goose sets afloat its second issue.

In this issue we continue to offer a selection of calls for submission for national and international journals, conferences, and symposia. In the interests of expediency, we have omitted calls for American conferences. We would direct readers who are interested in learning about American conferences to the "Conferences and Events" page of the ASLE website (<http://www.asle.umn.edu/conf/conf.html>).

We also continue to offer a bibliography of new books by Canadian publishing houses that might be of interest to our readers; a provincial feature (in this issue: the Northwest Territories); a listing of current events of interest to our readers; and The Graduate Network (this month's feature: the University of Calgary) containing, in addition to a faculty directory, thesis abstracts from graduate students at the U of C.

Highlights from this issue include reviews of Karsten Heuer's *Being Caribou* by Cindy Spense, Birk Sproxtton's *Phantom Lake: North of 54* by Angela Waldie, and John Vaillant's *The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness, and Greed* by Diane Guichon; an essay on the importance of land and mobility to the Dene of the Northwest Territories by Jonquil Covello; a travel memoir and photos by Paul

Huebener, who recently traveled to Venezuela and reports on his experiences as a volunteer with the Peace Villages Foundation; and previously unpublished poems by award-winning writer Anne Simpson. I would like to extend sincere thanks on behalf of Lisa, Mike, and myself to our contributors.

Plans to create a membership directory are still underway; please send us your contact information (name, e-mail address, research / artistic interests, academic affiliation, and location—city and province) to the editors. We also continue to welcome suggestions and letters (send them to: goose.newsletter@gmail.com), and contributions (contact the editors at the e-mail addresses listed below).

Hoping to see many of you at the proposed Congress / ACCUTE meeting in May!

--Ella Soper-Jones

EDGE EFFECTS: MERGING LITERARY AND ARTISTIC BOUNDARIES

Anne Simpson

Snow

A great sleeper
turns on the bed of the world.

Fallen
snow, lipped and drifted around the spruce
where the ruffed grouse circles,
dragging a crippled foot,
little crown askew
as she pecks, pecks

a way inside that slow, flickering descent,
whirl and glimmer of
now, not yet —

Brightening the wind,
they return. Racing,
on swift horses. Warriors, chariots. Wheeling
souls. If they're crying out

we can't hear them.

Who rode with Sennacherib,
king of Assyria?
Who died in Jerusalem? Who

remains? The snow lays siege
around the high walls.
A dream. Such a long-forgotten weight.

The grouse retreats
into the mauve shadows. It's dusk
and the snowflakes are pins
dropping against glass. For an instant, only,

it could be a radiant host
restlessly moving before the gates
of Jerusalem,

an entire city
suspended in air, even as it falls.

And the sleeper
sleeping on the bed of the world,
could be the guardian of history.

It doesn't matter — it's behind us. We're moving forward,
into the dark, sparkling.

If once

If air were a robin's egg as it broke open. If the tangled hayfields
sloped into mist; if the leaves of the poplars assembled the many ears
of sky. If a crab spider scribbled in the wild roses. If light buckled each

silvery board narrowing to the beach and if the many trays of ocean could be balanced — if once, and if only, and if I could speak with the easy glide of an eagle, holding time in its round eye, I would thank you for being here, exactly here, at the edge of the rolling world.

Note on Contributor:

Anne Simpson's first book of poetry and winner of the Atlantic Poetry Prize and the 2001 League of Canadian Poets' Gerald Lampert Award for best first book of poetry, *Light Falls Through You* (2000), was followed by a first novel, *Canterbury Beach* (2001), which was shortlisted for the 2002 Thomas Head Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award. Her second poetry collection, *Loop*, was a finalist for the Governor-General's Award and winner of the 2004 Griffin Poetry Prize. Her new novel, *Falling*, will be published by McClelland & Stewart in 2007. She teaches part-time at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, NS.

List of Publications:

Anthologies

Simpson, Anne ed. *An Orange from Portugal: Christmas Stories from the Maritimes and Newfoundland*. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2003. ISBN 0-86492-345-7.

Poetry

Open Field: 30 Contemporary Canadian Poets. Ed. Sina Queyras. New York, NY: Persea Books, 2005. ISBN 0-89255-314-6

In Fine Form: The Canadian Book of Form Poetry. Ed. Kate Braid and Sandy Shreve. Vancouver, BC: Raincoast Books, 2005. ISBN 1-55192-777-2

Desire, Doom & Vice: A Canadian Collection. Ed. Nathaniel G. Moore. Stratford, ON: Wingate Press, 2005. ISBN 0-9735977-7-1

The Griffin Poetry Prize Anthology: A selection of 2004 shortlist. Edited by Phyllis Webb. Toronto, ON: House of Anasi Press, 2004. ISBN 0-88784-699-8

Coastlines: The Poetry of Atlantic Canada. Edited by Anne Compton, Laurence Hutchman, Ross Leckie, and Robin McGrath. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2002. ISBN 0-86492-313-9

Words Out There: Women Poets in Atlantic Canada. Edited by Jeanette Lynes and Gwendolyn Davies. Lockeport, NS: Roseway Publishing, 1999. ISBN 1-896496-09-1

Short Fiction

"Dreaming Snow." Atlantica: Stories from the Maritimes and Newfoundland. Lesley Choyce, Editor. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2001. ISBN 0-8692-309-0. Click here for WFNS' description of this book: <http://www.writers.ns.ca/Writers/asimpson.html>

"Green Knight." Home for Christmas: Stories from the Maritimes and Newfoundland. Edited by Sabine Campbell. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 1999.

"Waters of Immortality." Rip-Rap: Fiction and Poetry from the Banff Centre. Edited by Edna Alford, Don McKay, Rhea Tregebov, and Rachel Wyatt. Banff, AB: Banff Centre Press, 1999. ISBN 0-920159-65-6

"The Memory Theater of Guilano Camillo." Water Studies: New Voices in Maritime Fiction. Edited by Ian Colford. East Lawrencetown, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1998. ISBN 1-895900-12-3

"Dreaming Snow." The Journey Prize Anthology 9. Selected with Nino Ricci. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1997. ISBN 0-7710-4425-9

"The Day Elvis Rose from the Dead." Fiddlehead Gold: The Fiddlehead Golden Anniversary Anthology. Edited by Sabine Campbell, Roger Ploude, and Demetres Tryphonopoulos. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 1995. ISBN 0-86492-177-2

PROVINCIAL FEATURE: NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

"Revisiting the Land: The Importance of Land and Mobility to the Northwest Territories Dene"

by

Jonquil Covello

It is generally believed that the Northwest Territories was settled in a benign and non-violent fashion, and that the Dene who lived there were treated in a fair and equitable manner. Early policy makers saw themselves in the altruistic and paternalistic position of protectors of the Native people and were able to justify their invasion of the land with the argument that it was terra nullius or empty land, in the sense of being largely uninhabited, or empty of any social organization capable of meeting European standards. There are few Dene accounts to challenge this dominant discourse of justifiable colonization, and until George Blondin, a Fort Franklin elder, began to collect the stories of his people, very little was known of Dene history or legend. Blondin's work, *Yamoria the Lawmaker: Stories of the Dene* is a collection of Dene stories and legends. The predominant theme of the collection is the contrast between the nomadic life of pre-contact Dene and the later, sedentary, settlement life proscribed by traders, missionaries and government officials. My contention is that rather than providing, as paternalistic government agencies envisioned, a secure and comfortable lifestyle whereby native people would be "protected" from their "harsh environment" and relocated in settlements with all the accoutrements of civilization, the deliberate disruption of the traditional, mobile lifestyle of aboriginal hunter/gatherer societies of northern Canada for economic gain severely weakened and nearly destroyed First Nations culture in the Northwest Territories.

Yamoria is gentle in tone and kind in its intent. However, Blondin makes it clear that, far from being willing participants in the process of giving up their lives on the land and becoming "civilized," the Dene were apprehensive, confused and angry about the white invasion of their country. For ten thousand years, the Dene were a highly mobile people and were dependent upon the land, which provided a seasonally changing and fluctuating food source: "Before contact, my ancestors travelled constantly, following the caribou herds for meat or looking to find good year-round fish lakes. They were born on the land and they died on the land. They roamed across Denendeh and settled nowhere" (Blondin vi). The Dene travelled through the land and harvested its resources, but their deep attachment to their land goes far beyond simply viewing it as a provider of food and clothing; mobility was also important from a cultural and spiritual perspective. J.C. Catholique of Lutsel K'e believes that, "land to the Chipewyan people is pretty well everything. It is a way of life for them. The land provides them with food, clothing, and principles of life. They consider the land to be very spiritual" (Raffen 104). Blondin quotes Dene elders who speak of the power of the land for spiritual fulfillment. Sarah

Peters of Fort McPherson knows that "when a person loves his country, he has to keep moving and make a living. Jimmy Bonnetrouge of Fort Providence recalls the idyllic days of his nomadic life: "I have travelled far, across the rivers in the mountains and down river – life in the bush made me very happy," and Blondin remembers a time when "there was no hurry to get anywhere: the Dene travelled all over the Land, so every place was home. That was how it was to travel on Sahtu De every summer" (43). Travel on the land gradually ceased when Europeans arrived, and as the Dene connection to the land weakened, so did their spiritual strength.

Spiritual strength, according to Blondin, comes from "Medicine Power," which he describes as the force that enabled "all life forms to look after themselves" (51):

When the world was new, everything was based upon medicine power. Dene storytellers say our existence depended on it. It's the only thing that our ancestors believed could help them, so it was supremely important to them. (51)

In the beginning all humans, birds and animals possessed medicine power. Medicine power controlled every aspect of life, from changing the weather and making hunting and travelling easier, to controlling the movements of animals, and "folding up the land" to allow hunters to travel great distances in a short time. It could be used to settle disputes, it had the power to kill evil people and the power to cure the sick; in short, it controlled every facet of existence and it was the spiritual power through which the Dene interacted with their land and the animals.

When Yamoria, the great medicine man who had "powers for spirit travel," was travelling the land and the people were travelling to earn a living from the land, the medicine power was strong. The defining qualities of a good hunter and a family that could survive were versatility and the ability to make quick decisions based on animal movement and weather. To Europeans, who value possessions and a secure home, this nomadic way of life was unfamiliar and often disturbing. Hugh Brody observes that "profound misunderstandings arise when representatives of settled, acquisitive cultures seek to help or to change mobile, hunting cultures" (103). Those who tried to "help or change" the Dene were the fur traders, the church, and the residential schools, but Blondin puts most of the blame for the loss of Dene culture and spiritual power firmly on the schools: "The fur trade and the European settlement of the North changed us, but it was the

mission schools that really upset our way of life" (222). The stated policy of the Department of Indian Affairs for the residential schools of the early twentieth century was to drive a "cultural wedge between younger and older Indians" (Titley 25). Authorities were convinced that "aboriginal economic activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and food-gathering would have to be abandoned" and decreed that "The Indian should learn how to cultivate the soil or prepare himself for employment in the industrial or mercantile community" (33).

Using residential schools to train Dene children for employment as farmers or for work on the "factory floor" and forcing families to abandon their ancient, nomadic way of life was the equivalent of cultural genocide. As Blondin argues, "Families could no longer stay in the bush to trap furs because their children had to be in school. The government built houses so people could stop living in tents" (40). Thus, a centuries-old pattern of life regulated by seasonal travel and well-established educational and cultural values was destroyed. With the children confined to schools and their parents strongly encouraged to live in government settlements, the nomadic and apparently "random" life of the Dene came to an end. The Native people were diminished and culturally impoverished through the imposition of a colonial system that sought to fix their movements through a rigid system of containment and control.

Blondin is deeply concerned by what he sees as the loss of cultural values, self-respect and well-being well of young Dene. He is well aware that his people cannot return to their ancient, nomadic life and he also knows that oral story-telling is no longer a viable practice. However, the Dene have always been resourceful, using whatever means were available for survival, and Blondin firmly believes that the only way to reach an audience of Dene school children and to help them to integrate traditional values into their present lives is to collect the old stories and put them into print:

Because the earth has changed, and because we Dene do not live in the same way as our ancestors – eating only wild meat and living outdoors in the clean air – medicine is not the same as it was before. But we still have power. We have our imagination, our dreams, our virtues, and our faith in the Creator, and those are a medicine person's most important tools. May this book remind us of the strength of our ancestors, of our Dene laws, and to live the best way we know how. (233)

Blondin's work is valuable, not only on account of its desire to preserve Dene stories for Dene people, but also because it is the only record we have of Dene history and mythology from a Dene point of view. In the Northwest Territories, numerous government programs and policies have been designed to compensate the Dene for their cultural and material losses. However, retribution is not always made with compassion or understanding, and in many areas there is still deep conflict and anger. J. Edward Chamberlin believes that the power of stories lies in their ability to transcend borders and ideologies. In situations of cultural conflict he argues for the importance of understanding not just our own stories, but also what others are saying in their stories and myths (237). Blondin offers his stories in the good faith that they will be read not just by his own people, but by all readers with an interest in the future of the land. It is my belief that in reading these ancient stories we, as relative newcomers to the Northwest Territories, may greater appreciate the land and its people.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES

The bibliography and resource listings are by no means exhaustive; many of the works cited have excellent interdisciplinary bibliographic material. Especially valuable is Sherrill Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North*, which also includes a visual arts and music bibliography.

Also, follow the link directly below for Larry Peters' (University of Northern British Columbia) extensive, annotated reading list of North and NWT writings: http://www.uni-mannheim.de/users/bibsplitt/anglistik/can_bks.html

The Yellowknife Book Cellar

Specializes in distributing publications pertaining to and / or written by NWT writers:

<http://www.yellowknifebooks.com/TopTenBooks/book5.html>

Online Academic, Environmental, Regional, Cultural and Arts Resources

Arctic Institute of North America (AINA), University of Calgary

Promotes interdisciplinary study of the North American and Arctic circumpolar region. AINA brings together researchers from natural and social sciences, and the humanities and arts. The Institute has extensive online links to archives, special collections, and art collections, as well as bibliographies, databases, current research projects, and contacts. AINA also publishes two journals, Northern Lights Series and Arctic Journal (<http://www.arctic.ucalgary.ca/index.php>).

AINA's Hydrocarbon Impacts / Incidences des hydrocarbures database offers over 5,000 publications and research projects about the environmental and socio-economic effects in Northern Canada (<http://www.aina.ucalgary.ca/hi/>).

Canadian Circumpolar Institute

The Canadian Circumpolar Institute is the centre for northern research at the University of Alberta, serving Northerners, students, academics, government, industry, and the general public.

Their mandate is:

- To promote and support research on the Canadian and Circumpolar North, especially that involving interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programs;
- To promote and support the Canadian Circumpolar Library collection as a distinctive northern reference centre of international importance;
- To foster communication among northern-oriented researchers;

- To encourage the involvement of Northerners from all circumpolar nations in the activities of the institute; and,
- To disseminate information about the Circumpolar North.

<http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/polar/index.cfm>

The Circumpolar Students' Association, University of Alberta
Provides a network base for students involved in Northern research.

<http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/polar/csa.cfm>

CPAWS (Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society) NWT Chapter

Nah?a Dehé Artists' Trip and Artists' Profiles

<http://www.cpaws.org/chapters/nwt/work/artists.php>

<http://www.cpaws.org/chapters/nwt/work/artists-profiles.php>

Dene Cultural Institute

<http://www.deneculture.org/>

http://nwt-tno.inac-ainc.gc.ca/mpf/stakehld/denecult_e.htm

Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories

<http://www.assembly.gov.nt.ca/>

Lessons from the Land

"A collection of online cultural explorations based upon the traditional travel routes of the Northwest Territories' Aboriginal peoples. This online exhibit will explore the relationship between people and the land and will highlight sites of cultural and historical significance throughout the territory..."

<http://www.lessonsfromtheland.ca/>

Northern Library

Northern Library lists many naturalist publications and works about history, Indigenous peoples, canoeing, and adventure traveling in the Northwest Territories.

<http://www.explorenwt.com/resources/northern-library/index.asp>

Northern Women's Web Centre

<http://www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/~agraham/womensconf/index.html>

Notable Northern Women: Artists / Performers / Songwriters /
Storytellers / Crafters

<http://www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/~agraham/womensconf/nwnotable4.htm>

Northwest Territories Library Services

<http://library.usask.ca/native/directory/english/nwtlibrary.html>

Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre

<http://pwnhc.learnnet.nt.ca/index.htm>

The PWNHC provides a variety of databases and geographical, cultural,
and historical information.

NWT Arts Council

<http://pwnhc.learnnet.nt.ca/artscouncil/inwtcultorg.html>

NWT Archives Database

<http://pwnhc.learnnet.nt.ca/databases/fonddb.htm>

NWT Place Names Database

<http://pwnhc.learnnet.nt.ca/databases/geodb.htm>

On-Line Exhibits

<http://pwnhc.learnnet.nt.ca/exhibits/index.htm>

Environment and Region

Aurora Research Institute

Aurora Research Institute, affiliated with Aurora College conducts
scientific and social research in accordance with the NWT Sciences Act.

<http://www.nwtresearch.com/default.aspx>

Discover North Online'Northern Frontier Visitor's Association

Discover North lists upcoming events, regional information, visitor services, and activities in NWT.

<http://www.northernfrontier.com/default.html>

Government of the Northwest Territories Online

The government site provides links to environment and land, culture and community, business and resources, and education and employment (<http://www.gov.nt.ca/>)

The Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary Online

This site provides links to other articles and sites about the Thelon Sanctuary.

<http://www.thelon.com/sanctuary.htm>

Wildlife Division: Northwest Territories Environmental and Natural Resources

This site offers information on hunting and fishing, biodiversity, protected areas, wildlife, publications, legislation, and research.

<http://www.nwtwildlife.com/>

Magazines and Journals

Arctic Journal

Arctic Journal is a peer reviewed, quarterly journal from the University of Calgary's Arctic Institute of North America.

http://www.arctic.ucalgary.ca/sections.php?sid=publications&cid=arctic_journal

Northern Lights Series

Also from AINA this journal is dedicated to nontechnical works about natural, earth, and social sciences, and the humanities.

http://www.arctic.ucalgary.ca/sections.php?sid=publications&cid=northern_lights

Northern Review

Yukon College publishes this refereed, biannual scholarly journal that focuses exclusively on Northern issues.

<http://www1.yukoncollege.yk.ca/review/>

Up Here

Up Here is a magazine that focuses on Northern lifestyle, environment, wildlife, travel, personalities, business, and current affairs (<http://www.uphere.ca/>).

Submissions: <http://www.uphere.ca/contact-us/guideline.aspx>

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See Richard Van Camp's website for further publications:

<http://www.richardvancamp.org/>

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FILM AND LITERATURE REVIEWS

Diane Guichon

Ecological Tragedy of a Mythic Nature: A review of John Vaillant's *Golden Spruce*

Toronto: Vintage, 2005. (256 pages. \$21)

John Vaillant's account of the brutal 1997 chainsaw death of a unique 300-year-old golden Sitka spruce in the heart of the Queen Charlotte Islands by timber surveyor and logger, Grant Hadwin, is a beautifully crafted, lyrically written text that continues the Canadian tradition of mythologizing nature. The book opens with Milton's lines from *Paradise Lost* describing the Tree of Life: "And all amid them stood the Tree of Life, / High eminent, blooming Ambrosial Fruit / of vegetable Gold; and next to Life." We are planted firmly in a textual world that, in Lynn White, Jr.'s words, conceives of nature "primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men" (11).

The Prologue welcomes the reader to a western edge of land where tidal surges and driftwood "burnished to silver. . . lies heaped as high as polar winds and Pacific waves can possibly throw it" (4). Amongst these most violent of Canadian shorelines man-made artifacts go missing (as did Grant Hadwin himself). The reader becomes a scavenger searching for meaning in a text where language, story, Native totems, and landscape loom large and as grand as any subject in Shakespearean drama. There can be no wonder that *The Golden Spruce* won the Governor General's literary award for non-fiction in 2005: the book possesses all the elements that Canadians love best in the stories we tell of ourselves, all the things we would like to be true. Canadians like to believe we possess a caretaker's relationship with the land; that we could live off the land with only a red and white Swiss army knife in our jeans; that we are familiar with and honour Native storytelling; and that we support the green side of environmental issues. The magic of *The Golden Spruce* is that, paradoxically, it also shows us that these ideals seldom reflect the truth--even in Canada.

Early in his book Vaillant introduces us to the main characters in this West Coast murder mystery. Nature becomes an anthropomorphized character of mythic stature: the sea heaves stones, logs, "and even itself into the woods at every opportunity" and tree roots "of shore pine and spruce grope for a purchase on rocks" (7). The Queen Charlotte Islands, known by the local First Nations as Haida Gwaii, are described in reverent terms of a holy and "eternal-feeling, like a branched and needled Notre Dame," (8) a world wonderfully in balance

with itself: "Trees are fed by salmon, eagles can swim, and killer whales will heave themselves into the graveled shallows and stare you in the eye" (11).

In the chapter "The Tooth of the Human Race," Valliant draws our attention to the devastation human beings all over the globe have enacted upon the forests that once covered our planet. Romans, Greeks, Sumerians, Europeans, and North Americans have all displayed a voracious appetite for wood. Technology has only added to this devastation. The Industrial Revolution, the invention of the circular saw, the planing machine, and even the readily-disposable paper bag have contributed to deforestation. Logging in Canada adopted the attitude of not how to preserve the forest, but "how to master it" (93). Into this philosophy enters one "heroic" logger by the name of Grant Hadwin.

Described as a man of the forest legendary for his ability to lay out wilderness roads that pushed logging trucks and crews into the most remote areas of the British Columbian timberlands, Hadwin is a paradoxical figure, both a lover of the forest and a man complicit in its destruction: "While doing the work he loved he helped to raze the site of many of his happiest memories" (99). Perhaps his contradictory relationship with the land contributed to his increasingly erratic behavior that included the writing of manifestos, rants, and letters to various political and judicial figures in Canada. He even turns his critical eye towards the behaviour of university-trained professionals. Hadwin reminds us that we (those of us working in academia) should beware of how we "create and positively reinforce facades and perceptions until these facades and perceptions are 'perceived' to be fact" (107).

Hadwin, a man who quite literally measured his manhood by stretching his penis across a bar-room table, began to feel he personally had to effect change to prevent the terrorism enacted upon British Columbian forests. Objecting to what he perceived as a "sick tree" kept as a pet mascot for MacMillan Bloedel, he conducts his own act of terrorism: in the dead of a winter night, Hadwin swims across the YakounRiver dragging his chainsaw behind him and proceeds to fell the mythical Golden Spruce with a series of Humboldt undercuts and cookies (134).

The sheer popularity of The Golden Spruce reminds us that we love stories of myth and mystery. As ecocritical readers, though, we must be wary of stories that continue to define nature in relation to

humankind. If we continue to project humankind's speaking voice onto non-speaking subjects in nature, we support an attitude towards natural subjects that fails to truly reflect how such subjects live and act in the world. Christopher Manes in his essay "Nature and Silence" describes humanism as a "parade of organic forms [that] is transfigured into a forced march led by the human subject" (21). By continuing to translate and interpolate the existence of subjects within the natural world into our own human myths and stories, we fail to allow the nonhuman world to articulate its own way of being. Vaillant's book is a compelling read; nonetheless it does suggest that environmental activism should not be carried out in isolation, and that each issue is profoundly complicated with a history of its own that requires extensive research before action is taken. University-trained professionals beware.

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Note on Contributor

Diane Guichon is a second-year Masters student in the University of Calgary's English Department. She is a recipient of the SSHRCC Graduate Scholarship Award.

Cindy Spence

A review of *Being Caribou*, by Karsten Heuer
Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2006

Karsten Heuer's first-person narrative of his five-month, physically demanding and spiritually challenging attempt to shadow the migration of the Porcupine caribou herd across the northern-most reaches of North America adeptly mingles science and politics with the rhythms of nature.

Heuer's writing moves from the scientific language of quantities, dates, and GPS readings towards the language of myth, dreaming, and instinct. In the Prologue he admits his disbelief when an old man descended of the Athapaskan hunters of the Arctic shares a secret: "Back then people could talk to caribou, and caribou could talk to people." It required fourteen months and more than 1500 kilometres of Arctic landscape and wildlife for Heuer to understand and achieve the truth of this statement.

Leanne Allison, Heuer's wife, traveled beside him filming and documenting their undetermined journey across the Arctic. Their willingness to journey into the Arctic without a clear idea of their route or destination (other than the general area of the caribou calving grounds in the Alaskan National Wildlife Reserve) harkens an image of the great explorer setting out into an unknown landscape. Indeed, within the first seventy pages the couple encounters every imaginable stereotype necessary for a good Arctic adventure: snowstorms, wolves, grizzly bears, isolation, lack of food (which must be dropped in to the couple by airplane every fortnight), blinding snow, burning sun, a physically demanding landscape that wreaks emotional havoc, and bugs, lots of bugs. Yet these two humans survive the harshness of the landscape to, as the title indicates, become caribou.

The narrative contains diary entries, presumably transcribed from Heuer's personal journal. These diary entries contain the book's most poignant prose, a writing that borders on the poetic. It is within these entries that we find raw fear and emotion; we witness the transformation of Heuer from a scientist who prizes maps and known, quantifiable facts to an instinctual being who values dreams and the rhythms of the landscape.

Perhaps the only failure of the book is its direct impact on the political stage, although it is not for lack of trying. Heuer and Allison have been featured in books, magazine articles, films, documentaries and reviews, yet the information and knowledge they gained about the Porcupine herd does not hold sway with any of the politicians in Washington, D.C. Despite meeting with aides and lobbyists, as described in the Epilogue, Heuer sadly reports the reality of politics: when it comes to oil development, minds are already made up. As one aide bluntly commented, "the bottom line for voters on this issue [the opening of ANWR to oil drilling] is cheap gas."

Heuer's boldest statement affirms the Athapaskan hunter's claim, that humans and caribou can converse. He believes that caribou have a

language among themselves, a thrumming, as Heuer calls it, that can be heard by humans and that occurs at significant moments in the caribou migration. This thrumming has not been documented by any other researchers or explorers, yet Heuer believes it could be a keystone to communicating between and with the caribou. Allison, too, heard the thrumming, although not as early in the journey as Heuer. Heuer believes that through the combination of thrumming and Heuer and Allison's presence in the landscape, we talked to caribou, and caribou had talked to us." He writes of leaving the Arctic with more questions than when he arrived, questions about dreaming, thrumming, and instinctual ways of knowing and existing, all questions stirred and generated by the animals. Heuer's desire to understand these questions close the book.

Heuer's book cogently, and perhaps subconsciously, merges the human and non-human elements of the Arctic landscape. The book represents an attempt to articulate the unknown, to question and validate the importance of myths and dreams, to generate discussion that will lead to greater understanding of the Other, and to record a fantastic and worthy journey into the wilderness of the Arctic and of the soul.

Note on Contributor

Cindy Spence recently graduated with a Master of Arts degree from the University of Calgary. Her thesis is titled, "Hitch-Hiking in the Canadian North: Clair W. Dawson's 1916 Journal and Correspondence."

Angela Waldie

A Review of *Phantom Lake: North of 54* by Birk Sproxton

Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005. 214 pp. Paper \$29.95

"My story is shot through and through with strands of North," writes Birk Sproxton in the concluding pages of *Phantom Lake*, a compelling exploration of the significance of personal, literary, geologic, and historical narrative to Sproxton's understanding of his "home place" (195). Although Sproxton now resides in Alberta, in *Phantom Lake* he focuses on his childhood home of Flin Flon, Manitoba, where he frequently travels to reconnect with family, spend summers at various lakeshores, and read and record his attachment to this realm of genealogical and geologic memory. "Towns must be imagined into

existence," he writes, as he notes the importance of novels such as J.E. Preston-Muddock's *The Sunless City* (1905) and Douglas Durkin's *The Lobstick Trail* (1921) to the conception of Flin Flon (86). Josiah Flintabbatey Flonatin, a grocer-explorer who tunnels to the centre of the earth in *The Sunless City*, appears alongside prospectors, explorers, and surveyors, such as Tom Creighton, Kate Rice, David Thompson, and Joseph Burr Tyrrell, in Sproxton's reflections on Flin Flon. By blurring the delineation between literary and historical aspects of place, Sproxton invites the reader to consider the power of literature to inform history.

The fifteen personal essays of *Phantom Lake* are arranged neither chronologically nor according to a geographical linearity. Instead, they continually intersect with one another as Sproxton engages in exploration, archival research, and personal recollection to illuminate his portrayal of Flin Flon. As I encountered the myriad names of towns, ghost towns, lakes, rivers, highways, and back roads that recur throughout these essays, I found myself searching the book for a map. But as there is no such static reference included with the text, I wonder if Sproxton intends to convey that the region surrounding Phantom Lake and Flin Flon is not easily mapped. It consists of a layered literary and geologic past, and is characterized by the fluid shift from camp to boomtown to ghost town that typifies a resource-based economy. Sproxton blends the fictional and historical past of Flin Flon with his childhood memories and contemporary visits so seamlessly that a map might hinder the confluence of past and present in this memoir.

Phantom Lake reflects tensions familiar to many who have grown up in small, resource-based Canadian towns. While Sproxton acknowledges a retrospective awareness of the environmental degradation caused by mining and smelting, he reveals the effects of these industries as being an accepted part of life in his hometown. Smoke from the local smelter was a quotidian presence. "We grew in it," he writes. "The plant breathed smoke; and so long as the stacks snorted smoke into the sky, the town was alive and kicking" (46). The smelter smoke was most visible in its absence, as smokeless days indicated the economic uncertainty of shutdowns or strikes. Sproxton's essays provide vivid depictions of the environmental consequences of mining—a lake drained and converted to a tailings pond, others polluted with mercury, and a town where weather predictions can be based on glances towards the ever-present stream of smelter smoke. Yet Sproxton complicates these details by portraying families reliant on the mining industry for their livelihoods, in a place where one of the only

alternatives to work in the mines is to leave one's home and seek opportunity elsewhere.

Encouraged by his father, Sproxton avoided a life of underground labour by obtaining a series of university degrees that led him to a career in post-secondary teaching and writing. Yet the fascination with words that drew him away from Flin Flon also drew him back, to mine personal and collective memory, landscape, and archives. Reflecting on the significance of geology and literature, Sproxton asserts that "rocks and books are pre-texts of place" (35). Sproxton's excavation of Flin Flon informs the ecocritical concern with linking environmental history—in this case, grounded in the very bedrock of the Canadian Shield—to personal and collective articulations of place. The essays of *Phantom Lake* could be used, either individually or collectively, in courses concerned with the imbrications of literary, personal, industrial, and ecological history. For those familiar with the Flin Flon area, this collection offers the pleasure of revisiting known landscapes from varied directions and perspectives. And for those unfamiliar with this region, *Phantom Lake* offers the opportunity to visit this realm "North of 54" with a guide fluent in the history and lore and of this land.

Note on Contributor

Angela Waldie is in the second year of her PhD at the University of Calgary. Her research interests include western Canadian and American literature, ecopoetry, bioregionalism, and literary ornithology. Her dissertation will focus on expressions of species extinction in Canadian and American literature.

THE GRADUATE NETWORK: RESOURCES FOR CANADIAN GRADUATE STUDENTS

Feature: **University of Calgary**

By featuring students' projects, The Goose's "Graduate Network" aims to introduce and interconnect Canadian graduate students by encouraging them to share their current research with one another. This network consists of a listing of calls for submissions to graduate conferences and journals, and a student and faculty directory reflecting the ecocritical strengths of the feature university. We hope

that you will use the directory to identify prospective doctoral and post-doctoral advisors and project collaborators.

For our second issue we have chosen to feature the University of Calgary. The U of C is at the forefront of ecocritical studies in English and the Humanities in Canada , largely due to the efforts of Dr. Pamela Banting. The U of C also offers the only PhD in English with a creative thesis option in Canada, which affords graduate students a unique opportunity to explore, to bend, and to blend the boundaries of creative and academic pursuits, as Diane Guichon and Margot Gilligan demonstrate.

Diane Guichon is a second-year Masters student in the University of Calgary's English Department. She is a recipient of the SSHRCC Graduate Scholarship Award.

"BirchSplit Bark: Deconstructing the Canadian Canoe Through Poetry"

In his essay "Disunity as Unity" Robert Kroetsch remarks that in Canada, "history in its traditional forms, insisted too strongly on a coherent narrative" (24). He refers to critics such as Northrop Frye who tried to "assert the oneness, the unity, of all narrative" (24). In Canadian culture the canoe has traditionally supported this oneness of narrative. The poetic treatment of the canoe surfaced with the nineteenth century lyrical works of the Confederation Poets such as Duncan Campbell Scott, Archibald Lampman, and Isabella Valancy Crawford. In their poems, the canoe lent voice and song to a Canadian landscape striving for an identity separate from England , France , and the United States . Even today, the canoe remains an icon of the "Canadian." Starbucks Coffee® recently ran an advertising campaign featuring an image of a canoe by artist Andrew Lewis on its gift card: "celebrate our history over coffee." Images such as Pierre Eliot Trudeau in fringed buckskin paddling his canoe on northern waters support this notion of the canoe as an essential Canadianism. My creative writing poetry thesis involves taking the canoe and returning it to a site of multiplicity. In other words, I wish to deconstruct the historical unifying myth of the canoe in Canadian culture by writing poems that play against the canoe's traditional representations and return it to a site of desire – split the birch from the bark.

Kroetsch posits "an archaeological sense that every unearthing is problematic, tentative, subject to a story-making act that is itself subject to further change as the 'dig' goes on" (24). Poetic representations of the canoe continue to figure in the imagination of

Canadian poets. For instance, Earle Birney, in the poem "Hands," uses the canoe to highlight the difference between hands on a paddle and hands manipulating the tools of war. Marie Annharte Baker in the poem "Geriatric [sic] Canoe Princess" plays off canoe rhythms and representations in E. Pauline Johnson's work. I propose to participate in this literary tradition of a metaphorical archaeological dig by unearthing my own representations for the canoe.

For my Master's thesis I will write a collection of canoe poems. I will play against the traditional metaphors of the canoe in my poetry, but the main thrust of the thesis will be an experimental effort to open the canoe as a site for new representation. I will literally break down the construction of the canoe into its composite components and re-signify its parts – the paddle, the cargo, its potential passengers, the streams it navigates, etc. For example, the canoe's paddle might represent the back of a father's hand, the canoe's watercourse the tracks leading a casket into a crematorium's furnace. By opening the canoe as a site for unlimited representations, I hope to deconstruct the canoe's myth of unity. Just as Annharte engages in a textual dialogue with Johnson's myth of Canoe Princess, I wish to explore through poetry the further conditions of possibility for the canoe as signifier and free it from its traditional reductive expressions for the signified.

The undergraduate and graduate work I have completed within the English Department's Creative Writing program has provided me with experience in contemporary poetic techniques of dislocation and fragmentation which will help in deconstructing the traditional canoe metaphors. Using existing canoe language found in such textual material as *Canoe & Kayak*, or canoe manuals and wilderness magazines, I hope to extend such language to other sites of human experience and emotion. If my thesis work is successful, this experimental approach to the canoe might suggest interesting ways to re-textualize other essentialisms in areas such as feminism or colonial studies. Kroetsch's "dig" continues.

Margot Gilligan has a BA in English from the University of Regina, and is an MA student working with Pamela Banting at the University of Calgary.

Although little scholarship has focused on prairie women's writing of the past few decades, recent texts depict the attachments that women have to landscape and the positive ways in which these attachments can help to dismantle the binaries of self/other, culture/nature, man/woman. As Judith Plant notes in *Healing the Wounds*, "Making the

connection between feminism and ecology enables us to step outside of the dualistic, separated world” that characterizes contemporary western culture (5). In her thesis, Margot analyzes the relationship between prairie landscape and women as portrayed in *The Diviners*, *Luna*, “A Song For Nettie Johnson,” and *A Hard Witching and Other Stories*. Through the ways in which they depict women and girls interacting with the natural world, these four texts identify and counter the conjoined oppression of women and denigration of nature.

Despite the canonical status of *The Diviners* within Canadian literature, little has been written on the role of nature within the work. Further, Laurence’s copious musical inclusions within the text resonate in their demonstration of characters’ attachments to the southern Manitoba landscape. In addition to offering the perspectives of multiple women over several generations, *Luna* highlights some of the debates within ecofeminism regarding the position of women vis-à-vis nature. “A Song For Nettie Johnson” captures the imagination with its evocative language and resonant images – there is little criticism on this rich novella that explores the connections between one woman and the landscape in which she lives. The Sand Hills setting of *A Hard Witching and Other Stories* provides a unique opportunity to explore and eradicate stereotypes regarding the prairie landscape, and Baker’s stories delve into the issues surrounding gender roles and environmental consciousness.

Margot argues that reading these and similar texts from an ecofeminist perspective may serve to strengthen the reader’s own connection to the landscape and highlight the positive potential that this connection presents for according agency to both women and the natural world.

What follows is a list of the research interests of and contact information for faculty at the University of Calgary.

English Department / Creative Writing Program

Pamela Banting (ASLE member) – [pbanting\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:pbanting@ucalgary.ca)
Canadian Literature, nature writing, and ecocriticism

Harry Vandervlist – [vandervl\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:vandervl@ucalgary.ca)
Mountain literature

Rick Davis (ASLE member) – [rdavis\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:rdavis@ucalgary.ca)
Biography of R.M. Patterson

Barbara Belyea (ASLE member) – [belyea\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:belyea[at]ucalgary.ca)
Parks and explorers in Western Canada and regionalism

Aritha van Herk – [vanherk\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:vanherk[at]ucalgary.ca)
Literature of the Canadian and American Wests

Jon Kertzer – [jkertzer\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:jkertzer[at]ucalgary.ca)
Professor Kertzer is a Canadianist working in the field of ethics.

For more information, please consult the faculty directory, listed in the Department's website (<http://www.english.ucalgary.ca/faculty/>).

Sustainability Initiative in the Humanities Program

Environmental Ethics - Dr. Marc Ereshefsky and Dr. Brenda Baker(emeritus)

Energy Discourse Analysis - Dr. Dominique Perron

Dr. Perron has just finished a book on the discourse of Hydro-Quebec entitled *Le Nouveau Roman de l'Energie Nationale* and is now working on another book, *Les Discours de l'Energie en Alberta*, which deals with the cultural aspects of energy—identity, discursive strategies, rhetoric on environmental issues, and ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism - Dr. Pamela Banting

Dr. Banting is a poet, anthologist, literary theorist, and writer of creative non-fiction who works in the field of environmental literature and ecocriticism at the University of Calgary, where she also teaches courses on such topics as "Writing the Rural, Literature of Wilderness and Wilder Places," "Nature Writing and Ecocriticism," "Representations of Animals," "Mountain Literature," and creative writing. Dr. Banting was the first Canadian elected to the Executive Council of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), on which she served from 2002-2005. Her current research includes articles on representations of aridity and drought in Canadian literature, the politics of location, and the works of naturalist Andy Russell and grizzly-bear expert Charlie Russell.

Other faculty members and organizations of note include:

Tim Rogers – [tbrogers\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:tbrogers[at]ucalgary.ca)
Psychology, ecopsychology

David Monk – [monk\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:monk[at]ucalgary.ca)
Fine Arts, dancer and choreographer, Professor of dance

Tang Lee - [lee\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:lee[at]ucalgary.ca)
Environmental studies professor

Regina Cochrane – [rcochran\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:rcochran[at]ucalgary.ca)
Faculty of Communication and Culture

Haijo Westra – [westra\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:westra[at]ucalgary.ca)
Greek, Latin and Ancient History, strong interest in environmental work.

Julia Murphy– [jmurphy\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:jmurphy[at]ucalgary.ca)
Anthropology, examines local and global environmentalism

Diane Draper – [draper\[at\]ucalgary.ca](mailto:draper[at]ucalgary.ca)
Geography, looks at Canadian environmental sustainability

Western Canadian Caucus (<http://gauntlet.ucalgary.ca/story/8618>) also engages in environmental issues. On campus, many of the members have an interest in the environment, sense of place, environmental history, geography etc.

The U of Calgary Press(<http://www.ucalgary.ca/ucpress/>) is headed up by a former Parks Canada historian (and poet) Walter Hildebrandt, who publishes books by his former colleagues in parks history.

TRAVELOGUE

Paul Huebener

“Where the Savannah Meets the Rainforest”



They say every town in Venezuela, no matter how small, has a Plaza Bolívar: a village square built around a statue of El Libertador, usually in battle posture on his horse. Simón Bolívar is a mythological

figure here; in addition to the plazas, his name is borne by one of the country's states, a major city, countless buildings and streets, even the national currency. The Plaza Bolívar in which I am waiting now, a thousand kilometres south of the original one in Bolívar's birthplace of Caracas, is in the centre of Santa Elena de Uairén, a growing town of about 28,000 full of diamond shops, adventure tour companies, and unlicensed taxis, just a stone's throw from the Brazilian border. The village to which I am trying to get, though — Chirikayen — has no Plaza Bolívar.

A small group of men and women from Chirikayen who have come into town for the day to sell food and crafts at the Friday market have offered to drive me back to the village with them, so I sit under a tree with my backpack, Bolívar standing behind me with his sword at the ready, until one of the women I recognize appears to tell me that we are ready to leave. I clamber up and take my place on the back of the truck they've procured, noticing with some relief the existence of rails along the sides of the open bed. The eight or nine of us onboard are in close quarters, standing or slouching amongst the bags and boxes of unsold market goods, store-bought groceries, and eggs, but at least the rails mean there is something solid to hold onto as the truck, grinding and rattling, pulls out of the plaza and joins the main road out of town.

A few days ago, while taking me to his own property outside of Santa Elena, Manfred had told me about the importance of keeping vehicles running for as many years as possible. Repairs are expensive, but

buying a new vehicle — especially a decent four-wheel drive vehicle that has a good chance of getting through cracked and swollen roads during the rainy season — is prohibitive.

“When people buy a used car,” he said, bouncing slightly in his seat as he navigated a trench carved into the road by water runoff, “they don’t care what the year is. They only care if the engine is running. This is why vehicles do not lose their value; even a Land Cruiser like this one, twenty years old, is worth keeping and repairing.”

As he said this, the already considerable heat inside the vehicle started unexpectedly to build up and become quite oppressive, prompting him to look at the dashboard.

“I have the feeling,” he said, holding his hand out over the vent, “that the air fan has stopped.”

There was no continuing like this without a breeze under the blazing sun, so he stopped the vehicle and rummaged around under his seat until he produced a length of wire, stripped at each end. He stuffed one end of the wire into a section of the exposed fuse box under the steering column, and poked the other end into another exposed bit near the electric window control. The window slid down with a whine. It seemed only polite to ask if I should do the same on my side, but he shook his head.

“This is the only one that goes down.”

Manfred is a tall man with an easy grin, and his English and Spanish carry the accent of his native German. After running a home-restoration business in Amsterdam for several years, he moved to Caracas to work with street children, but when the political turmoil in Venezuela’s capital appeared to be escalating around the turn of the millennium he decided to take his work to the south of the country. Now in his early fifties, Manfred runs the small nonprofit organization in Santa Elena through which I have been introduced to the residents of Chirikayen, the idea being that I will spend a few weeks in their village on a sort of cultural exchange, helping with whatever work needs doing as best I can. Manfred has an absent-minded air about him which can make you feel sometimes as though it’s necessary to repeat yourself, but he is humble about the network of volunteers he has set up to promote sustainability and work with local children.

"I don't expect to change the world with this organization, you know," he explained. "I think that would be a mistake. The world goes by itself. I try things out to see what might work and to see how we can help, but I don't pretend to have all the answers."

He held his hand out over the vent to confirm that it hadn't started up again. "It's common for cars to catch fire here, you know. These cars are very old, and people will fix things, replace things, maybe install an alarm, fix something else, remove the alarm but leave the wiring behind — it's very shoddy, and after a while the car is a big tangled mess of rusty wires, some with unknown purposes, some leading nowhere. In the hot sun all you need is a spark and maybe a little wind and there will be a fire. I am going to take this car in for a repair soon because I have noticed some wires getting hot."

As we drove further along, we saw two or three clouds of smoke rising in the distance. It seems the savannah itself is always on fire, except perhaps in the height of the rainy season. The flames spread quickly through the tall grass, and sometimes find their way into trees. At one point during our trip a few ghostly flames were visible in the grass just outside our vehicle, so we got out and suffocated them with our boots and handfuls of dirt, Manfred insisting while trying to keep the soles of his boots from melting that the fires are not part of a regenerative process. A cigarette, a piece of glass in the sun, or a cinder from a garbage fire can ignite the grass and pose a threat to pockets of forest in the area. Though the trees are less likely to burn than the grass, they represent the scattered traces of a tropical forest that once covered more than a third of the Gran Sabana, but which, after three centuries of logging and human-started fires, has now been reduced to small sections of dense jungle: islands isolated from one another by giant swaths of grasslands that don't seem to show much propensity for regeneration.

"In any case," he said when we were back in the vehicle, "remember on your way to Chirikayen that you will pass through the military checkpoint. It is best to explain to the guards that you are a guest of the Pemón. You are not a worker: we won't use the 'w' word, because work means working for pay. They are suspicious of people who come for money — the miners, they damage the rivers and the tepui, and they take the gold and diamonds which now legally belong to the Pemón."

"You don't think we can tell them that I'm working as a volunteer?" I asked.

"Ah, no," Manfred said, frowning. "Volunteering here is... an unfathomable concept. There is no check box for it on the forms, you know? One thing we are doing is trying gradually to introduce the concept of volunteering, but these things take time. For the moment, you will be a guest."

Now, in the back of the pickup truck with my Pemón hosts, I hold on to the railing and feel my teeth rattle as we roll out of town. We turn off the main southbound road just a mile or two short of the Brazil border, and head west. Here the road carries us along the top of El Abismo: a jagged cliff face that extends for miles, forming a natural boundary between Venezuela's Gran Sabana to the north, and the Amazon basin and Brazil to the south. The rolling Brazilian hills that fade into the mist are covered by rainforest so thick that only a solid bed of treetops is visible; even the rivers that wind their way through the forest are undetectable from this height. The rainforest ends abruptly, though, at the base of El Abismo, and the landscape on this side of the cliff — the highland — is markedly different.

Locals sometimes call the Gran Sabana "Second Africa," and it is a fitting name for the grasslands that sweep over the horizon, punctuated by the occasional watering hole. There would be no mistaking this terrain for First Africa, though, because of the tepui: enormous flat-topped mountains made from some of the oldest stone on earth, which are always visible on the horizon, raised out of the ground like colossal stone tables. The largest of these, Auyántepeui, covers 700 square kilometres and spawns Parecupá-merú: the tallest waterfall in the world, known to English speakers as Angel Falls. These tepui, the multitude of smaller waterfalls, and the Sabana's scattered pockets and valleys of tropical forest bursting with toucans, araguato monkeys, and fluorescent butterflies, are much admired by foreigners and tourists: this is the landscape that sparked Arthur Conan Doyle's musings about a lost world. But for the indigenous people who make their living off the land, the rolling stretches of hot grasslands are the reality.

It doesn't take long to reach the checkpoint, and our driver comes to a halt as three or four guards emerge from the small military office, sweating under the weight of their assault rifles and full-body camouflage. A truck full of Pemón, though, is of little interest to them today, despite the presence of an unfamiliar white face; they wave us through, my passport unchecked.

Again there is smoke visible in the distance as the asphalt beneath us turns to cracked and dusty earth, and several times we see entire hills blackened by recent fires. On the right side we pass a semicircle of smouldering burnt grass perhaps eighty feet across, with flames at the edges creeping outward from where the fire has started at the side of the road. The sun begins to dip below the horizon, which means that darkness will be total within half an hour; the evening's changing winds will either defeat this small fire, or fuel it.

Turning from the main dirt road onto another smaller one, our driver deposits us in Maurak, a Pemón village of a few hundred people. We wait, chatting and eating sweet bananas for an hour or two until another car, a battered sort of station wagon with little paint, appears in front of us. The driver of this car, a middle-aged Pemón man, helps us stuff the boxes, packages, and my backpack first into the back of the car, and then onto the roof as well. We all climb in, four people in the front seats; three adults, two babies, and myself in the rear seats; and four more jammed into the rear space, these last hidden from view by the luggage. The broken springs pointing up out of the ancient seats mean that those of us in the front two rows are not much better off than those in the back, but the lack of any panes of glass in the windows makes for plenty of fresh evening air. The driver is able after a few tries to start the tired and wheezing engine, which shakes violently, causing the car's rearview mirror, hanging vertically from the ceiling, to swing back and forth. He leads us in a short prayer and we depart, the mothers nursing their babies, and others half-dozing as we bounce in our seats.

The drive to Chirikayen takes another hour, interrupted briefly by the necessity of walking in darkness up a hill whose steep incline has caused sparks to shoot from the exhaust pipe of the fully-loaded car. The sparkling night sky here is different from the one I am used to, not only because of the lack of urban glare, but because of the difference in latitude; Venezuela's southeastern edge, a mere four degrees from the equator, is strange territory indeed for someone who lives more than halfway to the north pole. Familiar constellations are shifted towards the northern horizon, revealing stars that are new to me in the southern portion of the sky. When the car, free of the weight of its passengers, arrives spluttering at the top of the hill, we climb back in for the final leg of the journey: a section of road that winds through a forested area, passing over two or three small log bridges before emerging onto the grassy plain of the village.

Here the car's headlights trace a path towards a cluster of small wooden buildings. We unload, and a woman who is nearly invisible in the darkness, but speaks kindly, leads me to an unoccupied building where I am to tie my hammock to the low support beams and sleep.



I awake at sunrise, and stepping outside of the little building I get a good look at my surroundings for the first time. Chirikayen mountain, the long and angular tepui after which the village is named, rests on the eastern horizon, blurred by a layer of shining mist. Though named after a bird — the chirika — Chirikayen mountain is also known as the sleeping giant; the outcrop that forms the nose and face of the enormous human figure lying on its back is now silhouetted by the hazy orb of the rising sun. A long, winding row of palm trees on the near side of the mountain marks the route of a small stream which, I have been told, is the best place for washing and bathing. Already now I can feel the heat of the sun as it starts to burn through the mist, warming the tall grass and the inverse craters of countless termite mounds surrounding the village.

The building I have been given to sleep in is one of a group of seven or eight, all made of boards set together with small gaps to let the light in, and roofs thatched from the leaves of the morichi palm: the same trees that line the banks of the nearby stream. This group of buildings, set apart from the village proper, is a campus run by two young American missionaries: Joshua, who has lived in the village for a year, and Casey, who has recently arrived. Their Seventh-day Adventist school, which draws Pemón students not only from Chirikayen but from villages miles away, is currently out of session, and while the purpose of my secular visit here is more to learn from

the Pemón than it is to teach, it is to Joshua's respected position in the village that I owe my welcome.

I spend the morning investigating my surroundings and helping to repair a few broken boards on the mess hall. Being somewhat lacking in the melanin department, I try to limit my exposure to the sun, which has quickly risen to an entirely unfamiliar and dizzying height. I have noticed with mild alarm that during the midday hours if one is standing next to a building and wishes to walk around to the shady side of the building, the journey is bound to be unsuccessful. Still, equipped with a hat, I have found that sunburn here is not usually a problem, for the simple reason that clothing covering one's arms and legs is necessary for fending off the puri puri: tiny midges that swarm endlessly and cause bites which are similar to mosquito bites but last longer. The apparent inefficacy of the special lotion I have been given, which is meant to repel anything with a sense of smell, leaves me wondering if the puri puri are not guided by a different sense altogether. I sit down to catch my breath, and Joshua arrives to tell me that we have been invited to have lunch with the Captain.

The five-minute walk from the missionary camp into the village follows a dirt path worn in a gentle uphill slope through the grasses and termite mounds. From this direction the first building we pass is the church, followed by smaller homes constructed in three or four different styles. Some are made of a wooden latticework filled in with clay, others of boards stacked horizontally; some have thatched palm roofs, and others have roofs of thin flat metal sheets. One or two new buildings in the early stages of construction are being made from compressed bricks of dirt and cement. Joshua explains that the different building styles reflect the changes in government policy over the years. The metal roofs, for example, were part of an initiative that was intended to provide housing for Pemón groups in the area over a decade ago, but resulted in buildings that, unfortunately, were excellent at absorbing solar heat. After a few mistakes of this kind, the current administration is leaning more towards supplying the Pemón with raw materials, which the Pemón can use how best they see fit. As we pass one of the small construction sites, two men are shovelling a mixture of cement and earth into the chambers of two small metal compression pumps, whose long handles are then pushed down by two other men, straining to squeeze the mixture into strong bricks. Several dozen finished bricks are stacked around them.

The village is home to about two hundred people, though a visitor from North America upon seeing the two or three dozen small buildings here

would probably guess the population to be less than half this number. Except for one or two homes that have been built with a second floor, all of the buildings are single-storied, and often single-roomed as well; each one is home to a family, though, of anywhere from two to perhaps ten or twelve people.

Joshua leads the way to one of the larger buildings, which lies in a rectangular shape and turns out to be full of long tables at which fifteen or twenty people are sitting for lunch. A man who looks to be in his late thirties or early forties, wearing shorts and an American t-shirt, stands up, and Joshua introduces him as Eusebio, the village Captain. Eusebio smiles, and switching from the Pemón dialect with which much of the room is filled to Spanish, asks about my surname.

“Sí,” I reply in fractured Spanish, “my name is from Germany, but I am from Canada.” Eusebio declares that he is at my service, and gestures Joshua and I into seats at the table.

Lunch is a bowl of rice with chicken, served with casabe bread: the grainy, cracker-like bread made from yucca which serves as the staple of the Pemón diet. Also at the table is a bowl of thick green dip meant to be soaked up by pieces of casabe. Recalling the stories I have heard about the famous Pemón spicy salsa made from termites, I tear off a chunk of casabe, and after a moment’s hesitation I brave the dip, which is indeed spicy and not a little salty.

“I’ll take you to meet Victorino,” Joshua tells me after the meal, as we watch two live chickens walking in and out of the open door. “He lives over near the edge of town.”

We thank our hosts for lunch, and Eusebio in turn thanks me for coming to help in the village, a little prematurely perhaps, since it remains to be seen how much work I am actually capable of.

As Joshua and I leave the dining hall and walk towards the opposite end of the village, he explains what I am meant to do. “All the men in Chirikayen either farm, hunt, or mine for gold, or some of each. Victorino has a yucca farm — yucca is the main crop here — so you’ll be helping him on his plantation. He’s a nice guy. He has a meteorite.”

“A meteorite?”

“Well, it’s some kind of rock at least. He’ll show you. And remember the football game if you’re back in time.” He gestures towards a small dirt field in which a few young children are kicking at a battered soccer ball. “The little ones are playing now, but the real game is later in the afternoon.”

I boggle for a moment at the thought of playing afternoon sports in the equatorial heat, but my thoughts quickly return to the lunch we have just eaten. It seems to me on reflection that eating insects is probably less strange a thing to do than eating genetically modified corn, but termite salsa is new to me, and I ask Joshua about it.

He laughs. “No, no. That was a noodle seasoning package. If it was the salsa you would have seen the termites in it. Here, this is Victorino’s house.”



The house is of the clay-filled wooden frame variety, with a sheet metal roof. It could contain one large room, or two or three very small ones, but before we reach the door Victorino emerges, smiling. A short middle-aged man with blue slacks and a t-shirt, he greets me warmly in Spanish. Joshua exchanges a few words with him, then wishes me luck and turns back towards the missionary camp.

Victorino leads me in the other direction towards the edge of the village, asking me a few questions about where I come from and why I decided to come to Chirikayen. He says little in response to my own questions, not out of displeasure but rather with a sense that there is little that needs to be said. I am able to learn that he has six children and that his wife is pregnant, then he continues in silence, two

machetes swinging from his arms. We walk over a short wooden bridge under which runs a small stream where a woman and a few children are washing and playing, Victorino nodding in greeting to a man walking in the other direction. On the other side of the bridge we pass two last houses, and then turn off of the road, following a footpath uphill through a patchy section of hot grasses towards a long wall of trees.

After a few moments we reach the trees and instantly we are inside the tropical forest, our path becoming a narrow trail cut through the dense foliage. The change is drastic: the air is now heavier and close, the smells rich and damp, and though I am sweating from the heat and mugginess, we now at least are protected from the sun by the tall trees that surround us. A flock of green butterflies skirts in and out among the underbrush, and various birds call out to each other, hidden from sight in the canopy overhead.

We continue along the path for a few minutes, and as I marvel at the way in which the landscape can change so suddenly from scrubby grasslands to lush tropical forest, we reach a clearing. It is immediately obvious that the clearing is one which has been made by people, and recently. A roughly square-shaped area with edges perhaps eighty feet in length stretches in front of us, each side defined by a sharp boundary between the land that has been cleared and the thick undisturbed forest. The clearing itself is filled with the black charred remnants of stumps and branches, some still smoking.

During my time in Santa Elena I had heard several different and conflicting accounts of the Pemón farming techniques. Manfred's version was that the Pemón came to Venezuela from the Caribbean about three hundred years ago to escape the colonialists, and began a partially nomadic lifestyle in the Gran Sabana's then-abundant forests. They would clear a section of forest, grow crops on the land for a year or two, then clear another space and move on, eventually describing a large circle in such a way that when they finally returned to a spot that had been cleared and farmed, it would be two generations later and the land would be forested and fertile again. A few decades ago, though, the Venezuelan government began to build houses for the Pemón, thus reducing their mobility. The Pemón farmers still use the same slash and burn technique to clear sections of land for crops, but now they clear the forest in roughly concentric movements outward from their stationary homes.

These small-scale slash and burn plantations, Manfred believes, are probably sustainable, but combined with the timber industry, mining, cattle farming, and other land uses brought in with the colonialists, the forest was and is being destroyed. Making matters more difficult is the fact that the Gran Sabana is a relative highland, on which the forest doesn't regenerate the way it can in the lower basins.

"The slash and burn technique is probably not good for the ecosystem," he had said to me, "and I'm not sure if the Pemón really reuse the land, but the thing is there is no viable alternative for them to grow food. They would have to start buying fertilizer for all their land, and that of course would be another big problem. Still, I think these family farmers are probably a scapegoat — it is the big logging operations that destroy the forest."

I heard a different story from a man in Santa Elena who has written a series of books on the history and features of the Gran Sabana. When I tracked him down inside the small office of his tour company, I had the chance to ask him if it was true that three centuries ago the Gran Sabana was forested.

"Half of it was," he said.

"How has so much of it been destroyed?" I asked.

"By fires. The Indians set them, they use fires for everything: crops, communication, snake protection — you know we get about ten Indian snake bites every month, that's compared to about one a year for tourists. They travel at night, they walk barefoot, they get bitten. They start fires for everything."

On another occasion I had asked Hans, a gentle father and carpenter I got to know in Santa Elena, whom he thought was responsible for reducing the Gran Sabana's forest. "Colonialists, Indians, we," he said, gesturing to himself, "we all treat Gran Sabana bad. And drought: there was drought for ten years, then a huge fire in 1969. United States and Canada sent help that time. Now the forest is getting small, the animals scarce. Still, the Gran Sabana is beautiful."

It seemed unlikely that my mere weeks here would afford me a chance to get to the bottom of these matters which have confused and divided people who have lived in the area for decades. Still, the chance to see the forest plantations firsthand was not one I was about to pass up.

Victorino leads me deeper into the forest, and the smouldering clearing which will soon be filled with yucca or another crop passes out of sight behind us. Eventually we reach a small open-framed wooden shelter with a thatched roof, set alongside a section of forest that must have been cleared several months ago, in which now grows a jumbled collection of yucca plants and other assorted stalks, vines, and greenery. Victorino sits on a log set into the ground under the shelter, and begins to sharpen the edges of his machetes with a small metal tool. After a few minutes of this he leads me out into the midst of the yucca plants, and explains that we are to cut down the smaller plants — weeds, then — growing among them.

The work is difficult in the minimal shade afforded by the yucca leaves, but I am able over a couple of hours to clear a reasonably-sized area, and I slowly begin to grow accustomed to the movements of the machete, learning that much less effort is needed to cut through even a thick stalk if the angle and aim of the blade is properly controlled.

The motions soon become repetitive, so I am startled into renewed focus when I see that I have hacked through a woody stock just a few inches away from a motionless large brown toad. I kneel for a closer look at the tiny spiky bumps that cover its body, and the two larger ridges of these that extend down both sides of its back from above its eyes. I can't help but feel a little uneasy here. I knew before I arrived in Venezuela that as a volunteer and a guest I was offering myself up to take a stab at whatever work happened to need doing: that it wouldn't make sense for me to arrive and then shake my head at the tasks put before me. And with this arrangement I am satisfied. Still, the thought of hacking through a slash and burn plantation from which a variety of creatures the likes of which I have never seen have had to escape or risk death is unsettling.

Perhaps I have been labouring under the illusion that living sustainably off the land shouldn't involve labelling certain plants weeds and tearing them down at the expense of some birds' nests and toad shelters. I hear an echo in my mind of William Cronon saying that the concept of wilderness as a place that stands apart from human interference is one that could only have been invented by people who think that food comes from a grocery store.

Back in Santa Elena, Hans had asked me one morning why I had decided to come to Venezuela. I explained that South America's general absence in Canadian media and consciousness had made me curious, but that the main reason for the trip was my interest in the

environment and my desire to try my hand at some conservation and sustainability projects in the area.

“Ah,” he had said, nodding, “you have a love for people. Good. Not many people have that.”

This comment surprised and impressed me. It is unusual, I think, to draw such an immediate connection between environmentalism and a love for people — if anything, it seems that environmentalists have a reputation for prizing trees and whales and the like over human concerns. That the state of the world’s trees and whales and the like is perhaps the ultimate human concern, and dictates everything from the health of our internal organs to the health of our economies, is a detail we tend to have a hard time grasping.

All of this is not to say, though, that I don’t feel a sense of admiration and delight looking at this still motionless brown toad for no reason other than that it is a toad. I turn away and grant him some space to decide whether or not to look for a new shady spot to replace the one I have cut down.

Soon Victorino indicates that it is time to leave, and we begin the walk back through the forest towards the village. I ask him how long he will be able to grow yucca on the plot of land we worked on today, and he tells me that it will be good for one year, and then he will start farming another section of land.

“What happens,” I ask, “when the farm gets too far from the village?”

“It won’t,” he says. “The forest grows again in two years, so we use the same land again.” He gestures at the thick, lush forest beside us. “This used to be a yucca plantation too. The forest grows.”

When we arrive back in the village, Victorino invites me to sit on a wooden bench set underneath a mango tree behind his house. A small table rests nearby, holding a collection of bowls and one or two pots, and beside this a small firepit is dug into the ground — it seems that Victorino’s family has recently cooked a meal, though they are now inside the house or elsewhere. Victorino brings two bowls over to the bench, along with some casabe bread and a dip. I am so grateful for the food that it is not until I am partway through eating that I notice how much of the meal is made from yucca. The bread is yucca, the main ingredient in the grainy, spicy dip is yucca, and the coarse pebbly condiment that turns the thin broth in our bowls into a hearty soup is

yucca as well. Victorino hands me a cup full of thick delicious banana juice, and I remember that bananas and plantains are the other major crop in the village.

Victorino sighs after putting aside his empty bowl, and tells me that the Pemón have lived in Chirikayen for fifty years, and that they are generally happy here. "Work, eat, sleep," he says, "we are happy with this. When I go to a big city I can't sleep." Then, standing up, he says, "So, I will see you tomorrow?"

"Sí," I say, "muchas gracias."

Victorino returns my thanks, switching now from Spanish to the Pemón dialect. "Guacabeh gurumon."



Note on Contributor

Paul Huebener has a BA in Honours English from the University of British Columbia and an MA in English from McMaster University. He plans to start a PhD after working for a while in New Zealand.

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