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Exploring the Excerpts: Historical Documents and Narrating Canadian Identity
By
Jessica Bennett Langston

**Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the PhD degree in English**

**Department of English
Faculty of Arts
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Dissertation Abstract
Exploring the Excerpts: Historical Documents and Narrating Canadian Identity

This thesis examines a specific type of documentary literature, one that narrates the exploration period of Canadian history through excerpting and re-framing the journal entries of early explorers. Because these literary texts are concerned with English Canada's founding, they provide an important context for thinking about the ways that Canadian history is used to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct national identity. By returning to this seminal historic moment and reconfiguring history through a narrative dialogue with its documents, these authors not only undertake to re-conceptualize national identity; they also engage in a dialogue about representation versus truth. The dissertation begins with an examination of several poems – John Newlove's "The Pride" (1968) and "Samuel Hearne in Wintertime" (1968), Marion Smith's *Koo-koo-sint* (1976), Jon Whyte's *Homage, Henry Kelsey* (1981), and Lionel Kearns' *Convergences* (1984) – and then moves on three works of fiction: George Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980), Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994) and John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (1992). All these texts incorporate actual passages from original historical documents, the explorers' journals or narratives. The thesis charts the different ways these Canadian writers re-frame the detailed, often dispassionate accounts of explorers, considering how each re-framing deals with the struggle of representing history responsibly and how such a representation also enacts a particular type of national narrative.

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For my family – you will always hold the map to my heart

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Introduction – “Hunting for a Source”: Canadian History and Identity

The materials of citizenship today are different and the perspectives wider and more difficult; but we have, as ever, the duty of exploring them and of waking the heart and will in regard to them. That duty is what documentary is about. (Grierson 215)

In 1938, renowned critic John Grierson was hired by the Canadian Government to study and make suggestions on centralizing and coordinating national film activities. His report led to the creation of the National Film Board, where he stayed on as Commissioner through to the end of the war. Under Grierson’s guidance the NFB became and continues to be the central producer of documentary films in Canada, and it was reports such as the one excerpted above that formed the country’s understanding of what documentary was and should be. A documentary film, according to Grierson and, by proxy, the NFB, should not only inform Canadians about the nation in which they live; it should also excite their allegiance to it. Not that the documentary had to be dour and prescriptive; the documentary can and should be engaging and entertaining.¹ In fact, the duty of documentary cinema was to teach nationalism, creatively.

Writing almost thirty years after Grierson’s tenure at the NFB, Dorothy Livesay returns to Grierson’s precepts, applying them to what she perceives as an emerging genre of Canadian literature. Citing a number of poems – E.J. Pratt’s *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (1940), Anne Marriott’s *The Wind Our Enemy* (1939), and her own *Call My People Home* (1950), among them – Livesay argues that, like the documentary film, these “documentary poems” “reflect our environment profoundly . . . [and] cast light on the landscape, the topography, the flora and fauna as well as on the social structure of the country” (“The

¹ As Grierson explains in his “First Principles of Documentary,” “in its use of the living article,” the documentary also has “an opportunity to perform creative work” (101).

Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre” 269). The documentary poem, then, is rooted in the real, the concrete (“descriptive”), yet, it is still “lyrical” (a literary equivalent to Grierson’s entertainment). Finally, like the documentary film, the documentary poem is, ultimately, “didactic” (269). The documentary poem, then, operates on a fissure similar to that of its cinematic forerunner; its purpose is to both engage and inform. Livesay explains this purpose as a dialogue between “objective fact” (the referenced historical sources) and “subjective feelings” (those of the poet and those created by the text surrounding the “real” information).

Since Livesay’s observations (and, according to Manina Jones, partially spurred by them), a number of Canadian writers (poets, novelists, and playwrights) have contributed to the tradition that Livesay names, taking it even further (and literally) by including actual documents in their fictional texts. Robert Kroetsch’s *The Ledger* (1975) and *Seed Catalogue* (1977), Kim Morrissey’s *Batoche* (1987), Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic* (1988), and Margaret Sweatman’s *Fox* (1991) are just a few examples of this trend. These documentary works deal with pivotal periods of Canada’s past, incorporating records from a historical period into their fictional revision of it. Influenced by postmodern and post-colonial theories of history and nationhood, these texts depart from Livesay’s and Grierson’s emphasis on the “real” and the “didactic,” offering instead a critical take on national history. However, by including excerpts from the history that their texts work to destabilize, writers of documentary literature are engaged in the dialogue that Livesay delineates. That is, they both revise *and* revere the past. While, through their incorporation of the documents, these texts seem to struggle with and foreground the difficulty of representing historical truth, in and through the fictional narratives surrounding these documents, they also seem to be trying to access or illuminate a more truthful history.

This thesis examines the ways some contemporary Canadian writers grapple with this paradox of historical representation and how this grappling is tied up with a re-thinking of Canada's national identity. Its focus is a very specific type of documentary literature, one that narrates the exploration period of Canadian history through excerpting and re-framing the journal entries of early explorers. This sub-genre of both documentary and historical fiction not only relies on Canadian exploration history and texts, but is itself an exploration of this period, its key figures, and its role in the production of national self-concepts.

Because these literary texts are concerned with the beginnings of the European presence in North America and hence a period that preceded Canada's founding, these texts provide an important context for thinking about the ways that Canadian history is used to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct national identity. My interest is in the ways that the authors' use of actual historical documents introduces a new level of complexity into these debates about the representation of the real in relation to questions about historical knowledge. These texts engage with the tension between history as representation and history as accessible fact, the tension between the instability of knowledge and the desire to believe that there is something significant and concrete accessible through historical documentation. The detailed, often dispassionate accounts of explorers are re-framed and recast within these historical fictions and ultimately used to trouble populist, mythologized, and teleological versions of Canada's history and, in some ways, to create, if not a more truthful, then at least a more complex image of Canada.

In his expansion and development of Livesay's definition of the documentary long poem, informed by poetry written since Livesay's essay, Stephen Scobie argues that the documentary text is positioned precariously between fact and fiction. By drawing on and foregrounding the document as a source, this genre makes "an appeal to the authoritativeness

of fact” (*Signature, Event, Context* 122). The document acts as “the necessary link” between the reader and the historical moment being revisited and revived (*Signature* 123).

Simultaneously, however, because these works² reject the typical privileging of fact over fiction, they render the historical document and their own creative writing interchangeable (“Amelia” 272). This interchangeability, in turn, disrupts the qualities of authority, objectivity, and truth-telling typically assigned the document, “consign[ing] it to a systematic blurring of limits” (*Signature* 122). The document, as Scobie explains, exists in a kind of double-bind; it “‘proves’ the historicity of the subject: but the document is itself no more than another instance of *writing* . . .” (“Amelia” 273).

Manina Jones recognizes a similar double-bind or double movement in *That Art of Difference*, where she labels this technique of “self-consciously transcrib[ing] documents into a literary text” “documentary-collage” (13-14). The “documentary-collage,” she argues, “both invoke[s] and undermine[s] the opposition between categories such as . . . literary/non-literary, or fiction/non-fiction” (14). In doing this, the “documentary-collage” challenges the claims of authority and autonomy made by the records cited and by the “institutions” these records represent (16). There is, according to Jones, another key division with which the “documentary-collage” plays. Referencing Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*, Jones explains how these inserted texts create a “zone of contact between past writings and the ongoing present,” blurring temporally-based systems and limits (15). Through the re-contextualization of the historical document, the perception of “the past as a finished and unchangeable truth” is disrupted (15). As opposed to the modernist use of “reference,

² The poems that Scobie discusses include Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), and E.D. Blodgett’s *Sounding* (1977). In his article “Amelia or: Who Do You Think You Are?”, Scobie also examines novels such as Bowering’s *Burning Water* (1980) and Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers* (1966).

citation, allusion, and quotation” in order to preserve and honour “Tradition,”³ in the “documentary-collage,” the excerpted document becomes an emblem of a “reassessment” of the past and of the narratives we tell ourselves about it, that is, history (15-16).⁴ These texts, then, are not just challenging the story of Canada’s past; they are also challenging the conception of this national time period as finished, its narrative as a *fait accompli*. By re-framing the historical document, these texts are re-opening the process of accessing and narrating the past, a system that is typically perceived as closed.

Other critics, however, complicate these postmodernist- or poststructuralist-informed readings of documentary literature, suggesting that, perhaps, these types of texts are not wholly involved in subversion or even revision. Barbara Foley raises concerns which, though she is writing on American modernist literature, are still intriguing in relation to the more postmodernist texts this project considers. Documentary literature, she argues, occupies a slippery position (25). As fiction, it participates in a mimetic contract of sorts, wherein the reader agrees to accept the author’s paradigms – in other words, to suspend disbelief (43). Documentary, which Foley defines as the “specified invocation of data known to exist in an extratextual reality” (166), makes a further claim on its reader, attaching to the “fictive pact” a surreptitious assertion of truth-telling backed up by “empirical validation” (25-26). The reader is asked to do more than suspend disbelief; he or she is asked to believe. Contending that it has “some kind of specific and verifiable link to the historical world” (26), the documentary novel is neither as innocent nor as skeptical of truth-telling or, more specifically, of telling a particular truth or telling truth a particular way, as it pretends to be

³ Jones illustrates the use of citation by Modernists through a reference to T.S. Eliot’s image of “fragments I have shored against my ruins” in *The Wasteland* (79).

⁴ Compare the “documentary-collage” with modernist critic Georg Lukács’ study *The Historical Novel*, wherein he claims that the job of the historically-grounded text is to “*demonstrate by artistic means* that historical circumstances and characters existed in such and such a way. It is the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity” (43).

(43). While it may challenge the empiricism, authority, and autonomy of its source material (i.e., of historical records), documentary literature also uses empirical data, not only to question history, but to persuade the reader of the validity of the author's re-interpretation of history. Documentary literature, in other words, often dispels the idea of truthful history in order to recuperate some truth from history.

This re-interpretation, according to Duane McDougall, typically includes "propagandistic and didactic" elements (21). "[D]esigned to carry cultural instruction" (31), documentary literature is invested in teaching the reader about "natural, social, political, and/or religious events, acts, and thoughts that are . . . germane to a community's vision of itself . . ." (21). Although McDougall prefers to use the more general term "community" as opposed to nation, in his 1995 dissertation on the Canadian long poem the link between documentary and a country's or region's self-fashioning is made abundantly clear. The documentary poet, McDougall explains, is never writing for only him- or herself; rather, his or her poem becomes a kind of "repository of cultural" material that is reconsidered and revised with the interests and opinions of the larger community in mind. The ideology of documentary is never one of individualism; "documentary poetry is not formally possible unless there be sufficient social and/or political content to sustain the cultural views the poet attempts to convey on behalf of his or her localized community or greater society" (22). In McDougall's view, documentary literature's position as communal production and property leads to a genre that is always interpretive and propagandistic (29). The documentary poet, though he or she is, as McDougall would have it, "a spokesperson for a public reading of the cultural record under review" (31), is also writing out of and to a cultural context of his or her own.

Keeping in mind Livesay's suggestion that documentary literature uses official history to convey a message, my project charts the different ways Canadian authors re-frame excerpts from the exploration period, ultimately considering how each re-framing reconfigures our understanding of Canadian history and national identity in distinct ways. My dissertation begins, in Chapter One, with a consideration of several poems – namely, John Newlove's "The Pride" (1968) and "Samuel Hearne in Wintertime" (1968), Marion Smith's *Koo-koo-sint* (1976), Jon Whyte's *Homage, Henry Kelsey* (1981), and Lionel Kearns' *Convergences* (1984) – and then moves on to my main texts in the next three chapters: George Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980), Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994), and John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (1992). Through a close reading of each text, I examine how the exploration excerpts are used to keep in suspension the tension between different kinds of historical knowledge.

There are, of course, many other works of historical fiction that would complement this focus. Canadian literature that deals with national history through a foregrounding and revisioning of historical documents is abundant; in fact, most periods in Canada's national development have been revisited in contemporary documentary literature. Aside from the texts this project considers, numerous others, such as Douglas Glover's *Elle*, bpNichol's "Lament," Brian Fawcett's *The Secret Journal of Alexander Mackenzie*, and Elizabeth Hay's *Late Nights on Air*, revisit the exploration period, though these texts would not be considered strictly documentary as they do not use actual excerpts from documents, hence their exclusion from this project. Texts that narrate Canada's settlement using historical documents include Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), as well as Robert Kroetsch's *The Ledger* (1975), Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966), and Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988). George Bowering's *Shoot!* (1994), Kroetsch's *The Man from*

the Creeks (1998), Wiebe's *The Scorched Wood People* (1977), and James Reaney's *Sticks & Stones* (1975) all make use of documents in their narration of the development of Canadian towns and communities, as well as the appropriation of natural resources.

Documents are also used in recent representations of Canada's role in the Great War in texts such as R.H. Thomson's *Lost Boys* (2001), Wendy Lill's *The Fighting Days* (1985), Marilyn Bowering's *Grandfather Was a Soldier* (1987), and Heather Robertson's *Willie: A Romance* (1983). However, the poems and novels this project considers are concerned with a distinct historical period and with a distinctive means of invoking that period. The writers I engage with are challenging and re-envisioning the received historical record, but they do so very self-consciously by merging documentary texts with fictional ones. In the process, they explore the tension between historical fact and the force of narrative, underscoring the impossibility of the attempt to access history, while also challenging and reimagining the first few chapters of Canada's (hi)story.

Even though it predates the establishment of Canada as a nation-state, the exploration period is often figured as a significant period or event in Canada's development, often as the beginning of Canada's "story." This conception of the exploration period can be seen, for instance, in Carl Klinck's *Literary History of Canada*, in many anthologies of Canadian literature, such as, Donna Bennett and Russell Brown's *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*, and Cynthia Sugars and Laura Moss' *Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts*, both of which begin with selections from explorers' journals. Television documentary series, such as *Canada: A People's History*, and history textbooks, such as J.M. Careless' *Canada: A Celebration of Our Heritage*, typically plot Canada's story as starting with European exploration. A literary text that revisits this period, then, is, inevitably engaging with this discursive tradition. However, this definition of exploration as a sort of

founding moment of the nation is also unstable because it is a manufactured understanding; the national significance of the exploration period is one that has been applied retrospectively, after the fact. These explorers were not invested in the idea of Canada since Canada, as a national entity, had not been conceived of when these men came to the New World as representatives of the British and French Empires. The very fact that they have become national symbols highlights the constructed nature of Canada's history.

It is largely this paradox that has informed my decision to focus on literary texts that revisit the exploration period through an imaginative engagement with its documents. This focus allows for a closer look at the difficulties of literary re-presentations of national history than a book that examines historical fiction in general (works such as Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern* or Herb Wyile's *Speculative Fictions*). My thesis, then, suggests that these texts are both investigating and re-inscribing the contradiction inherent in the national production of the exploration period. The contemporary writers whose work I am discussing are all, in some sense, re-visionist. They want to challenge what they perceive as narrow or limiting visions of Canada, and these explorers' journals already challenge the kind of narratives that are ostensibly Canadian.⁵ The incorporation of excerpts from these documents thus underlines and even prefigures the disruption of Canada's story that takes place in the texts themselves. Simultaneously, however, because these explorers and the exploration period represent a time before the Canadian state, in and through these explorers' journals there is the potential for going back to the beginning of the nation; they provide an opportunity to imagine a new narrative. The historical documents are used to enact a deconstruction and reconstruction of a Canadian narrative in these texts; their presence and their re-framing encapsulate the struggle to represent history "right."

⁵ Thank you to Robert Stacey for bringing this complexity to my attention.

Historical Fiction and the Struggle between Truth and Representation

Canadian author Wayne Johnston caused a stir with the publication, in 1996, of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, a semi-fictional biography of Newfoundland's first premier, Joey Smallwood. In a review of the novel, Stuart Pierson chastises Johnston for the historical inaccuracy of everything from language choice to historical events to the very personality of Smallwood himself. Rex Murphy raises similar concerns in the *Globe and Mail*, emphasizing the gap between the "real," historical figure of Smallwood and the Joey of Johnston's book, who "never sounds right." The central question raised by these reviewers, and it would seem, by proxy, the novel itself, is, as Pierson puts it, "how do we establish the boundary, if there is to be one, between history, as written, and imaginative literature?" (290). Also, one might add, what duty does literature have to history? Does literature have to get history "right," as Murphy seems to suggest? Is getting history "right" even possible?

Unsurprisingly, the same types of questions attend the novels I have chosen to explore in this project. George Bowering, for instance, was taken to task by historian W. Kaye Lamb for "not only violat[ing] the basic facts of Vancouver's career" but for "bespatter[ing] his pages with numerous errors of fact that are both pointless and needless" (A5). Several years after the publication of *Burning Water* and Lamb's subsequent dressing down, Bowering called the review one of his "happiest responses." The "failure of [the] novel to get a good grasp on history," Bowering contends, is the whole point – "History," Bowering explains, is only ever "a version" ("Efficacy" 22). In interviews surrounding the publication of *A Discovery of Strangers*, Rudy Wiebe, on the other hand, highlights the importance of research, of "ground[ing] in fact" the historical novel (Riches D16), while simultaneously acknowledging that "the factuality means nothing unless there's a larger story told there. . . . the fiction writer . . . is not hamstrung by the facts" (Bergman 2). These

historical novels, any historical novel, are engaged in a negotiation, a juggling act between the real and the representational.

As Robert Holton has demonstrated in his extended study of theories of history, *Jarring Witnesses*, this tension between fact and interpretation has bedeviled debates about modern historiography since at least the nineteenth century. While in the eighteenth century history was “most commonly thought of as an orderly narrative,” Holton explains that “[m]ore recently . . . the academic and scientific respectability of historians has at times been impugned on the basis of dubious truth-claims that can be made for the works of scholars whose main task may appear to be ‘mere’ story-telling” (3). Acknowledging the necessarily interpretive nature of historical analysis need not extend to a rejection of the existence of facts, but on the other hand, this admission cannot be equated with the idea of unmediated access to these facts. Flattening history to so much fiction distorts rather than complicates these tensions, as does the opposite impulse towards empiricism. If, as Holton suggests, the theoretical work of influential historiographic writers from F.H. Bradley to Hayden White has turned compulsively on this tension, literary texts, as overtly fictional works, may be uniquely positioned to explore these questions. The historical novel, precisely because it is a fictional genre that draws on factual sources that are then subjected to a fictional framework, can be seen as emblematic of the ongoing tension between history as representation and history as accessible fact. Historical fiction is caught up in the tension between historical fact and the force of narrative, between the instability of knowledge and the search for some verifiable facts or truths attainable in and through history.

The texts this project examines take this instability of historical truth as their theme. In fact, they are foregrounding this theme through the incorporation of actual documents. Of course, the instability of historical truth as it is treated in Canadian fiction is Linda

Hutcheon's focus in *The Canadian Postmodern*. "Historiographic metafiction," a genre that she defines as a postmodern novelistic genre that troubles historical narrative(s) by underlining the very fact that they are narratives, is celebrated by Hutcheon for its unsettling of the concept of historical truth. The historical novel,⁶ Hutcheon argues, no longer claims to provide any sort of direct access to the past through realist fiction; rather, through "using and abusing" the conventions of realism and history, historiographic metafiction (the current form of the historical novel) challenges the notion that we can *know* the past (Hutcheon 8). History, according to Hutcheon, is only available to us through texts, and, by incorporating these texts or documents into their novels, historiographic metafictionists blur the line between fiction and history.

While historiographic metafiction may incorporate historical facts, Hutcheon insists that it never "assimilates" them. It is, in fact, the largely unsuccessful attempts to assimilate history that these texts foreground (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 114). Historiographic metafiction, by focusing on "collecting and attempt[ing] to make narrative order" of historical data, highlights the "paradox of the *reality* of the past" and its relative inaccessibility to the present, except through textuality or discourse (*Poetics* 114). In other words, historiographic metafiction produces and is produced by the conflict between the desire to draw the past and present together and the simultaneous desire to revise the past in the present, in part through a recognition of history's writtenness. This is not to say that these texts somehow stand outside of the culture whose historical narratives they challenge; Hutcheon recognizes at several points in *The Canadian Postmodern* that historiographic metafiction is, as she puts it, "unavoidably a part" of that which the authors "still wish to

⁶ Among the novels that Hutcheon discusses are Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) and Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966).

criticize” (3). Rather, it is to say that these authors recognize, foreground, and struggle with the fact that “the act of making fiction is an *unavoidably* ideological act, that is, a process of creating meaning within a social context” (10).

Like Hutcheon, I am interested in the ways these texts trouble traditional conceptions of history as objective, while re-creating history as a subjective and anachronistic narrative. However, I also extend Hutcheon’s examination of historiographic metafiction in several ways, most importantly in my focus on the actual historical documents that get excerpted within these texts, and on related questions about how these documents are re-framed, and to what effect. This difference in our approaches is compounded by differences in the texts we analyse. Hutcheon deals only with novels, while I ground the development of this particular genre in a discussion of the documentary long poem which I then extend into a discussion of novels that function as documentary collages. Nor does Hutcheon’s book, which came out in 1988, deal with the two more recent novels, Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers* and Steffler’s *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, which constitute a central portion of my discussion.

Hutcheon’s work has often been invoked in broader theoretical debates which pursue the issue of the political efficacy of postmodernism generally. Critics continue to debate this question of the nature of the relation between postmodernism and post-colonialism. If the two can in no way be equated, neither is it clear that they are mutually exclusive. Authors such as Fred Wah and Roy Miki, not to mention Salman Rushdie, have often been described as both. Where postmodernism has been broadly associated with an interrogation of grand meta-narratives and a network of self-referential and ironic formal characteristics that privilege *jouissance* or the irreducible playfulness that we have come to know as textuality, post-colonialism has emphasized the question of the power relations and the ethical dimension of identity formations that constitute the legacy of imperialism.

I am less interested in the tortuous task of resolving these definitional struggles than in thinking about the ways that their intersections might help us to conceptualize the fraught relation between fact and fiction in history writing generally and in a group of texts whose focus raises this problem of interpretation as a central aspect of their thematic concerns. What preoccupies me in this thesis is less the question of ontology (did things really happen? what do we mean by the word “facts”?) than the epistemological issue of the challenges that processes of representation create for historical knowledge. This may not be a problem that can be resolved in any final way, but posing it explicitly in the form of a problem – as a set of issues to be wrestled with – might itself be a productive way of foregrounding important questions about the representation of history. What intrigues me about these authors’ use of actual documents (many of them bound up with a legacy of colonial relations) is the way these documents’ inclusion introduces a new level of complexity into these debates about the representation of the real in the particular context of questions about historical knowledge. These excerpts, taken as they are from the historical record, are the concrete site of the present text’s dialogue with the past. As such, the manner in which the excerpt is re-framed by the imagined narrative can tell us a great deal about the author’s perception of both historiography and history. Further, because these excerpts originate from Canada’s colonial period, their presence foregrounds the difficulty of representing the nation creatively without some form of reverence for the historical document as a trace of the real.

Like Hutcheon, Herb Wyile traces the manner in which contemporary historical fictions subvert notions of empirical history, though where Hutcheon tends to be optimistic about the radical potential of these revisions, Wyile identifies a surprising “conservatism” in Canadian historical novels of the past few decades (253). He ties this conservatism to a desire to reconstruct as opposed to wholly deconstructing the past (254). In his conclusion,

Wyle suggests that this movement towards a narrative reconstruction of Canadian history in recent novels compromises their post-colonial critique because they “run the risk of becoming consolatory narratives compensating for the sins of official history” as well as “encouraging simplistic approaches to the legacy of colonialism” (261). Wyle argues that, in its eagerness to “‘correct’ official history,” the revisionism of these novels⁷ “implicitly or explicitly asserts a more authentic version . . . a stance that jeopardizes its own contestation of the ‘truth’ of official history . . .” (262). Although I disagree with Wyle’s depiction of this simultaneous subversion and reclamation of historical truth as inherently conservative – in fact, it seems to me more likely tied to a contemporary, left-wing politics – I share his interest in the question, not only of how Canadian texts trouble history, but also how their troubling is, in itself, troubled. We cannot read these texts as straightforward indictments and rejections of history, nor can we read them as simple celebratory reinstatements of Canadian nationalism. They are both and neither.

My reading of historical fiction in Canada also has some similarities to those of Marie Vautier and Martin Kuester. In *Framing Truths*, Kuester contends that by including older texts, the postmodern Canadian historical novel works not simply to engage with existing historical narratives, but to challenge and change them. The Canadian historical novelist, Kuester explains, takes an old text “hostage” by placing it within a new parodic context, thereby forcing a reconsideration of the “hostage” text: “we will never be able to return to the parodied text and read it in the same ‘naïve’ way . . .” (Kuester 18). Vautier argues, in *New World Myth*, that the “European accounts of New World historico-political events. . . no longer entirely suffice” (x). *New World Myth*, as she labels these literary

⁷ Some of the novels that Wyle considers include Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), Jane Urquhart’s *Away* (1993), and Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996).

challenges to older, inherited belief systems, “involves a reclaiming of the past that frequently works *against* ‘original’ . . . versions of past events” (x). These texts disrupt the idea of history as an objective and universally applicable narrative by challenging “the very notion of past reality” and the discourse by which we know it (47-48). Further, New World Myth rejects the division of history and fiction, re-creating the past “through story” (47-49). As Vautier recognizes, this story’s motivation and, therefore, outcome are not entirely unidirectional. These texts represent a “collision” between a “didactic interest in retelling the past and [an] awareness of the constantly shifting grounds of certitude in the present age” (37-38).

My project springs from these previous discussions of Canadian historical literature, but I am also working to develop these discussions through my focus on the narration of a particular period in Canada’s history that is especially pertinent in the production and challenging of Canada’s “imagined community,” imagined as the homogeneous and naturalized result of a teleological process. Further, and more importantly, this examination of the narration of the exploration period is grounded in a discussion of the historical documents that are incorporated, wholesale, within the contemporary texts. What most firmly sets my work apart from that of Hutcheon, Wyile, Vautier, and Kuester, then, is the attention to the excerpts and how they inform and are informed by the surrounding fictional text. What interests me is a question that remains largely peripheral in previous analyses: the ways that contemporary literary texts complicate these ontological and epistemological debates (the availability of past experience to historical reflection) by inscribing within their accounts actual documents. The incorporation of documents complicates the representational dynamics that structure these literary texts’ engagement with the past, not by recuperating the idea of the availability of some pre-interpretive and therefore objective level of

experience (although a post-colonial analysis is necessarily invested in a belief in the possibility of distinguishing between some forms of the truth), but in order to highlight the force of the epistemological frameworks within which these facts are situated. Certainly any historical fiction that deals with colonial history, as these works all do, is interested in the “impossible necessity”⁸ of making evaluative distinctions between different representations and textualized versions of the historical past.

Selective Storytelling: Understanding Nation, History, and Narration

Challenges to established historical narratives are bound up with a network of theoretical questions which are themselves connected to a now familiar set of debates about the narration of national identity and history. By engaging with the difficulties surrounding historical representation, and, in particular, the representation of national history, the texts that I will be considering are inevitably also engaging with the contentious topic of what nation and nationalism mean. The nation is seen by most contemporary theorists as an ideological construct that is both formed and fixed by discourse. Although a key component of this discourse is to present the nation as an eternal entity – to use Benedict Anderson’s words, as “loom[ing] out of an immemorial past” (11) – the concept and concretization of the nation is, in fact, “historically recent” (Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism* 9). The notion of nation, according to Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Anthony Smith, came to the fore of Western political thought at or around the end of the eighteenth century. The reasons given

⁸ The phrase “impossible necessity” is used by Terry Goldie to explain the paradox attendant in the settler’s desire to become indigenous (*Fear and Temptation* 13). I am adapting the phrase as a way of understanding many of the documentary texts in the present study, which underscore the “impossible necessity” of engaging with history. These works take as their subject the impossibility of accessing a singular historical truth from a past that is discursively constructed.

for this rise of nation(s) vary. Anderson sees the inception of the nation as spontaneous and virtually instantaneous. In the face of the crumbling stronghold of religion and the related loss of a political system whose hierarchy was presented as divinely ordained, the nation, largely through the spread of print culture and vernacular, was created as an alternative site of allegiance and faith (11-12). Hobsbawm, on the other hand, describes the growth of the concept of the nation in stages, beginning with an almost grass-roots movement, innocent of political implications, and moving, in the more recent past, to a “nationalist programme,” conceived of and implemented by high-ranking politicians (*Nations and Nationalism* 12). Finally, Smith perceives the nation as originating out of “ethnie,” communities tied to each other through shared history, ancestry, and, often, ethnicity (“Ethno-Symbolism and the Study of Nationalism” 24). Despite these differences of opinion, what does remain constant in these and other theories of the nation is the argument that, as Ernest Gellner puts it in *Nations and Nationalism*, the understanding of the nation as “God-given” or as “an inherent political destiny” is a myth (48-49). Nations are, in Anderson’s now famous words, “imagined communities.” Although most members of a nation will never know each other, they still hold in their minds “the image of their communion” (6) and a sense of “a deep, horizontal comradeship” that explains the willingness of so many citizens to die for their country (7).

“Shared national memories,” Stuart Allan and Andrew Thompson argue, “have the effect of reaffirming the existence of the nation beyond the time of the present” (40). Because we remember the past, we know that the future will remember us. National identity, as Homi Bhabha elucidates in “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” is split between the need for continuous (re)creation in the present and an equal reliance on figures of the past. Moreover, the iterative performance of nation in the

present is constantly being transformed into a “pedagogical” national-history: “The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past” (294). The nation, in other words, is typically seen and represented as both an outcome and a promise. But as Smith observes, this invention of tradition cannot rely on just any past: “In order to create a convincing representation of the ‘nation,’ a worthy and distinctive past must be rediscovered and appropriated. Only then can the nation aspire to a glorious destiny . . .” (Smith, “The ‘Golden Age’ and National Renewal” 36).

Uncovering “a worthy and distinctive” national history, however, often requires a bit of re-jigging. While Smith perceives this rediscovery of national history as an almost innocent and certainly positive act of “cultivat[ing]” “shared memories” (“Ethno-Symbolism and the Study of Nationalism” 23), other theorists have pointed out the oft overlooked corollary of remembering: forgetting. As Allan and Thompson explain, “what is selected to be remembered is partially determined by what is chosen to be forgotten . . .” (42). Nations, in other words, authorize only “particular formations of national memory within certain codified rules of inclusion and exclusion” (Allan and Thompson 37). In an 1882 lecture, scholar Ernest Renan put it perhaps most succinctly: while “the essence of a nation” may be that its citizens “have many things in common,” it is also “that they have forgotten many things” (11).

Another way of talking about this “forgetting” is to see it as the editing phase of what Bhabha describes as “*writing the nation*” (297). In order to justify the existence of the nation, the past must not only be unique from the past of other nations; it must also be a good story. The writers of the texts I examine in this dissertation are trying to capture and engage their reader with a “good story,” working with and juxtaposing the documents that their narratives work to re-frame. Of course, in foregrounding the struggle between truth and representation,

these authors are also inevitably exploring this contradiction between sober(ing) reality and narrative, a contradiction inherent in both their own texts and in those of the explorers whose journals they use. History, in other words, is exposed in these novels as selected, edited, even altered in the service of creating and maintaining a cohesive narrative. Narration, Bhabha explains in the article “DissemiNation,” is so central to nationalism that we may, in fact, understand “the nation as narration” (297). This narration is twofold, a kind of “double-writing or dissemi-*nation*” (299), because it is represented as both pre-existing and permanent (it is a narrative told *to* the people) and as performative and ever-changing (it is a narrative told *by* the people). The authors whose work I am examining are involved in both processes. They are, for the most part self-consciously, writing pedagogical narratives (by challenging the existing versions of Canada’s history and by uncovering lost stories and voices). They are also, however, simply by re-framing, re-visioning, and, in some sense, rewriting national history, performing the changing nature of national history. They are writing for contemporary readers, but are also readers of history and nation themselves. The narrating of nation revolves not only around the figures of the nation’s past but also around the nation’s current citizens, their place within that past, and their own contribution to national histories of the future. As Stuart Hall observes, it is through the “narratives of the past” and our position within those narratives that we come to have histories (394) and, one might add, nations.

Bhabha’s understanding of the nation as existing in a sort of “double-time” is particularly useful to a discussion of the re-framed historical documents:

We . . . have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical “objects” of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted

historical origin *in the past*; the people are also the “subjects” of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process. (“DissemiNation” 294)

The exploration excerpts in the texts my project examines have a unique and complex relationship with time and, therefore, with the national development they are meant to represent. On one hand, they represent a past that is unequivocally past. These records are the remnants, the reminders of dead people, dead cultures, dead traditions – they signal the static nature of history, the finality of the past. Simultaneously, however, they also signal a beginning. It is, after all, in part, through these explorers that the present-day nation was born, grew, and progressed to the contemporary nation that continually revisits their experiences and contributions. This seemingly paradoxical figuration of the past – as both long gone and omnipresent – bestows upon these excerpts a sort of pedagogical function. They teach us where we came from. Pedagogy creates a “discourse [of] authority,” which, in turn, establishes the current nation as originating in an irrevocable, unchangeable, and unquestionable past.

There is, however, something else going on here. No matter how past this past may be, the moment its physical records, objects, and images find themselves in a new, modern context – in the present – history becomes not only pedagogical, but also performative. In this new context, the past escapes its pastness, becomes incorporated into the present experience. Two things happen at this moment of intersection. One, taken out of its own period of time, this marker of the past and the narrative it represents are suddenly open to re-interpretation. And, two, this present presence of the past forces a sort of self-reflexivity for

contemporary readers/citizens. The records of history serve as reminders that the present – this very instance of looking at this re-framed document – will one day be past. The nation is, in fact, always in the process of making (itself) history, and these excerpts are concrete instances of this iteration of the nation.

The excerpts, then, re-framed as they are by contemporary fictions, perform both pedagogical and performative functions. They work to signal the distance between the current text and the history from which it is drawn, while also authorizing the story in which they re-appear. At the same time, the excerpts in these novels and poems signal a recuperation and reinvention of the past, an act that, once initiated, becomes itself a record of producing the nation.

Producing Canada's Identity

From beer commercials that proudly declare “I am Canadian” to stamps and money depicting scenes from Canadian heritage to the images of the new Canadian Travel and Tourism campaign, who Canadians are (even that Canadians are) has, apparently, become natural, a given. It is easy to forget the work that goes into producing this belief in a national consciousness. However, as so many critics have argued, the nation is always produced and is ceaselessly in the process of production. This production of nation can be viewed as a kind of narrative for several reasons: one, because it imposes on the nation not only a chronology but a notion of progress or development; two, because narratives are generally repeated, simultaneously changing and becoming more permanent and entrenched with each retelling; three, because it eschews the understanding of national identity as somehow manufactured, instead entrenching the idea of the nation as a given in the daily activities of its citizens. As Daniel Francis puts it: “A nation is a group of people who share the same illusions about

themselves. . . . These images of communion are expressed in the stories we tell ourselves” (*National Dreams* 10). Ian Angus makes a similar point in *A Border Within*, contending that “a social identity such as the nation is only meaningful through the social actors who belong to it” (13). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, thinking of the nation as narrated helps highlight the key role literature (and literature about literature) plays in the creation of a country’s self-image.

In *Nationalism and Literature*, Sarah Corse argues that countries’ governing bodies and citizens have long used and viewed literature as a reflection “of the unique character and experience of the nation” (1). Consequently, literature, particularly canonical literature, is often read “through a nationalist lens,” resulting in interpretations that not only beget generalities about a nation’s literature by drawing out similarities between texts, but that also try to connect these overarching characteristics or themes to the nation itself (Corse 2). Literature, both independently of and in association with literary criticism, often serves as both product and producer of the national narrative. As Dermot McCarthy’s and Leon Surette’s articles in Robert Lecker’s *Canadian Canons* postulate, canon formation in Canada has been particularly tied up with the production of nation. Canadian literary history has long been focused on “national self-definition and self promotion” (McCarthy 32), its “central purpose . . . the discovery of the Canadian-ness of the literature written in this country” (Surette 17). Of course, Lecker himself makes the same argument in *Making It Real*, stating in his chapter on the Canadian canon that the canon was created, in a relatively short time, by privileging literature that helped to validate the “solidity and authority” of Canada itself through a “mimetic discourse” (37). In Lecker’s view, the canon is composed of books that represent a “nationalist currency” by reflecting the country back to its readers (37-38).

Literature and history, Jonathan Kertzer contends in *Worrying the Nation*, tend to “interact” in the service of the production of nation (18), becoming a powerful hybrid in the genre of historical literature. Canadian writers, Kertzer argues, often feel and manifest a desire “to rediscover the land as if for the first time” (50). Attempting to define a distinctly Canadian literary genre, much Canadian historical literature “take[s] the form of hunting for a source, which will create ‘Canada’ as a cultural presence and authorize a legitimate line of descent” (50). In other words, literature, by helping its community of readers imagine history, also imagines the nation.

The relationship between literature, history, and nation is not, however, a straightforward one. While literature can “articulate a national life by telling its story and by supplying its motivating principle,” it can also expose it as “unjust, and even monstrous,” and criticize it as ideology (Kertzer 12). Literature works to naturalize the nation, presenting it as the destined outcome of past events and efforts. However, if only because literature is itself based in imagination and rhetoric, it ends up exposing the nation as rising from a similar foundation. “Literature,” Kertzer explains, “knits people together, but it also shows how the knitting was accomplished and at what cost” (14).

This exposure is particularly apparent in contemporary Canadian historical fiction. Informed by postmodernism and post-colonialism, many writers are returning to the official narratives of the nation’s past to write new histories that engage and reveal forgotten voices and forgotten stories. These historical fictions “subordinate inherited foregroundings of the national myth and, in a politically committed way, focus on those elements traditionally backgrounded in Canadian history’s documents” (Boire 222). Certainly the texts that the following chapters consider can be seen as advancing this re-visionist agenda. While the journals these writers excerpt are primarily written by European explorers, the narratives that

re-frame these documents question their ideology and draw attention to the marginal figures of history. This marginal history is particularly evident in the subject of my third chapter, Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, in which excerpts from the diaries of members of the first Franklin expedition are surrounded and challenged by the experience of the First Nations people they encounter. Through this questioning and supplementing of official history, these texts are able to trouble and, in some instances, begin to re-conceive Canada's national narrative.

It is the investment in revising Canada's national narrative that marks the texts I am examining and the period in which they were produced. While Canadian literature has always shown a preoccupation with history, this preoccupation took on a sense of urgency in the 1960s as the issue of Canadian identity gained prominence in socio-cultural circles while at the same time becoming burdened by a skepticism about governing narratives. As I discuss in my first chapter, the decade in which Newlove's, Smith's, and Whyte's poems was produced, featured years of complex national sentiment in Canada. Although this decade witnessed a rise of Canadian nationalism, this rise in nationalism was in reaction to growing fears about two sometimes contradictory phenomena: a sense of national vulnerability and a view of national institutions as potentially oppressive and silencing. Literature in Canada at this time took on a double role in the development and continuing cultivation of a Canadian identity, while its growth was, in some ways, perpetuated by this sense of identity crisis. Such contradictory motivations can be seen in George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* and Ramsay Cook's *The Maple Leaf Forever*, calls to action which both argue that Canada's fate as a nation is in peril. Literary critics and scholars were just as engaged with this project of fostering Canadian national unity through pointing out its weaknesses and offering solutions.

For example, Margaret Atwood's *Survival* labeled Canada a "victim" and suggested ways in which national literature might write the country out of this "victim" position.

The conception of Canada as a nation determined by its European roots and vulnerable to increasing Americanization and internal strife has continued to inform discussions and productions of national identity right through to the present day.⁹ In *The House of Difference*, Eva Mackey identifies the ways a perception of internal fragmentation has been used in the interests of national consolidation: "Everywhere Canadian identity is seen as crisis-ridden, as a fragile and weak entity constantly under attack and in need of vigilant defence," and because of this perception "intellectuals, politicians of every hue, activists, state institutions, and businesses have sought to define, defend and differentiate Canadian identity" (9). Mackey's analysis extends into the 1980s and 1990s, the two decades in which *Burning Water*, *A Discovery of Strangers*, and *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* were written. During this period, numerous books were published that participated in this nationalist project, using Canada's supposedly unstable identity as a justification for retelling and, in some ways, re-creating a national narrative. Robin Mathews, for instance, worried in his 1988 *Canadian Identity* that the growing influence of the U.S. would cripple Canadian independence and individuality, and in 1989, Stephen Graubard edited a collection of essays that, cumulatively, were meant to enact a "search" for national "distinctiveness" and to help Canada "be known for itself" (ix). Literary studies such as Gaile McGregor's *The Wacousta Syndrome*, T.D. MacLulich's *Between Europe and America*, and Frank Birbalsingh's *Novels and the Nation* all work to identify unique themes within Canadian writing, to chart the development of these themes, and to suggest in which direction Canadian writing might (or

⁹ The titles of some recent volumes on Canada include Michael Byer's *Intent for a Nation: What is Canada For?* (2007), Allan Smith's *Canada – An American Nation?* (2003), and Joe Clark's *A Nation Too Good to Lose* (2002).

should) go in the future. This investment in producing and protecting Canadian identity appears even as recently as 1997 when Ian Angus struggles with what constitutes “Canadian-ness” (22) in *A Border Within*.

This notion of national crisis merged with a growing awareness of Aboriginal rights issues in Canada and elsewhere. Native land claims drew (and continue to draw) attention to the more problematic aspects of Canada’s founding; they, in fact, raised the inevitable question of whether Canada had, indeed, even been “founded” in the way that most White, Anglo-Canadians believed. “For almost three centuries White North Americans,” according to Brian Trigger, “assumed” that the New World had been relatively uninhabited upon the arrival of the Europeans and that the assimilation or extinction of its Native peoples was only a natural process given how few their numbers always were (3). But with the promise of the Pearson government in 1963 to create a land-claims commission and with the growing public attention to Native poverty through the 60s and 70s (Ray 330-32), it became apparent that a reconsideration of Canadian history was in order, one that reflected the recognition that Europeans were not, in fact, the first people here and respected the First Nations’ place in the country’s past. As Arthur J. Ray explains in *I Have Lived Here Since the World Began*, while earlier histories of Canada’s First Nations peoples typically presented them as “vestiges of earlier stages of cultural evolution” (xiii), starting in the late 1960s historians became more invested in representing Native peoples’ history as dynamic and their presence in North America as continuing and important. The texts this project considers were written, in part, to address this need for a new history that reflected the changing understanding of the nation’s origins and development. By revisiting the history of first contact and subsequent colonization, these texts also work to simultaneously abate and exacerbate the worry that Canada is somehow unstable or lacking a distinct identity. By incorporating historical

documents into a literary re-visioning of the country's past, these poems and novels foreground their purpose of dialoguing with Canadian history in order to both reassess and revivify the national identity.

The excerpted documents are the central component of these texts' conflicted positioning *vis-à-vis* nation-building; they foreground these texts' struggle with truth and representation, pedagogy and performance. In light of Bhabha's conception of nation narration as an ongoing activity in the present that is always already a rhetorical figuration of the past, I would like to suggest that the excerpts can be understood as existing on Bhabha's past/present fissure: they are seen in the national imaginary as *being* an act of performing or iterating the nation at the moment of their initial creation, a perception/production that leads to their *becoming* a record of Canada's past. On one hand, these excerpts can be seen as serving the function of a pedagogical history lesson – providing information on Canada's exploration period and serving as both a cautionary tale and a reprimand for the manner in which the nation was founded. But because these excerpts are being reinterpreted in the perpetual present, both by the narrative surrounding them and by the reader at the moment of reading, they also constitute an act of performing the nation.

The excerpts are, in one sense, re-framed and their contents challenged and revised by the fictional narrative surrounding them. This challenging and re-visioning extends, of course, beyond the excerpts and represents a dissatisfaction with official national histories in general. However, the excerpts provide an optimum way to highlight the very instability of historical representation: the fact that history is always mediated yet also that historical events nevertheless are real and have tangible real-world effects. The use of excerpts from historical documents thus highlights the inevitable trap of representation but also the desire for "getting history right." If the use of these excerpts is compromised within a critique of

overarching historical truth systems (since they depend on the very attraction to the truth of historical events and figures), their presence is also problematic inside any post-colonial narrative that purports a re-visioning of received history (since their very citation re-circulates that history). The post-colonial impetus informing many of these literary texts about the exploration period is motivated by a tacit belief in historical truth (some versions of the past are deemed more correct than others). Yet the excerpts are also used by the authors to underscore the unreliability of such records. They thus provide an intensely evocative and compelling means of eliciting readerly engagement in the problem of post-colonial truth making.

This ambivalence, which becomes more overt in the later historical novels that I'm examining, is certainly present in the long poems that my first chapter discusses. Published over an almost twenty-year period (1968 to 1984), these poems and their use of historical documents not only provide an important context for understanding the development of the documentary novel; the different ways each poem incorporates and revises history, in itself, demonstrates an evolving idea of the links between history and nation. In Newlove's "The Pride" and "Samuel Hearne in Wintertime," there is an abiding investment in connecting the explorers and the past they represent to both the individual and the nation of the present; the historical document becomes, for Newlove, the source of this connection, and it is used, for the most part, unself-reflexively to produce a nationalist narrative. Looking at Kearns' *Convergences*, however, we can clearly see a shift in the perception of history and its documents. *Convergences* is nothing if not self-reflexive, with Kearns continually foregrounding the cultural context through which his interpretation and use of these documents is filtered. Further, we can see in *Convergences* the influence of postmodern and poststructuralist theories of historiography. Although Kearns charts the convergences

between past and present and the type of story they plot, he ultimately depicts these seeming convergences and this narrative as manufactured, forcing his reader to question the validity and contemporary applicability of national meta-narratives.

Bowering, in both *George Vancouver: A Discovery Poem* and *Burning Water*, complicates the idea of Canada as discovered and the conception of European explorers as national heroes. Like Kearns', Bowering's is a deconstructive treatment of history, and his texts largely work to undercut conventional modes of historiography and dominant versions of Canada's development into nationhood. Of course, neither Bowering's nor Kearns' texts are purely deconstructive; drawing attention to the contradictions in each, my reading will question the versions of history that seem to be offered in the place of national meta-narratives and will examine how the documents each writer incorporates both deny and produce this complicating replacement narrative. Not that Bowering actually offers up a new, improved version of Canada's discovery and development; in fact, what is there is (intentionally) discontinuous and elusive. More firmly a postmodernist writer than Wiebe and Steffler, Bowering is committed to a radical deconstruction of history. Simultaneously, however, Bowering is working to demythologize history, a task which requires an engagement with the specificity and materiality of historical figures, events, and documents. Bowering's critique of Canadian national narratives is complicated, first by the conflict between its disavowal of historical veracity and its reliance on documents from that narrative, and second because it does not ultimately make readers rethink colonial relations, since Bowering is primarily interested in playing with historical truth-claims rather than offering any potential for an alternative. The way Bowering plays with accounts of George Vancouver's exploration of the West Coast is in line with postmodernist critiques of historiography, but it seems to me that, because Bowering is revisiting a moment in Canada's

colonial history, he might be called to task for a lack of clarity in his position with regard to that history. Given his choice of subject matter, one might question Bowering's take on imperial politics and the violence and exploitation at the root of Canada's "discovery." It is not that Bowering ignores these issues, but, rather, that because the novel's focus is the instability of narrative and the impossibility of ever representing truth, things like Peter Puget's shooting a Nootka in the face or the sodomizing of this Nootka by a marine (two obvious metaphors for first contact) are equally destabilized. If this is just a version and no version is ever true, then with how much gravity will or can the reader treat these disruptions of Canada's national history?

Like the long poems in Chapter One, Bowering's texts provide an interesting counterpoint to the more recent novels examined in my final two chapters. The final two historical novels this project examines are more reliant on a grounding in historical truth or presence. Steffler, to an extent, and certainly Wiebe, seem to suggest that there is a right and wrong, and there are versions of history that are more acceptable than others (for instance, Cartwright's constant rewriting of his diaries represents his quest to get the facts of history right). There is an evident trajectory between *Burning Water* and *A Discovery of Strangers*. Wiebe's novel takes an ultimately more difficult position since it struggles with the question of the mediated nature of history and the representation of others in a more earnest way and perhaps also in a way that, in Wiebe's eyes, has more real-world effects. Unlike Bowering, Wiebe wants readers to reconsider what happened to Canadian northern peoples in the name of settlement and discovery; he is struggling to come to terms with Canada's historical record and not in any hasty binary way. Wiebe is determined to write a polyvocal novel, one that incorporates not just the voices of the White explorers, but also one that makes use of Dene source material (i.e., oral documentary material, rather than written). Further, Wiebe

foregrounds in a self-aware manner the fact that, as the author, he has final interpretive authority; his novel reveals a self-reflexive engagement with his role as representer and his impossible to fulfill desire to depict this history as truthfully as he can. Ultimately, Wiebe's solution to the problem of history is to propose a culturally heterogeneous Canada that is both European and Native.

While Wiebe's reimagining of Canada's colonial origins is a serious attempt to consolidate the beliefs and stories of its two nations in and through narrative, Steffler's re-visioning of history involves an expulsion of its sordid details. *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* imposes a confessional model on both the imagined narrative of Cartwright and on the excerpts from the historical Cartwright's journals. In this novel, the re-framed documents and the colonial past they represent become the material of Cartwright's apology. Cartwright, as a sort of figurehead for the exploration period and the Canada and Canadians that have developed from it, goes through the process of repentance and atonement – ultimately seeking and receiving forgiveness from the land for the exploitation that accompanied European colonization. Steffler's work is clearly informed by post-colonial concerns, which can be seen, for instance, in his detailed and sometimes visceral descriptions of the consequences of first contact. However, through imagining Cartwright's forgiveness, Steffler draws dangerously close to suggesting that we can somehow erase or alter the past through narrative, a suggestion, which, for obvious reasons, conflicts with post-colonialism's emphasis on the materiality of the past and the politics of its production and uses in the present.

Despite the divergent approaches to history and nation contained in the texts this project examines, the key similarity – their re-narration of the exploration period through their deployment of its written documents – signals their engagement with the struggle

between representation and truth that plagues all historical narratives. That these texts confront this tension within many of the most politically contentious debates about Canada's national history underlines their understanding of the larger social importance of these issues. National identity has increasingly been approached, not so much as false consciousness but as a focus for intense discursive negotiations between contending perspectives. The centrality of national frameworks within these historical literatures highlights the importance of both the facts that relate to them (who did what to whom) and the highly mediated nature of any approach to these contentious issues, all of which carry with them the palimpsestic weight of endless previous interpretations.

Chapter 1 – The Exploration-Documentary Poem in Canada

This chapter will examine five poems – John Newlove’s “The Pride” (1968) and “Samuel Hearne in Wintertime” (1968), Marion Smith’s *Koo-koo-sint* (1976), Jon Whyte’s *Homage, Henry Kelsey* (1981), and Lionel Kearns’ *Convergences* (1984) – that are patently concerned with reimagining the beginnings of Canadian history. While they employ varying methods, the first three poets all try to draw connections between the exploration period and the present, delineating a narrative of progress and continuity. Kearns, on the other hand, departs from the more nationalist poetry of the 60s and 70s, adopting an understanding and treatment of history that works to complicate idealized, teleological versions of Canada’s past, thereby foregrounding the difficulty of accessing a single version of what really happened. Newlove, Smith, Whyte, and Kearns rely on the exploration document as a way into and out of Canada’s colonial beginnings, a use that requires some careful re-framing of the excerpts they take from the journals of Samuel Hearne, David Thompson, Henry Kelsey, and James Cook’s crew. In the following pages, I will be discussing the ways these works highlight and elide these excerpts by embedding them within surrounding text and how this re-framing contributes to each poet’s vision, narration, and representation of Canada.

The engagement of these poems with the issue of Canadian identity is, of course, a timely one. Many exciting and transforming events occurred in Canada during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. In 1967 Canadians celebrated their hundredth year as a nation and hosted the World Exposition in Montreal. The poems of Newlove and Smith, in particular, reflect this Centennial spirit, hearkening back to the nation’s beginnings and highlighting the continuing relevance and significance of exploration narratives. Pierre Elliott Trudeau was elected in 1968, and the country reached a relative economic stability. However, in the succeeding years, the FLQ crisis and the growing threat of Americanization offset much of

this celebratory feeling. Also, notions of national stability were put into question by the growing civil rights movements of the period. Of particular influence in Canada were the initiatives of second-wave feminism and Native activism, the latter especially in response to the controversial “White Paper” that was introduced by the Trudeau government in 1969. This tension between a sense of pride in the developing nation and a feeling of fear over its lingering instability and hence vulnerability to disintegration was reflected in and even partially produced by many books written at this time. Socio-historical studies such as George Grant’s *Lament for a Nation* (1965) and, later, Ramsay Cook’s *The Maple Leaf Forever* (1977) worried about the lack of a solution to “the French-Canadian question and the American question” (Cook 45) and expressed an apprehension that Canada’s survival as a nation was uncertain, even doomed.

Despite, or more likely because of, these fatalistic proclamations, Canadian literature and culture was exploding during these years. There were a number of government-sponsored programs to bolster cultural nationalism, for example the establishment of the Canada Council in 1957 and the funding of projects such as the *Literary History of Canada* (1965). Canadian educational institutions also got in on the act. In 1972 the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada created the Commission on Canadian Studies, which produced a report, *To Know Ourselves* (otherwise known as the Symons report), that is credited for the establishment of the Association for Canadian Studies (Angus 36). Further, in 1978, the University of Calgary held the Conference on the Canadian Novel, one main effect of which was the adoption of Canadian literature on school syllabi. Feeding and fed by this sudden upsurge of interest in Canadian writing were a growing number of Canadian presses, both small and large. Canadian publishing giants McClelland & Stewart flourished, and in 1958 started the reader-friendly New Canadian Library series, which introduced both

recent and older novels that were no longer in print, thereby creating a sort of continuum from early Canadian texts to those of the present-day. Also key was the newly created House of Anansi, a publishing house that, according to Matt Cohen, “published what it wanted to and didn’t depend on foreign publication or approval to make its decision” (85). Coach House Press, which also came into existence during these years, was an important “haven” for writers “who considered themselves to be working at the edge” (Cohen 90).

Much of the literature and literary criticism produced by these flourishing publishing houses expressed an engagement with Canadian national identity. This concern was particularly directed towards history and its connection to the Canada and Canadians of the present. Many writers blamed Canadians’ ambivalence about the country’s past, citing it as the source of the current national malaise. In the 1973 essay “Cadence, Country, Silence,” Dennis Lee suggests that Canadians inhabit a sort of non-space and non-language due to their Loyalist background and contemporary reliance on American culture; writing in this country, then, means finding words to fill the “spacelessness” that is our home. Al Purdy’s “The Country North of Belleville,” which describes a landscape of deserted farms that have “lost meaning” as “the undulating green waves of time are / laid on them . . .” (42-45), also encourages Canadians to find meaning in this “country of our defeat” (46) by going “back there” (67), even if “it’s been a long time since / and we must enquire the way of strangers” (73-75). Earle Birney takes this notion of an unremembered past one step further, when he writes in his 1962 poem “Can. Lit.” that Canadians, in general, believe that this country has no history worth remembering, and it is this perception and the consequent absence of knowledge that haunts the nation, rendering any self-realization or actualization impossible. A similar atmosphere of anxiety hung over studies of Canadian literature published at this time. Northrop Frye described the nation as a sort of shut-in, living in irresolvable tension

with the environment in which it was attempting to take root and flourish; Margaret Atwood's 1972 *Survival* positioned Canada as a victim, while her *Journals of Susanna Moodie* figured Canadians as schizophrenic; and D.G. Jones, returning to Frye's "garrison mentality," chastises Canada for struggling against a natural world that could, ultimately, help to set it apart as a nation. As Kertzer observes, "the job of the poet and critic" had become both diagnosing Canada's "cultural malaise" and advising Canadians on "how to cure it" (24).

Mining the past for meaningful origins and connecting these origins to the contemporary nation was viewed by many writers as a panacea for Canada's faltering, underdeveloped culture. As it does for most nations, history became a source of validation and the proof of progress; by uncovering/creating a remarkable beginning, the past points to an unfolding of the nation over time, illuminating the present and promising a future. "History," as Daniel Francis observes, "explains where our institutions and values come from. Out of this shared experience of the past is supposed to emerge a 'national identity' which unites all Canadians and makes us unique" (*National Dreams* 11). The documentary poem, a genre that, through its marrying of historical document and fiction, foregrounds Canada's past in a revalidation of national history, flourished during this time.¹⁰ Poems such as Dorothy Livesay's *Documentaries* (1968), Frank Davey's *The Clallam* (1973), and Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston* (1974) engaged with aspects of Canada's past in a quest for a deeper understanding of the nation in which the poets lived.

¹⁰ Note that the documentary poem is distinct from the "found poem." While both genres use excerpts from historical documents, the found poem does not reframe them with original poetry; instead the found poem rearranges already written speeches, letters, etc. to find new meaning within them (New 384). Examples of found poems include John Colombo's *The Mackenzie Poems* (1966) and F.R. Scott's *Trouvailles* (1967).

This is not to say that the documentary poem only concentrated on history. Indeed, as Michael Ondaatje observes in his “Introduction” to *The Long Poem Anthology*, many of these poems fit Livesay’s more inclusive and flexible definition of documentary by merely writing about the poet’s life with an emphasis on realism, even the mundane, such as bpNichol’s grocery list in *Martyrology* Book III (15-16). In fact, the long poem, in general, has been described as impossible to categorize by Kroetsch, in “For Play and Entrance,” by Eli Mandel, who describes it as defying “definitions” (19), and by Smaro Kamboureli, whose *On the Edge of Genre* argues that the “new genre” is characterized by its “generic restlessness” (xiv). Despite its flouting of any fixed category, the long poem has still typically been undertaken with a consistent motive. According to D.M.R. Bentley, the long poem in Canada works to connect “individual experience with collective experience,” placing the poem and its author within a “community” (“Colonial Colonizing” 19). Frank Davey recognizes a similar design in “The Language of the Contemporary Long Poem,” contending that what distinguishes the long poem is “a specific sense of the poet’s relationship to his world and society” (193). Perhaps recognizing the potentially influential role of this genre on national self-conceptualizing, there was a conference organized in the early 1980s that focused on the importance of the long poem in Canadian literature. The Long-liners Conference at York University featured papers and discussions on everything from autobiography in the long poem (see Louis Dudek) to place in the long poem (see Russell Brown). However, looking through the conference proceedings, collected in a 1985 volume of *Open Letter*, what is most intriguing is the singling out of the documentary long poem, and, in particular, the documentary long poem that focuses on national history.

While there is no consensus regarding the exact definition of the genre, the Long-liners “Discussion” involving critics Colin Browne, Livesay, Stephen Scobie, Magdalene

Redekop, Roy Miki, and Gary Geddes raises some key aspects of the documentary poem. The looseness of Livesay's original definition is questioned, and the discussion moves towards a more specific understanding of documentary literature as "poetry that uses documents" (Redekop 88). From this understanding, Miki ties the documentary impulse to the past by commenting on Marlatt's *Steveston* and the idea of local history depicted therein (89). The discussion ends with Browne's cautioning against the alignment of documentary with government agendas and nationalist aims (90), a caution that, while it aims to separate the documentary poem from nationalist propaganda, simultaneously suggests an almost inevitable association. Certainly Redekop draws a link between nationalism and the documentary poem in her paper on E.J. Pratt's *Brébeuf and His Brethren*. She argues that the insertion of documents into literature seems to be a particularly Canadian practice and that this insertion and the revising of the embodied document represents a conflict between "things as they are" and a wished for history, a "desire" for change within our country both in the present and the future ("things as they ought to be") (48). Frank Davey, in his contribution to the conference, similarly sees the documentary poem as invested in the uncovering or establishing of "truth," in part through a revelation of "old materials" as "still operative within the present" and as an "entry" for the writer (and reader) into "history" ("Countertextuality in the Long Poem" 40-41).

Not that the "truth" the long poem preserves or presents necessarily corresponds with the "hierarchical values embedded" in the historical source. Written almost a decade after the Long-liners Conference, Kamboureli's book-length study of the Canadian long poem suggests that the poem that includes documents is, in fact, "a rereading of writings, a rewriting of readings" (99). Dennis Cooley makes a similar observation in his essay "Document in the Postmodern Long Prairie Poem," arguing that, through the re-framing

device of literature, the authority of the document and the history it represents are disrupted: “As ‘document’ moves into literary texts, it apparently sheds whatever gestures it might innocently, or not so innocently, once have made toward the ‘real’ world, and it takes on secondary and literary meanings” (188). Despite this challenge to dominant ideology, the documentary long poem is still searching for and validating the idea of “meaning”; it is just a different type of meaning. This new literary context serves to “release or to make manifest what is latent” in the documents (Cooley 191); it helps the reader see “merit or meaning in places where ordinarily it goes unnoticed” in the historical records (190). Further, while it may be rewriting, or, as Kamboureli would have it, “supplement[ing]” history (91), the documentary poem is still often invested in remembering, recounting, even “honour[ing]” history (Cooley 204). As Kamboureli acknowledges in her conclusion, the long poem “measures the pulse of the specific time and place we find inscribed in it” (206) and, I would add, the specific time and place in which it was itself inscribed. It is this entanglement with locality and temporality that results in the ultimate inability of the Canadian documentary poem to “rid itself of historical presuppositions” (206). Poetry in Canada, Laurie Ricou argues in Klinck’s *Literary History of Canada* “developed in parallel to . . . historiographic metafiction. . . . [It] looked to combine with a poetry of place, historical document, and the anecdotes of daily routine” (6). The documentary long poem, in particular, was a form suited to reviving and revising the details of history. Further, in part because it was generally perceived and claimed as a uniquely Canadian tradition (at the Long-liners Conference, Eli Mandel called it “perhaps the proudest invention of contemporary writing in Canada” [11]), the documentary long poem’s focus on history was frequently nationalistic in character.

A particularly fecund source for this poetic reclamation of national history was Canada’s exploration period, not least because these poets saw themselves as figuratively

exploring their country for the first time. There are, according to Bill Moreau, two movements of European exploration in Canada. The first occurred during the seventeenth-century and was undertaken primarily by France. The second wave of exploration, which reached its peak in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, was almost exclusively British and is linked to the fur trade and other economic interests, such as finding the Northwest Passage in order to allow easier access to the Pacific. By and large, English-Canadian literature has focused its attention on the second group. The British explorers were prolific and virtually every voyage resulted in a log or journal that was later turned into a publishable text. These texts are generally viewed by critics¹¹ as a distinct genre of Canadian literature because “the locus of their meaning [lies] in the lands they describe and because they contribute to the development of new and unique cultures” (Moreau 347). Exploration records, then, are claimed by some as the “earliest English writing in Canada” (Munton 93). Victor Hopwood, for instance, argues in his contribution to the *Literary History of Canada* that the records of explorers, fur traders, and settlers are the “proto-form of our still largely unwritten foundation literature” (19). Not only are these journals viewed as examples of early Canadian literature, the stories they contain “have provided us with many of our examples of heroism and tragedy so necessary to the creation of a national mythology” (Francis, *National Dreams* 153). In other words, the history of the exploration of Canada by Europeans has become a key component of the national narrative.

The connection hinges on the very notion of exploration or discovery. The texts of early explorers record a freedom and newness in not only their daily experiences, but also in their freedom from “poetic conventions and language restrictions” which allowed them to

¹¹ See, for example, Ian MacLaren, T.D. MacLulich, Victor Hopwood, and Germaine Warkentin.

“create original works” (Munton 94). In a paper presented at the Long-liners Conference, Ann Munton examines the important place given to exploration literature by Canadian poets. Munton argues that the writers of contemporary long poems¹² bypass the narrative poems of their predecessors (i.e., Isabella Valancy Crawford or E.J. Pratt), who tended to focus on settlement and development. Instead there is a link drawn between the physical exploration of the land and “[w]riting as a form of exploration” through an “exchange of the outer wilderness for the inner terrain” (Munton 94). Davey registers a similar connection, seeing “the explorer and chartmaker and wanderer” as such an integral part of the national psyche that this figure has become “a metaphor for the writer,” representing “not only an accurate responsiveness to experience but also the immense and creative force of the grounds, lines, tides, and winds which limit his ‘fancy’ and will” (“The Language of the Contemporary Canadian Long Poem” 147).

The connection, however, is more than a symbolic one; in many Canadian poems it is, in fact, more concrete. Munton observes a similarity in writing styles: “In both the early field journals and the recent long poems there is a concern with minute particulars, a distrust of metaphor, and a concomitant faith in the significance of the document” (95). Munton notes the inclusion in many recent poems of “journal entries and/or letters” as well as maps. While such inclusions sometimes merely chart the writers’ exploration of their internal landscape, of their own identity, in many cases the inclusion of the document also signals an attempt to chart a national identity. By trying “to bring that old material . . . to the possibility of future meaning,” the poet is often creating an “interaction of past with present, of earlier writer with later writer, a re-joining of then and now” (Davey, “Countertextuality” 38). In

¹² Presumably poems written from the late 1960s to early 1980s, given the date of the Conference.

other words, through “appropriat[ing], co-opt[ing], re-envision[ing], re-cast[ing] for one’s own needs and times” (Davey, “Countertextuality” 39), the documentary long poem is often suggesting a continuum, a chronology, and a progression. In particular, the first four poems that this chapter discusses tend to work anachronistically. The treatment of history and historical sources and documents in the texts of Newlove, Smith, and Whyte can be seen as producing the sort of national meta-narrative that becomes a point of departure for the rest of the texts this project considers. They also provide an informative contrast to Kearns’ almost anti-national narrative and to Bowering’s deconstruction and demythologizing of the explorer and the exploration period in *Burning Water*.

Something to be Proud Of: Newlove’s Canada

John Newlove’s “Samuel Hearne in Wintertime” and “The Pride” were both published in the 1968 collection *Black Night Window*. In these two poems, not incidentally written close to Canada’s centennial, Newlove draws on explorers’ records as part of the process of “feeling at home” in the land (D.G. Jones 5). Unlike the other poems that this chapter will examine, neither “Samuel Hearne” nor “The Pride” contains direct quotes that are marked off from the rest of the text or identified as excerpts. Instead, Newlove paraphrases a section of David Thompson’s journal in “The Pride” and recalls perhaps the most poignant image in Hearne’s journal at the end of “Samuel Hearne.” Despite not being showcased as they are in the other exploration-documentary works that I will look at, the explorer, his records, and the national origins they represent are nonetheless a key presence in Newlove’s poetic exploration of a distinct, yet familiar Canadian identity. In fact, Newlove’s easy assimilation of these texts into his own poetry signals not a lack of reverence for history and the words of its important figures, but rather a desire to connect to and create

a vision of the nation that is rooted in a heroic past. For Newlove, writing during the late 1960s, this need was more immediate and urgent than that of subsequent authors whose poems and novels were informed by postmodern and post-colonial critiques of national structures. Newlove's uncritical nation-building poetry is interesting to look at because it is a precursor to the more recent texts and because it overtly displays the nationalist ideology that exploration-documentary texts of the 1980s and 90s work to either disavow or rethink.

In many ways, "Samuel Hearne in Wintertime"¹³ seems to be a bleak poem, which is in keeping with the mood or perspective that, according to several critics, permeates Newlove's opus.¹⁴ The first section of the poem dispels the notion of exploration as "romantic" by pointing out the irony that those who perceive it as such usually do so from the comfort of their "heated" "houses" (8). Newlove then goes on to imagine the "hell," the "hell of sweat . . . meat-hell, fear-hell, hell of cold" in which Hearne must have written his journal (15-16), further dispelling the glamour of Hearne's mission. In the second part, Newlove's two sick children and his own endurance in the face of "puffy children coughing . . . vomit stirring in grey blankets" (20-22) is compared to Hearne's endurance, both of which go unremarked and unpraised (26). The poem, we are to assume, is a corrective to the absence of such "reality-testing" in the more generalized praise that characterizes critical discussions of Hearne. Also, the poem itself makes sure that Hearne does endure, as a part of national memory, and implies that, like Hearne, Canada itself has and will continue to endure, and, as such, is also worthy of praise. "Samuel Hearne did more / in the land . . . than

¹³ Under his employment with the Hudson's Bay Company, Samuel Hearne undertook three journeys "from Prince of Wales' Fort across the modern Northwest Territories between 1769 and 1772" (MacLaren, "Samuel Hearne and the Landscapes of Discovery" 28). The journals from these trips were later published (1795) in Hearne's *A Journey from Prince of Wales' Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772*.

¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, for instance, argues that, for Newlove, the world "is something to be disliked and feared" ("How Do I Get Out of Here" 59), and Brian Henderson, referring to the title of the collection in which "Samuel Hearne" appears, observes that "Newlove's window remains black more often than not . . ." (10).

endure” (27, 40), Newlove writes in the next section, enclosing in brackets a description of the landscape, reminding us that Hearne also explored and charted Canada, making “heated” “houses” in which to “think of Samuel Hearne” possible (8, 19). Newlove stops himself, though, from entertaining the “romantic” notions other Canadians may have about the explorers. Addressing Samuel Hearne directly, Newlove recognizes that he has “almost begun to talk / as if you wanted to be gallant” (45-46). However, his description of Hearne at the end of the fourth section as “wanting / to know, to do a job” (49-50) contains a contradiction that complicates the rejection of Hearne as a romantic figure. On one hand, Hearne is presented as a regular Joe (or “SAM”), just doing a job; on the other, this “wanting to know” belies a depth of character and motivation that suggests Hearne may be, if not “gallant,” then at least brave, determined, a man of pure and honourable intentions.

This idea of knowing returns in the final part of the poem in which Newlove, drawing from the most famous portion of Hearne’s journal, describes the “Eskimo girl / at Bloody Falls” “twisted” around Hearne’s feet “like / an eel, dying, never to know” (51-56). Ending the poem in this way, with the words “never to know,” certainly conforms to the pessimistic viewpoint that critics see in most of Newlove’s work. It also leaves us with the question: who is “never to know”? The “Eskimo girl,” Samuel Hearne, Newlove himself, Canada? As Jan Bartley explains, in this final stanza “time barriers are removed while history, and concepts of national and personal identity, are focused on the witness and the victim” (“Something in Which to Believe” 21). It is a tragedy with a trickle down effect: the “Eskimo girl” died too young to know the future of her country and of her people; also in her dying and in the death of Aboriginal people in general, she has left Hearne bereft of knowledge. Hearne and the European explorers that he represents are “never to know” because they bring with them too many assumptions about these people and their superiority to them to ever move out of

ignorance. Moreover, from first contact through to the colonization of the country, the presence of Europeans has led to the death of many Aboriginal people; this death leaves a gaping hole in the knowledge that the White invader can gain about the land he invades. Because Hearne dies never knowing, Newlove can never gain an insider's perspective on the Inuit; further, Newlove can "never" truly "know" Hearne either, for his death has left Newlove only sparse images to think about and incorporate into his poem. Finally, we (the Canadian readers of the poem who see the explorer as "romantic" or "gallant") can never know this moment with any kind of immediacy, a lack that encapsulates our overarching experience of our national history.

At the same time as Newlove paints a tragic picture of our inability to ever grasp the past and the futility of trying, "Samuel Hearne in Wintertime" also seems to express a yearning "to know" and a directive to the reader to become knowledgeable of Canada's past and to seek connections with it, much as the poem's speaker/Newlove does. The inclusion of a description from Hearne's journal that is almost word-for-word acts both as an impetus for the reader to investigate his or her country's history¹⁵ and as the first step in such an investigation. As such, it stands as a microcosm for the poem as a whole because the poem itself excerpts an instance from the records of Canadian history, supplying the reader with a gripping narrative from the past¹⁶ that encourages further research. In addition, the image from Hearne's journal of the girl's brutal death reminds us of the earlier section of the poem in which Newlove describes his children's suffering with a winter flu, thereby suggesting that there are connections to be made between what may seem like a very distant and alien past and our own, contemporary existence. As Davey argues, Newlove "juxtapose[s] the

¹⁵ Not least because of its graphic, gory, even "Gothic" content (MacLaren, "Samuel Hearne's Accounts" 36-37).

¹⁶ For instance, Newlove's visceral description of Hearne's living quarters in section I.

explorer's world with the twentieth century . . ." ("The Explorer in Western Canadian Literature" 142). The poem prompts us to search for connections between Hearne's endurance and our own and points to the possibility of finding other connections between the Canada of history and the life of the current populace.

In "The Pride," these connections between past and present nation are articulated unambiguously. While "Samuel Hearne" is more in keeping with Newlove's other work because it "mourn[s]" "history and the people who lived in the spaces" Newlove explores (namely the prairies), "The Pride" stands out as the only poem in which he "celebrates fully" Canada's national heritage (Barbour 259). The question is whether it is Anglo-Canadian heritage being celebrated or whether that of the First Nations is actually being appropriated. In Newlove's poem, it seems the two activities are inseparable. The poem charts a movement from the poet's intellectual and detached approach to the country's origins through to a sort of emotional indigenization that finally allows him to "have roots" (110). Although this movement is typical of the pattern that Brian Henderson observes in most of Newlove's historical poetry – "a movement from the poet's own past to the national past. It is not only his emptiness with which he comes to terms but that of the land he moves through as well" (16) – in "The Pride" Newlove does more than come to terms with the "emptiness"; he works to fill it.

In the beginning the poet is researching the records and images kept by "chronicler[s]"; he is flipping through history books (105). From this more passive and unsatisfactory participation in history, the poet turns to recounting, almost listing, the various myths and spirits of West Coast First Nations people. Newlove ends this section with a more overt directive to his reader than that found in "Samuel Hearne": "they are all ready / to be found, the legends / and the people" (107). The third section imagines the possible results of

finding and remembering these “legends” and people, seeing himself as the “son of *all* men / under the hot sun” who, while he “cannot know” the future or the past, will still “proceed / along a line / neither straight nor short” (107-08, emphasis mine). Newlove is implying that the line back to the past is “something difficult” and leads to an “obscure future” (Wood 235), but he is still promoting this sort of inquiry, even suggesting it is inevitable. The next section connects this inevitable and challenging movement back and forth in time to a physical movement through the country itself, charting its abundance and development – in the end seeing the prairies as “bare, / not barren” (108). It also returns to the First Nations with the poet suddenly finding himself emotionally attached to “the plains” people, moving away from the intellectual detachment of the first part: “easy / for me to love their people” (108).

The fifth section brings the preceding four parts together by drawing on the records of Anglo-Canadian history as a means of relaying the oral history of the First Nations. Newlove paraphrases a portion of David Thompson’s journal in which Thompson himself paraphrases the words of Saukamappee, a Cree chief with whom he developed a friendship (Tyrrell xxx). Thompson, who worked first for the Hudson’s Bay Company and then the North West Company, “assimilated many Indian customs and myths” while living amongst the First Nations with whom he traded and while travelling with them on his exploration journeys through the prairies and the Rocky Mountains – journeys later recounted in Thompson’s *Travels in Western North America, 1784-1812* (MacLaren, “David Thompson’s Imaginative Mapping” 91). The *mise en abyme* effect created by this section¹⁷ enables Newlove to gesture towards the overarching thesis of the poem: “the current inhabitants [of

¹⁷ The *mise en abyme* is actually a recurring image throughout the poem; in sections six and seven Newlove refers to mirrors in his description of the continuity from the First Nations’ desires and words to our own.

Canada]” are the “metaphorical descendants” of the First Nations (Atwood, “How Do I Get Out of Here” 68), a kinship enacted through a remembering and a relaying of history.¹⁸ The lines of the poem are following the lines of Thompson’s journal, which, presumably, followed the lines of the Cree stories and speeches. Of course, this *mise en abyme* is also enacting the very process that Goldie describes in *Fear and Temptation* – what he calls “a Quaker Oats box” process of signification (4). Like the picture on the Quaker Oats box, which is of a man holding a Quaker Oats box on which there is a picture of a man holding a Quaker Oats box (ad infinitum), the Aboriginal, argues Goldie, has become all signifier or referent. The real Aboriginal, the signified, is unattainable. The Aboriginal is all representation; we have stopped trying to get at the truth of (or it is impossible to get at the truth of) who the Aboriginal is, if there even is any such truth left to be gotten at. In its conception of the “Indian,” Newlove’s poem operates happily within this Quaker Oats paradigm. In fact, the poem not only re-presents an Indian that has already been represented by another White man in another text; it actually encourages this process of endless signification and ties this very act to the creation of Canada’s identity by suggesting that the present-day non-Native Canadian can take the place of the absent signified.

In the excerpt, “the old cree saukamappee” recounts the raids, the journeys, the wars, the hunting that his tribe has seen “since living memory” (108-09). The life described in the paraphrased excerpt is, as Newlove himself recognized in a later interview, “romantic,” his take on the First Nations one of “blind worship” (Interview with Bartley 151). When

¹⁸ Newlove’s approach to Canada’s national identity has some parallels to that of Wiebe; both ground the modern Canadian citizen in a sort of blending of White and Aboriginal and both attempt to enact this polyvocal narrative through incorporating the Aboriginal voice or story into their own. There are, of course, crucial differences between the two texts, namely, Wiebe’s foregrounding of the struggle and impossibility of representing history as opposed to Newlove’s desire to provide direct access to the past.

compared to the section of Thompson's journal from which it is drawn, it is clear that Newlove's idealized vision of Cree and Canadian history is tied up with the project of nationalism, so prominent in the late 1960s. As Ernest Renan, Benedict Anderson, and Jonathan Kertzer observe, producing a nation or a national narrative is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering. In the fifth section of "The Pride," Newlove practices such forgetting by condensing, conflating, and editing what is in Thompson's journal. There are two overarching changes that Newlove makes to Thompson's writings, both of which reveal the poem's nationalistic leanings. First, while Thompson's tone is fairly prosaic and direct, the tone of Newlove's excerpt is expressive, dramatic, and evocative. Although Newlove is trying to imitate the rhythm of storytelling, the impression conveyed is mythic, rendering the Cree chief and his people "legends." The experiences that appear in Thompson's journal as factual, the people that appear as solid and real, because they become mythic in "The Pride" also become almost unreal; their concrete existence dissolving in the past, they become symbolic, or, as Goldie would argue, they become all signifier, detached from the signified. The second overarching change that Newlove makes to the excerpt is also tied up with this problem of representation. In Thompson's journal, it is Saukamappee who seems to speak because Thompson introduces him quickly at the beginning of the twenty-second chapter and then writes all of Saukamappee's narratives in the first-person. This presentation of the Chief's stories from an indistinguishable first-person voice could be read as a form of appropriation of the words of the Other, especially since Thompson seems to be engaged throughout his journals in the act of making these stories more palatable to his assumed European audience. In Newlove's poem, this narrative is recounted in the third-person. In some ways, this change of narrative voice is Newlove's way of reminding us that the speaker in the poem (and in Thompson's journals) is not Saukamappee. Newlove is

disallowing the unacknowledged, even invisible translation that occurs in Thompson's writing. However, this narrative voice also enables the type of representation that Goldie criticizes in *Fear and Temptation*. In "The Pride," the storyteller is divorced from the story; the memories, cut free of the rememberer, are suddenly up for grabs, and they are taken up by the "we" or "us" of the last two sections.

There are a number of small changes and omissions that occur as well; primarily these edits serve the purpose of downplaying the impact European exploration and settlement had on these people, an impact that is quite apparent in Saukamappee's narrative as it appears in Thompson's journal. For instance, the guns that the Cree used to drive the Snakes out of the prairie were given to them by White men. According to the historical study, *Bounty and Benevolence*, the Hudson's Bay Company kept the Cree supplied with gunpowder and "shot" as part of their trade agreement (Ray, Miller, and Tough 13). Further, Newlove's final stanza, which draws on the glamorous images of horses and the Cree riding them, ignores the complex background behind the arrival of horses in North America. According to Saukamappee in Thompson's journal, the Cree did not have horses, at least not until they had killed many Snakes and stolen theirs, again something that would have occurred many years post-contact, not in some glorious pre-colonial past.¹⁹ Newlove also has Saukamappee describing "the game, great herds" that always fed the people, but he omits the rest of what Saukamappee said according to Thompson: "the Bison and Red Deer were . . . gone, we did not see one half of what was before" (337). After the Hudson's Bay Company began building forts in the prairie provinces, the bison population declined (Ray, Miller, and Tough 12). Finally, Newlove omits Saukamappee's relation of the "dreadful disease" that

¹⁹ In fact, as the editor of Thompson's journal acknowledges at the end of this chapter, both fire-arms and horses were introduced to the Blackfoot people by the Europeans (344).

killed about “one third” of his camp and left the others “with tears, shrieks, and howlings of despair” (337). The disease is, of course, smallpox, which the Europeans brought with them. While certainly a number of the effects of contact on the First Nations were spread through indigenous networks, as opposed to through direct contact with Europeans, what is interesting here is that the details Newlove chooses to exclude are the ones that would trouble the poem’s overarching message: that the present-day, non-Native Canadian is the symbolic continuation of the country’s first inhabitants, not their exploiters or destroyers. By editing out or eliding the various references to European contact that occur throughout Saukamappee’s statements, Newlove is not only minimizing the negative effect White men had on the First Nations, he is also placing the First Nations people firmly in an idealized, permanent past, that is untouched by modernity and the present. In doing this, Newlove ensures that the First Nations take on a symbolic role in the version of Canada he is producing. If the First Nations can remain in some glorious past, then their memories, their stories, their heroics are adoptable and adaptable in the present. By a sleight of hand, and some careful editing/forgetting, Newlove’s “indians” become “ghosts” whose spirit can be appropriated into becoming Canada’s history, and used to produce and validate a national identity by the very people who made them “ghosts” in the first place.

Another major difference between Thompson’s journal and Newlove’s recuperation of it occurs towards the end of the fifth section where Newlove’s paraphrase changes from a sort of meandering narrative to an incantation, repeating “their pride” in the final two lines. As E.F. Dyck observes, “[t]he word *pride* turns the poem sharply from its ostensible subject (the Indians on the plains) to its real subject” (79), namely the national pride of the “us” or “we” of the final two sections. While the poem retains the incantatory quality that arises from the image of the First Nations on their horses, the focus on “we” – a group that the “I”

of the first four sections belongs to, and, therefore, a group that is likely Anglo-Canadian – suggests a new kind of pride: “the grand poem / of our land,” “a line of running verse” that is derived from “what has happened before” (109). In other words, the pride the Cree felt riding on their horses is still a part of the nation; it has merely transformed with “us” Whites into a pride in language, in “rooted words” (Bartley 22), in poetry: “the indians . . . still ride the soil / in us . . . until at / last we become them . . .” (111).

Unsurprisingly, many scholars have criticized Newlove’s conclusions. Atwood worries that Newlove, in his adoption of the First Nations as ancestors, identifies “with them *as victims* rather than as real inhabitants of a land” (*Survival* 105). Henderson contends that Newlove’s “attitude is a little facile. The Indians would hardly regard us whites, who pushed them cruelly from their lands, as their rightful heirs” (21). Dyck takes this remonstrance even further: “the argument is a ‘poetic’ version of a popular response to Indian land-claims (‘at least we did something with the land’). The Indian never turned the land into a poem, whereas ‘The Pride’ does exactly that” (80). While certainly there is validity in these arguments, what strikes me as most interesting about this poem is the real need that it expresses for a sense of history that is connected to the land. “The Pride,” it seems to me, is a hallmark of the time in which it was written; it stands as a representation of the urgency and the hope surrounding the activity of uncovering and defining a Canadian identity.

Agreeing with Northrop Frye’s interpretation of his poem, Newlove explains in an interview that it “is about the total accretion of myth and stories and so on by Canadians” (Bartley 150). In other words, “The Pride” both contains and contributes to the production of the story of the nation. The paraphrased excerpt from Thompson’s journal is an integral part of this poetic figuration of Canada. Thompson’s relation of the Cree chief’s stories in his own journal acts as a forerunner to Newlove’s poem, which revolves around remembering

and connecting with First Nations' beliefs and narratives, while also making them more palatable for English-Canadian readers. Because "Thompson assimilated so many Indian customs and myths in the course of his development and travels" (MacLaren, "David Thompson's Imaginative Mapping" 91), myths which then became a focal point of his journals, he is an ideal symbol for the Canadian that Newlove hopes to help his reader uncover and become. Thompson, still a White man, is entangled with the Cree legends he recounts, an entanglement that makes his journals the perfect source for "the knowledge of our origins . . . whose land this is / and is to be" (110).

National Evolution and David Thompson

In the long poem *Koo-koo-sint*, Marion Smith returns to the figure of David Thompson. Like Newlove, Smith describes Thompson as a legend in her prologue, again largely because of the "observations of Indians, their way of life, their attitudes, their legends and belief" recorded alongside his survey notes (5). Written almost ten years after Newlove and the Centennial (*Koo-koo-sint* was published in 1976), Smith's presentation of Canadian history is still very much a celebration of Thompson's significance to Canadian national identity. She opens her poem with a sort of statement of intent, wondering where to "find" Thompson. The rest of the poem, then, becomes a search for the presence of this "bold," "ruthless" "friend to the Indian" in the land (6). The search takes the form of Smith's imagining Thompson's journey through Canada from beginning to end (with help from cues and excerpts from Thompson's journal). Smith writes from many points of view: Thompson's, primarily, but also the First Nations people with whom he traveled, the beavers whose fur was part of his livelihood, his wife, and other explorers, such as Alexander Mackenzie. Interspersed with the narrative are sections of Thompson's writings, some

identified by date, others melding inextricably with Smith's words. The excerpts are both the foundation and the jumping off point for Smith's poetic search for Thompson, and, more importantly, for her meditation on the country's past.

Along with stating her intention to "find" Thompson, in the opening poem Smith also makes clear the connection between Thompson and Canada. Describing him as a "Welshman cum Canadian," Smith foregrounds the contribution Thompson made to the nation of today, primarily through "defining boundaries": "The first maps of western Canada / drawn by your hand" (6). Smith links this mapping of "half this continent" with "chart[ing] / the future" (6). Thompson and men like him, then, are pictured as recording Canada into existence. From here, Smith launches into her narrative of Thompson's Canadian experience with an almost biographical section that gives, in brief, the details of Thompson's early life and schooling and his arrival in Canada. The image she paints is certainly designed to make Thompson a sympathetic character, to humanize him – she highlights his youth (he left for Canada at age fourteen) and his naiveté: "Having dreamed on such books as Robinson Crusoe and Arabian Tales, I thought myself prepared for great adventure anywhere" (7). This concept of Thompson as boyish, inexperienced, immature, is something that Smith draws on throughout *Koo-koo-sint*, aligning Thompson with Canada; as he grows throughout the poem, so too does Canada. The alignment of Thompson and the country is made clear in Smith's introductory poem, where she suggests that "the heart" of Thompson "is here" and imagines his "shadow / mov[ing] beneath my own / when I walk this land" (6). Thompson is in Canada, and Canada is, in some ways, also contained within Thompson and his narrative. Re-framed by these concepts, the excerpts from Thompson's journal showcase both the

actual development of one of Canada's key historical figures and the metaphorical development of Canada.²⁰

Certainly the first section almost entirely excerpted from Thompson's journal shows the relative immaturity of Thompson and Canada. Thompson's concerns and perspectives are largely still rooted in Europe. For example, his interest in the mosquitoes is scientific – he understands them by looking at them through a microscope. His discussion of the "Indians" is equally clinical, not referring to them by name, only as "two Indians" or "an Indian woman" (9). Finally, his focus is generally on the "society and occupations" at the Forts where he is residing, trying to distract himself from the cold winter with books borrowed from some officers (9-10). As the poem proceeds, however, Thompson begins to leave the security of the Fort and experience the landscape. He travels through the country and his journal begins to chart the vision of the mountains (13), the "whole heavens glow[ing] / from the northern lights" (17), and the changing seasons (17). This growing awareness and appreciation of the uniqueness of the environment and geography surrounding him is matched by the activities of the companies for whom Thompson works. For example, Smith tells us in a short note that the Hudson's Bay Company began sending its employees out into the wilderness to find trading partners as opposed to their earlier practice of staying inside the protected world of the Fort and waiting for the "Indians" to come to them (11). The Northwest Company is even more progressive – in the excerpt that Smith uses, Thompson writes that their "views were more enlarged" – and signs Thompson on "as Surveyor and Mapmaker," a position that recognizes that a knowledge of the land is vital to their continued

²⁰ Note that Smith actually follows the chronology of Thompson's life in Canada, as well as following closely the progression of the narrative that Thompson constructed from his notes upon returning to Europe. Smith's poem has a beginning, middle, and end feeling, as opposed to the more open-ended and digressive postmodern poems and novels that I will examine in the coming pages.

presence and success (18). By including excerpts that demonstrate a developing respect for the land in Thompson and that also allude to a similar change in the perceptions and actions of the companies that brought so many of these White men to Canada, Smith is ensuring that we see Thompson's development as representative of the changing attitudes of Europeans in general. The choice and arrangement of the excerpts from Thompson's journal, as well as the historic tidbits Smith provides, imply a sort of growing into the land by the explorer and, through this exploration, by the empire the explorer represents.

This growing into the land as it is charted in the excerpts that Smith includes is matched by a reciprocal acceptance of the explorer by the land. The land grows into or around the explorer and his European peers. The Smith-authored sections of the poem that re-frame the excerpts demonstrate the landscape's adoption of Thompson. Towards the end of the poem, Smith paraphrases and directly quotes a section in Thompson's journal describing his trip from the Athabasca River through the mountains to the Columbia River, where he set up a winter camp. This part of *Koo-koo-sint* demonstrates Thompson's respect for the wilderness surrounding him. As opposed to earlier in the journals/poem, where he struggles to relate the country to the stories of Sinbad the Sailor (8), here Thompson shows himself as both knowledgeable (naming the trees he passes and recognizing the after-effects of an avalanche) and sensibly cautious (deciding not "to try for the Pacific / by this unknown way" [59]). Further, his building of a snow hut in which to weather the encroaching winter and his use of snowshoes and dog sleds shows Thompson's growing ability to adapt to the environment, instead of trying to adapt the environment to himself. Smith, of course, has omitted the sections of the journal that suggest Thompson may have not been as completely at home in the landscape as the poem would have it. For example, he continues to rely on, reference, and see through the lens of European science as a means of grasping the natural

world surrounding him. He still provides a great deal of factual data, for example, the weight of a doe moose's brain, the growth patterns of forests, and a constant record of thermometer readings. In addition, Thompson continues to think in terms of his company's profits, expressing frustration over the loss of moose-deer skins due to the absence of a woman to dress them properly (455). Aside from her selective quoting, Smith also re-frames the above excerpts by following them with a poem that describes a timeless, untouched wilderness in which "we are as pygmies" (60). In this way, Thompson's humility in the face of the landscape is highlighted even further, while it is simultaneously pictured as natural and as not leaving any real footprint or impact on the land:

Silence
 Silence
 White silence of soft
 deep piled snow
 Brown silence of immense
 straight soaring trunks . . .
 No track of beast . . .
 even the moose deer . . .
 made no outcry
 at the advance of the knife . . . (60)

If Thompson's presence in the landscape does not disturb the silence, and the landscape, in the metaphor of the moose deer, accepts Thompson's actions, then, as descendants and beneficiaries of Thompson's pursuit, our own presence in the landscape is equally naturalized. Like Thompson, contemporary readers can imagine themselves simultaneously touched by, and yet leaving untouched, the wilderness that is Canada.

Another instance of this mutual acceptance comes about mid-way through the book when Smith quotes Thompson's account of the beaver. The first excerpt contains Thompson's more practical observations on the beaver, such as their average weight and habitat, as well as the fact that their "meat is agreeable, though oily" (22). This excerpt is followed by a poem written from the beavers' perspective as they "coast noiselessly / across" the water, gnaw at "green aspen bark" until the tree falls down, and build their dams (22). While Thompson's initial notes on the beaver seem detached from the fact that it is a living creature, taking instead a functional, even mercantile approach, the excerpt that Smith chooses to follow these imaginings of a beaver's life draw on the First Nations' legends revering it. The beaver, Thompson writes in the next excerpt that Smith quotes, "were wise and powerful," but "the Great Spirit became angry with them" and forced them into the water where they now live, without power, but still wise (23). Smith does not cite the rest of Thompson's recounting of the First Nations' beaver myth in which he suggests that, unlike "civilized man," the "Indian" does not "believe in Instinct . . . which accounts for . . . the actions . . . of animated nature" (204).²¹ Through this omission, she is able to intimate that Thompson is learning something and experiencing a shift in attitude due to the influence of the First Nations' perspective. This new perspective is linked to the beaver poems preceding the excerpt, creating the impression that Thompson's adoption of the First Nations' respect for the land and its animals has somehow precipitated our own glimpse into the spirit of the beaver.

Indeed much of the mutual adoption that Smith imagines occurring between Thompson and the country is tied up with the interpretation that Thompson accepted and was

²¹ Not only does Smith omit this discussion of instinct as the source for the animal's behaviour, on the following page she has Thompson dismissing the notion of instinct: he "shut[s] up all [his] reasoning powers" in the face of migrating reindeer, which seems to him "an extraordinary event" (24).

accepted by the First Nations people he encountered. Such an impression is created by the inclusion of excerpts that recount Thompson's interactions with First Nations people and relate the stories and folklore that he picked up from them. For example, Smith includes Thompson's description of how the "Indians" hunt eagles (14), his mention of the Stone Indians' dogs, which are "half dog, half wolf" (18), and his appreciation of one chief's sense of humour (27).²² She also includes excerpts that demonstrate Thompson's almost casual references to Indian mythology. For instance, as a means of explaining the strength of the Kootenay, Thompson mentions that the "Indians / believe each river / has a spirit in it" (37), and he incorporates the legend that the area surrounding the Athabaska River is "haunted . . . by mammoths" into his description of its "dreadful desolation" (58). While *Koo-koo-sint* may portray Thompson as having thoroughly assimilated the First Nations' ways of life and ways of thinking, the journals tell a slightly different story. Certainly Thompson was fascinated and, at times, appreciative of his experience with these people, but his writing maintains a distance between himself and his First Nations companions, firmly positioning them as Other. For instance, Thompson devotes several sections of his journal to an almost clinical discussion of the Nathaway (Cree), systematically describing the "Savage's" physiology, family units, and clothing, amongst other things. Periodically creeping into these scientific or ethnographic studies of the people is a tone of derision; Thompson seems to fault their religious beliefs, calling them "obscure and confused," and suggests that the "simple state" of their language would render teaching them "the doctrines of Christianity" impossible (83). Similarly, his discussion of the Mandane people is also concerned with what

²² This chief keeps a scarlet coat that Thompson gives to another chief as a thank you gift but which gets passed from chief to chief as none are comfortable with "such puffing up" (27). The sixth chief that gets the coat accepts it because he is near death and sends "his thanks / for such a fine coat to be buried in" (27).

he perceives as their limitations, which according to Thompson are primarily expressed in their “almost total want of chastity” and the “abominable ceremony” during which women must choose and have sex with random men from their village (234-35). That Smith excludes these and other examples of Thompson’s disgust and condescension indicates a need on her part for Thompson to appear a certain way: as a “friend to the Indian” (6). Such a conceit naturalizes Thompson, not only validating his presence in the land and amongst the people, but actually idealizing and indigenizing him. If the ancestor that the poem helps us to find is indigenized, it becomes easier for contemporary readers to feel at home in Canada and to ground the nation in that history.

Smith adds to this image of the indigenous explorer by showcasing Thompson’s acceptance by the First Nations; she signals this acceptance in two key ways. First, she foregrounds Thompson’s marriage to a Métis woman, Charlotte Small, with whom he travels “many a mile and river” (25), a fact to which Thompson pays scant attention in his journals. Also downplayed in the journals, but highlighted in Smith’s poem, is the fact that Thompson goes on to have a family with Charlotte. While in his journals, Thompson’s family only appears in passing references, the Thompson of Smith’s poem becomes more sympathetic and likeable by appearing as a sort of family man, recounting, for instance, shooting a horse that “nearly crushed his children” and remembering his son pointing “to a great eagle / soaring easily above the crests . . . / saying, if only we could fly!” (40). Thompson’s family does more than humanize him, because his children are part Métis and part European, it implies a spontaneous and peaceful melding of the nation’s founding civilizations.

The second, and perhaps more interesting because more subtle, strategy that Smith uses to indicate Thompson’s indigenization is to include him in the imagined Indian legends that take up sections of the poem. The very title of the book is an example of this inclusion as

“Koo-koo-sint” was the name that “the Indians called him” meaning “You That Look At The Stars” (“Prologue” 5). Foregrounding this re-naming of Thompson is integral to Smith’s re-framing of his journals as it suggests almost a baptism into indigenous culture. If Thompson is indeed as “inextricable” from the narrative of national progress as Smith implies, then his role as an ancestor that was adopted by the First Nations suggests the possibility of a similarly legitimated contemporary Canada. Another example occurs early in the poem when Smith excerpts Thompson’s description of Saukamappee, the man in whose tent he was staying, “a Cree [who] had lived among the Piegans for many years” (14). Smith then goes on to write a short poem from Saukamappee’s perspective about Thompson who “came as a youth with the traders / but already . . . spoke my language” (14). The poem tells of Thompson’s adoption into the tribe and his education in hunting. It reads like a *bildungsroman* in which we are introduced to the hero as a boy, hear of his education, and then watch him grow into a great man through the rest of the story, or, in this case, the poem. Smith, in other words, makes Thompson the stuff of mythology, using the First Nations as a mouthpiece for a story that is familiar and appealing to members of White Canadian culture. Intersecting narratives are formed wherein Thompson, in accumulating and retelling the First Nations’ stories, finds himself a part of them. Smith seems to be suggesting that narrative is free-floating, divorced from notions of ownership, thereby freeing Thompson from possible charges of appropriation and, not incidentally, herself as well. Further, by creating poems from the First Nations’ point of view that focus on Thompson, Smith is figuratively showing Thompson’s acceptance into this culture by literally including him in its stories. This tangle of narration, of which *Koo-koo-sint* is a part, emblemizes the ever-expanding, ever-evolving story of Canada’s growth towards national maturity and legitimacy.

Jon Whyte and a Homage to History

The texts by Newlove and Smith provide a reflection of the present nation in, if not a glorious past, then at least one that validates some sort of originary or pseudo-indigenous claim to the land. By connecting these “original” Canadians to Canadians of today, Newlove and Smith also create an impression of chronology and progress. While Newlove and Smith lay out this ideology in a fairly straightforward manner, Jon Whyte’s *Homage, Henry Kelsey* (1981) makes use of a postmodern writing techniques, but the poem’s content nevertheless clings to the notion of a national meta-narrative; as such, Whyte’s poem can be seen as representative of a transition in documentary literature. With the Canadian Centennial a decade before (Whyte actually finished his poem in the late 1970s) and the explosion of cultural production that followed, Canadian writers began moving away from more prescriptive work involved in formulating a unique national identity through literary themes and styles. Interest in postmodern techniques and ideas began to flourish.²³

Certainly *Homage, Henry Kelsey* displays some postmodern stylistics. It is fractured (lines of poetry are often haphazardly divided and placed on opposite sides of the page), discontinuous (Whyte moves from one subject to another with little closure or connection), and foregrounds its own hybridity (mainly with the italicized excerpts from Kelsey’s journal, the language of which is discordant with Whyte’s own modern, vernacular voice). Fundamentally, however, Whyte is unable to adopt fully the interest in surface and the outright rejection of any overarching truth or meaning, any grand(iose) narrative that many postmodernist texts seem to favour. Even the title of Whyte’s poem contradicts the poem’s

²³ George Bowering’s work provides a better example of the influence/effect of postmodern theory on documentary literature as, in *Burning Water*, he adopts not only postmodern literary techniques but a counter-discursive ideology as well.

form. This poem is indeed a “Homage,” a word that indicates “reverence” (OED). Kelsey’s words, the man they represent, and the history of which they are a part, are celebrated in this documentary long poem. More specifically, the excerpts, re-framed by this homage, bridge the gap between the physical or concrete exploration of the landscape and the abstract search for personal and national identity in which the Canadian poet and reader are engaged. Further, the inclusion of excerpts in the body of the poem identifies them as literature and, more importantly, as literature present-day Canadians should be proud to claim as their own.

Henry Kelsey, John Warkentin reports, was “a late-seventeenth-century Englishman who spent most of his life as a fur trader on Hudson Bay,” from 1684 to 1722 (vii). In this capacity, Kelsey undertook two expeditions that resulted in reports on regions from Hudson’s Bay to “the great interior plains of present-day Canada,” as well as observations on the First Nations people he encountered. While Kelsey kept records throughout his time in Canada, the journey from 1690-92 is perhaps “best known” (Warkentin vii), and it is from journals kept during this journey that Whyte draws his material. Much of these journals take the form of a sort of epistolary poem to the reader, and Whyte primarily excerpts from Kelsey’s poetry. “Now Reader Read...” (the title by which Kelsey’s poem is typically known) has garnered some critical attention, in particular from D.M.R Bentley who in *The Gay] Grey Moose* denounces charges that Kelsey’s work is “incompetent doggerel” that is in complete disjunction with the landscape that it aims to reproduce (73). Bentley instead suggests that “[b]ecause it aims at a plainness that bespeaks truth and honesty, Kelsey’s verse epistle sometimes succeeds quite well in communicating the experience of a “hast[y] journey through . . . a largely empty land” (74). In his introduction to *Bolder Flights: Essays on the Canadian Long Poem*, Bentley expands his discussion of the poem, arguing that Kelsey’s work, in fact, “enact[s] most of the tasks that would characterize Canadian long poems in the

ensuing three centuries” (8). “Now Reader Read...” is comprehensive; it’s an “inclusive commentary on ‘the Country’ and its inhabitants” (8). It is also a “commemoration” (of Kelsey’s journey), a commemoration that Whyte’s poem echoes or re-remembers. Finally, Kelsey’s poem describes the “construction” of the nation – again a task that Whyte’s poem also takes up. “Now Reader Read...” is, as Bentley contends, “the primal poem of colonial colonizing Canada” (8).

As Whyte explains in the introduction to his serial poem *The Fells of Brightness, Homage* “incorporates history, myth, landscape, a literary past” (8). Essentially, Whyte is just as involved in commemorating the construction of the nation as Kelsey, but instead of focusing on a literal building, Whyte’s poem praises and contributes to the cultural production of national history. Whyte uses the excerpts to build a narrative connecting then and now, arguing that Kelsey, in “[s]peaking to himself . . . speaks to us” (10). However, because Kelsey is writing in verse and, therefore, is bound by certain literary conventions of the time, his work differs greatly from the prosaic and straightforward journals of Hearne and Thompson; his phrasing and word choice is sometimes a bit difficult to follow. One part of Whyte’s project is to remove this “isolation” “out of” which Kelsey speaks (10). The poem works by reinterpreting, virtually translating, the quotes from Kelsey’s poem into images and language more accessible and more gripping to the modern reader.

In the first section of *Homage*, which serves as an apostrophe to Kelsey²⁴ and an introduction to his experiences in Canada, Whyte uses excerpts from Kelsey’s poem:

Thou dost not know the hardships I endur’d

In this same desert where Ever y^t I have been . . .

²⁴ Echoing the phrasing of “Now Reader Read,” Whyte writes “Hail, Kelsey, come,” urging Kelsey to return and “come to the land” (12).

Nor wilt thou me believe without y' thou had seen

The Emynent Dangers that did often me attend. . . . (13)

Kelsey's oblique allusions to "hardships" and "Dangers," while intriguing, end up pointing out the absence in his records of such details. Kelsey, ever the professional, speaks in "Now Reader Read..." of "fears & Cares" that he has "oppresst" because he was duty-bound to explore the country in the name of the Hudson's Bay Company, and the empire in general (1). This oppression, by and large, continues in Kelsey's account of his journey, which never fulfills the titillating references to dangers with any substantial descriptions, instead focusing on mercantile and colonial concerns. The above excerpt is a perfect example of this absence in Kelsey's text, and Whyte re-frames the excerpt with text that fills in these holes with images that are visceral and enthralling:

hunger, the stomach shrinking, the masked rocks of rapids,
the abuse of anger, the flare of feelings amid fear
and companions' enemies, canoes overturning, fire,
starvation . . .
fear of murder . . .
being lost in uncharted woods in winter . . .
unfamiliar beasts, unknown customs, the undiscovered hemlocks,
unease, disease, and always the threat
the land's maw will swallow a man. . . . (13)

Kelsey's antiseptic account is fleshed out and comes alive for the contemporary reader in this new context. Whyte imagines the "Dangers" Kelsey would have faced, the "fears" that he had to suppress, and thereby establishes an intimacy between the reader and the long-dead

historical figure. By creating this connection, Whyte is able to render Kelsey not only more sympathetic, but more tangible and accessible for the contemporary reader.²⁵

Another instance of Whyte's translation of Kelsey's journal into something more tangible occurs towards the end of the poem when Kelsey's sparse account of the animals, the geography, and the inhabitants of the land is re-framed by a first-person voice that is Whyte's idea of Kelsey's thoughts and perspective. While the excerpt from Kelsey's text provides few descriptive elements – merely stating, “*This plain affords nothing but Beast & grass*” (58) – Whyte's poetry helps us imagine Kelsey's personal experience of this landscape:

I stand
 in the middle
 of the long grass
 I turn
 to the north and east . . .
 I turn
 beneath the sun at noon
 turn
 to the ground
 to the sky
 draw the sweet breath of the air
 into my chest. . . . (58)

²⁵ Note the similarity to Newlove's Hearne.

By personalizing Kelsey's detached notes, Whyte counteracts the estranged feeling a present-day reader might have after encountering Kelsey's dry collection of data.²⁶ In this new context, Kelsey's "*plains*" become a recognizable region; further, Kelsey's experience of these "*plains & ridges*" evokes a contemporary vision of the prairies, making Kelsey seem closer, a fellow Canadian.

It is worth noting that this section of *Homage*, entitled "Flensing," is also the one in which Whyte, according to his brief essay at the back of the book, uses Kelsey's notes and finishes his poem for him (81). What this finishing entails is Whyte adopting Kelsey's phrasing, vocabulary, and typeset in order to add a few verses to the excerpted segments from Kelsey's 1691 journal in order to complete the record of his journey in poetry. "Flensing" is the last section of *Homage* that excerpts Kelsey's work; in the final section and "Epilogue," Whyte's and the reader's personal and national exploration takes center-stage. I would suggest that in "Flensing" the mixing of Whyte's voice, Whyte's voice speaking/writing for Kelsey, and Kelsey's voice points to the interchangeable nature of Whyte's poetry and Kelsey's poetry, of present and past. In a sense, Whyte is becoming Kelsey, and Kelsey is becoming Whyte. "Arbor," the last part of the poem, underlines this melding:

Sphere: a way of thinking

Sphere: a manner of perception . . .

Circle: a plane of intersection of two spheres . . .

the spheres' equivalences

and the spheres equivalent . . .

²⁶ For example, in the excerpt Whyte uses, Kelsey notes the width by miles of the woods, the absence of beaver and otter, and the violence between First Nations, all with the same emotionless tone (58).

Substitute in the above any of the following:

your sphere, my sphere;

your sphere, Kelsey's sphere;

my sphere, Kelsey's sphere. . . . (67)

In other words, not only are Whyte and Kelsey's experiences, perceptions, and words interchangeable with each other, they are also interchangeable with those of the reader. History is not really history; in Whyte's poem, its representative documents are re-framed in a way that makes them (or tries to make them), their writer, and the past he represents immediate and participatory for the reader. Whyte is hoping that with this re-framing, with this recognition that "disappearing [Kelsey] dissolves in us," "the gap [will be] breached / the void crossed" (68).

Of course, Whyte's poem encourages readers to do more than relate to Kelsey and the national history of which he is a part; it enables readers to admire Kelsey and to see him as a national ancestor. The narrative does more than chart "the dust of the continuum" (68). *Homage* enacts a desire to render history mythic, to make "history meaningful / while making of it something else" (66). Making "something else" of history is, in fact, exactly what Whyte is doing by re-framing Kelsey's journals. As Whyte puts it, Kelsey "dissolves in us," but in "diminishing he becomes a giant" (69). However, because Kelsey (and his writing) is, as Bentley puts it, the epitome of the "colonial colonizing Canada," Whyte's *Homage* has to counteract this problematic legacy. What this means is that he must downplay, even re-imagine, Kelsey's interaction and relationship with the First Nations people.

Tim Heath argues in "'Landscape Delitescens': Cultural Nationalism in Jon Whyte's *Homage, Henry Kelsey*" that Whyte's depiction of Kelsey is largely influenced by the

“Kelsey legend” which is associated with the writings of Arthur Dobbs and James Robson, two of Kelsey’s contemporaries. Basically, Dobbs’ “attempt to subvert” the Hudson’s Bay Company’s charter and monopoly of Canada led to a case tried in the House of Commons during which Kelsey’s journal was submitted as evidence of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s positive progress. After the hearing, the journal disappeared, “presumably into the keeping of the HBC” (58). Robson’s book, which was written in support of Dobbs, contained an appendix that attacked not only the Hudson’s Bay Company but “the veracity of Henry Kelsey’s journal” (57). According to Robson, Kelsey rebelled against his superiors and spent most of his time with the First Nations, actually running away with them and then returning with an Assiniboine wife. Robson claimed that the Hudson’s Bay Company had suppressed Kelsey’s journal, but when the journal was uncovered three years later and subsequently published, “the more glamorous version of Kelsey’s journey lost any credibility” (Heath 58). Whyte, however, picks up this “glamorous version” in his desire to make Kelsey and national history “meaningful” (Whyte, *Homage* 66).

While Heath’s article is more concerned with Whyte’s depiction of Kelsey as boyish and therefore innocent, focusing on the re-framed excerpts, I would argue that Whyte also works very hard to ensure that Kelsey is perceived much in the way that Smith wants us to see Thompson, as a “friend to the Indians” (Smith 6). Relying on the Kelsey myth created by the Dobbs-Robson material, Whyte downplays Kelsey’s role as a representative of imperialism by overplaying his connection to the First Nations people with whom he lived and traveled. For example, one excerpt that Whyte includes contains Kelsey’s description of First Nations’ songs; the tone of this description could be seen as dismissive: “*They have but two or three Words in a song*” (26). Whyte counteracts Kelsey’s detached discussion of the songs as anthropological curiosities by interrupting the excerpt (it continues two pages

later) with a poem that repeats two words, “systole” and “diastole,” yet includes many images that these words could potentially invoke/evoke, thereby exploding the idea that a song of two or three words is somehow limited. Simultaneously, Whyte capitalizes on Kelsey’s detailed explanation of these songs’ origins and motivation, both to give thanks and to seek revenge on enemies. Referring to the “dixonary” of the “Indian language” that Kelsey later created as part of a program to educate Europeans (Bentley, *Gay/Grey Moose* 78), Whyte tells how Kelsey “wrote secrets in Indian tongue” (26). Kelsey is thus pictured as having the inside track on these people; the excerpt, then, becomes an example of Kelsey’s privileged knowledge and position within First Nations’ culture.

This insider status is given particular credence through allusions to the Assiniboine wife that Robson claimed Kelsey married. While Whyte never directly defines the relationship between Kelsey and this woman, her recurring presence throughout *Homage*, especially around excerpts that concern Kelsey’s interaction with other Native people, suggests Kelsey’s acceptance of and acceptance by Native communities. Early in the poem, Whyte includes a section of Kelsey’s journal that describes his failed attempts to help the various First Nations tribes reach a peace. That Kelsey “*brought these Natives to a peace*” (23) can at best be seen as meddling and at worst as an imposition (namely of British ideas of order and justice). Further, Kelsey’s dismay at their return to violence – “*no sooner from those Natives turnd my back. . . . And for all grudges & their minds to fill / Came up with them Six tents of wch they kill’d*” (23) – bespeaks not merely a British sensibility but a fundamental inability to grasp First Nations society and culture. However, by preceding this excerpt with a first-person description from Kelsey’s perspective of the companionship of “her” through “the long night / lengthening nights and / always in strength and in warmth”

(21), Whyte invokes Kelsey's marriage and its incumbent vision of a heroic Kelsey who was closer to the First Nations than to the White men for whom he worked.

The idealization of Kelsey's marriage is also invoked towards the end of *Homage*, again to counteract the imperial mission that is so apparent in Kelsey's journals. The excerpt that Whyte includes here tells of Kelsey's setting up "*a Certain Cross / In token of my being there*" and of his renaming "*there*" "*deerings point*" after his "*master sir Edward deerings*" (59). As Bentley explains, this re-naming is one of Kelsey's "various acts of appropriation on both the land and its peoples" (*Gay*/Grey Moose 74). Whyte, however, re-contextualizes this act of appropriation with an image of Kelsey watching "her" "playing / beside the bank of the pond's still water" causing Kelsey's "heart" to wander with his "mind" (59). Deerings Point, then, is suddenly connected not solely to British colonization; it is also tied to Kelsey's lust and love for this Assinboine woman. Kelsey's imperial act of declaring ownership is balanced by Whyte's romantic vision of Kelsey's heart and mind being owned, or at least shared, with a First Nations woman.

At base, then, we have in Whyte's Kelsey a similar rendering of the explorer as that witnessed in Smith's *Koo-koo-sint*. Kelsey is connected to the landscape and to First Nations peoples; he is, in other words, indigenized, or, as Heath puts it, he "belongs to the land itself" (60). Whyte, however, is working not only to tie the explorer to the nation's past; he is working to link himself and his present-day reader to this history. Kelsey is pictured in *Homage* as an integral part of a continuum, and in the "Epilogue" to the poem Whyte makes his final argument for this perception of history and Kelsey's place within it. Lines, both on maps and in poetry, are described here as "indelibly scored" but also "scorched by time" (73). Of Kelsey and his contribution the poem asks "what's the difference?" (73), and then goes on to explain exactly why these lines (presumably, Kelsey's and Whyte's) matter, why

these must be remembered, and how this remembering will alter both the memory of the past and those bearing it, paying it homage. Maps, journals, poetry must be commemorated because ultimately what is left of history becomes “us” (73). Whyte closes his poem with the repetition of a seeming paradox: “The story continues, the story is ended. / The story continues, ‘The story is ended . . .’ / The story continues” (73). In one sense the story has ended – Whyte’s poem has come to an end and Kelsey’s poem ended long ago as did the period of time his poem sprang from. However, the idea that the story “continues” seems to override the idea of its ending – Whyte’s final line has no punctuation; there is no period after “continues,” giving a sense of openness and continuity. Further, in a concrete sense the story does continue as Whyte has attached two appendices, one the full text of Kelsey’s epistolary poem, the other two letters (epistles) by the book’s artist (Dennis Burton) and by Whyte himself on constructing the poem. These appendices, because they provide additional information and new perspectives, seem to encourage a second reading of the poem, a rereading of it. The story, then, quite literally “continues” past its ending with each new reading and new interpretation. This continuity of *Homage* mimics the continuity that Whyte is trying to enact for Kelsey’s journals. While “[t]he book ever open will close, fold in upon itself, / the deck be cut, shuffled, reshuffled . . .” (72) – Whyte’s poem and Kelsey’s poem within it may be shuffled and reshuffled (edited, rearranged, reinterpreted) – the important thing is that the cards are still in play, and the book can and will ever be re-opened.

Then and Now Converging: Kearns’ Complicated Nation

For Whyte, the main point of this constant return to the book[s] of history is a search for connections and continuity between then and now. This search is the ostensible subject of Lionel Kearns’ *Convergences* as well: “If these words of mine become words in your head

and so connect our lives . . . this will be meaning. Correspondence is what we seek, shreds of similarity, understanding, compassion” (n.p.). Kearns’ prose poem showcases moments of “convergence” between past and present by imaginatively reconstructing, with help from oral tradition and the journals of the men on the two ships, the early encounters (in 1778) of British explorer James Cook and his crew with the Mooachaht people of Canada’s West Coast, while simultaneously charting the contemporary writer’s experience and reflections on history. However, Kearns is ultimately interested in a more critical project, one which actually disrupts the narrative of historical progress and the concept of nation as the culmination and expression of this progress. Re-framing excerpts from Cook’s company’s records in a way that works to uncover correspondences or commonalities for/with the reader, Kearns’ poem also demonstrates the randomness of these connections, the coincidence of history, as well as exposing moments of disconnection. Kearns makes Cook and his men more immediate, more sympathetic, and, yet, more complicated and less heroic. By underlining this lack of heroism, Kearns helps readers trouble the portraits of explorers contained in narratives such as the poems discussed above. *Convergences* confronts us with the dark underbelly of Canada’s “discovery” and “founding,” forcing a recognition of the flawed actions of these flawed explorers, which, in turn, suggests a need to revisit and rethink Canadian history and our responsibility for the manner in which it was and continues to be produced. As Kearns explains on the final page: “we also participate in those events, you and I . . .” (n.p.).

What sets Kearns’ text apart from those by Newlowe, Smith, and Whyte is its self-conscious engagement with the problem of historical inheritance. As the title of the poem suggests, Kearns is interested in “convergences” between past and present. However, he is also alert to the difficulties inherent in such a quest, particularly in the assertion of links

between the colonial past and the future. As Kearns is aware, this insistence on descent may potentially render the present author complicit in a colonial ethos. The convergence that emerges as most viable in Kearns' poem is the issue of responsibility: how are we to acknowledge our responsibility to events of the past without necessarily embracing a teleological or evolutionary notion of this connection? Kearns does so by self-consciously structuring his poem, and its citation of historical documents, in a dialogic fashion that refuses any final genealogical links between past and present.

The book's structure presents the most visible instance of the poem's representation of this dilemma of historical convergence. Containing multiple discourses – historical narrative, explorers' journals, illustrations/images, and commentary or criticism – Kearns' poem is set up in such a way that the discourses continually interrupt or even undermine each other. Kearns is interested in setting up a dialogue that is at cross purposes (cross purposes that are structurally emblemized by the format of the poem) in order to highlight the crisis of historical representation. The text is divided into two columns. The column in large typeface presents the story of the first encounter of Cook and the Mooachahts told partially by a third-person omniscient narrator who, drawing on First Nations' oral history and on European historical records, imagines both the Europeans' and the Mooachahts' experience and thoughts. This column also contains the excerpts from the journals of Cook's men, which Kearns marks off by italicizing them and by identifying the original author. Separated by a space, appearing on the outer margin of the page, and running parallel to the historical narrative, is a column written in smaller type that contains Kearns' own experiences with and reflections on the history that the other column describes, as well as many direct addresses to the reader, pulling him or her into the reading of history with which the Kearns of this smaller typeface column is engaged. As Lianne Moyes explains, the marginal column

“continually interrupt[s] the historical material and vice versa, thereby frustrating both the eye’s continuous movement from the top left-hand corner of the left page to the bottom right-hand corner of the right page, and the impulse to finish reading one typeface before beginning another” (16). In other words, it becomes literally impossible to disentangle the narrative of the past from that of the present (both Kearns’ present as writer and our own present as readers reading).

These two columns, however, can be and have been interpreted in quite a different manner. In “Reading Against Consumption: Metafiction in Lionel Kearns’ *Convergences*,” Grant Williams argues that the two texts are, in fact, wholly divorced from one another. The outer or marginal column actually “encloses the narrative of Cook’s interaction with the Nootka Indians within the narrow confines of a hermeneutical prison: divided not only by a vertical fissure but by contrasting typescript and print size, the two columns imply that the texts of the sailors’ journals and the narrator’s commentary inhabit two distinctly different temporal planes . . .” (42). The space between the two columns, Williams goes on to explain, ends up “protect[ing] the narrator’s reading” from the narrative being read (43). And yet, there is something of a contradiction in Williams’s argument, since he also insists that the outer or marginal column “tells us how to read the inner columns,” including how to read the excerpts contained therein. Although he does not foreground this contradiction, Williams may be correct in perceiving a distinct ambiguity in Kearns’ poem. Kearns’ regulative voice re-frames the history that his poem contains, an interpretative act that both crosses and creates a desired gap between the shameful colonial past and our wiser, more politically correct present nation.

These disparate readings of Kearns’ poem offered by Moyes and Williams are both valid; in particular, this tension between longing for distance and longing for connection can

be seen in Kearns' re-framing of the exploration excerpts. In some cases, the outer column is used to engender a feeling of sympathy towards the European explorers. The first excerpt Kearns uses in the inner column is from midshipman Trevenen's journal and contains a vitriolic description of Lieutenant Williamson (a fellow crew-member): "Our first lieutenant, Williamson, is a wretch, feared and hated by his inferiors, detested by his equals and despised by his superiors, a very devil . . ." (n.p.). This excerpt becomes a jumping off point for Kearns to muse in the outer column on the treatment of men by history and suggest that, perhaps, these men were not as "despicable" as the records would have it: "the villainous William Bligh . . . on this voyage is the peerless sailing master of the *Resolution*. Bligh, age twenty-four, and as yet without a commission, is reputed to be next only to Cook in navigational skill. He is perhaps not such a despicable fellow, but historical fiction has treated him badly" (n.p.). Of course, this observation begs the question of whether the records do in fact suggest that these men were despicable. Perhaps this understanding of these men as "despicable" exists not within the records themselves but in the framing of them, an idea that is implied by Kearns' reference to *Mutiny on the Bounty* and the idea that historical fiction, in general, misrepresents figures from the past.²⁷ Kearns' reference to *Mutiny on the Bounty* is ostensibly made in order to allow the reader to connect to the excerpts contained in the poem and the men who wrote them: "You have seen those movies too, the men being lashed and keel-hauled..." (n.p.). However, Kearns is also reminding the

²⁷ After a tour as sailing master of James Cook's final voyage, Lieutenant William Bligh was assigned to the *Bounty*, a ship owned by the Royal Navy. Control of the *Bounty* was seized from Bligh by Fletcher Christian, who took command illegally through a mutiny. Since then, Bligh has been represented as an exemplar of the abusive sea captain in literature, such as in Lord Byron's poem *The Island* (1823), Jules Verne's *Les révoltés de la Bounty* (1879), and *The Bounty Trilogy* by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall (1932), and in the film *Mutiny on the Bounty*. In the film's original version (1935), Bligh was played by Charles Laughton and in the 1962 remake by Trevor Howard.

reader that such representations of history, which lead the reader to “imagine” Bligh as “Charles Laughton or Trevor Howard,” are not really the truth either. Kearns concludes his reflections in this marginal column by pondering, “I wonder how [history] will treat me, or you” (n.p.), thereby putting his reader in the place of these men and forcing a consideration of his or her own failings and position in space and time. The narratorial voice in the outer column thus speaks the very contradiction that the poem as a whole considers and enacts: the impossibility of escaping the paradox of historical representation. Yet this voice is also concerned with the problem of getting it right, since he wonders whether he or “you” will be treated sympathetically in hindsight. Will the interpreter of the future be able to enact a process of empathetic convergence? And if so, how is that implicated in the truth that one seeks in the past? If empathy is an “imaginative” act, does it ultimately highlight the radical in-congruence between past and present? While Kearns’ commentary may engender sympathy for and even a feeling of alliance with the explorers, it also leads the reader to question who these explorers were, rendering these men and their actions too elusive to ever connect to.

That said, many of the outer columns draw out similarities (convergences) between these explorers and the citizens of the modern nation they ostensibly helped found. As above, Kearns often uses these similarities to counteract the potentially distancing effect of some of the excerpts’ contents. For example, a midshipman’s description of the Mooachaht as “*the dirtiest beings ever beheld*” may represent the type of perspective from which the contemporary Canadian wants distance, and the quote from Second Lieutenant Rickman’s journal referring to Canada as “*that void space in our maps*” may represent a pre-nation period that the modern-day citizen has problems imagining. The description of Canada as a “void” may also remind the politically astute reader of the early conceptions of the New

World as uninhabited, a conception that helped justify colonization. Kearns uses the outer column commentary to arrest the likely impulse of the reader to experience a feeling of alienation from Rickman's vision of Canada or to want to distance him or herself from the midshipman's prejudice. Surrounding these two excerpts is an address to the reader that mocks the reader's world-view, making it seem just as small and unknowledgeable as that of these two men: "Now what is the matter with you? Things are bad. . . . So you gulp another beer or martini . . ." (n.p.). Further, Kearns argues that these men were "much like you. . . . they had problems like yours until they stepped on board those ships" (n.p.). Such a comparison helps Kearns suggest a common human experience, an experience that is, in some sense, defined by the fact that problems, flaws, and mistakes are common to all of us. However, Kearns is also letting us know that these men were unexceptional, which is making a statement about the narrative of history and nation that has been imposed upon them. They are just like you and me, so their privileged position in Canada's history is held up to re-examination. Since ideas of convergence, connection, and continuity are linked (as least in nationalist ideologies) to notions of destiny or progress, Kearns' reassessment of the explorers' heroism calls into question the concept of Canada itself as a product of these preordained links.

Even as he troubles the notion of convergence, Kearns seems to be proposing a particular understanding of historical connection that enables him to tease out the problems of the radical pastness of the past. The "links" in Kearns' poem are not presented as part of some mythic notion of national destiny, but rather, the idea of a common humanity and our participation in this humanity is what leads Kearns to view us as "the links in a chain that binds the universe" (n.p.). Kearns creates this sense of shared responsibility, in part, by collapsing the divisions of time and space. As Moyes explains, "'Here' . . . is Nootka Sound,

the speaker-composer's desk, his porch near the seashore, the West Coast reservations, and the reader's circumstances. . . . 'Now' is the meeting of Cook and the Mooachahts, the writing of the journal accounts, the writing of *Convergences*, and its reading" (22). This drawing together of then and now, here and there, renders the events the poem describes not only more immediate for the reader; it actually seems to involve the reader in these moments and records of colonization. In the poem's first marginal column, Kearns describes time as "a ritual exchange, though the gifts move in a single direction" (n.p.). *Convergences* itself may be understood as participating in this ritual exchange, bequeathing quotations to its readers (Jones 113). By accepting the gifts left by our ancestors, we are acquiescing to, even participating in, the socio-historical context of the gifts' production. However, as Kearns makes clear throughout the poem, we need to look at these "gifts" instead of accepting them blindly because to accept a gift is also to accept the burden of responsibility for its origins and, in the case of the excerpts, for the circumstances in which they were written and the events that they describe.

Kearns uses the poem's marginal or outer column to make us aware of and question the origins of these gifts. After all, how can we have an "exchange" if the gifts only move in one direction? Kearns seems to be troubling this notion of convergences by asking whether we really want to be connected to these men and their gifts, while also asking whether we have a choice. For example, towards the end of *Convergences*, Kearns excerpts entries from both Cook's and Ledyard's²⁸ journals that comment on the First Nations' notions of proprietorship. Cook writes: "*I have nowhere met with Indians with more high notions of the country and the produce being their exclusive property*" (n.p.). Ledyard also notes the First

²⁸ According to Kearns, John Ledyard was a "corporal in the marine detachment on board [Cook's ship] the *Resolution*" (n.p.).

Nations' belief that the country belongs to them: "*They intimated to us that the country all around further than we could see was theirs*" (n.p.). While both men treat such claims as preposterous, Kearns re-frames this perspective by reflecting in the outer column that this is, in fact, "a legal matter" (n.p.). These excerpts actually prove that the Mooachahts did have prior possession of the land before the Europeans came: "It is on record: the reasons and the testimony and the response. The claim is there in writing from these first instances of contact" (n.p.). Kearns' comments draw out the unintended irony of the historical documents and show how, despite their intentions, the explorers' record-keeping ultimately confounds their imperialist mission. The "gifts" our history has left us have been stolen from another people's past.

A similar sentiment is evoked by Kearns' inclusion of John Webber's²⁹ drawings of the Mooachaht people. Like the excerpts, these drawings represent the (mis)perceptions early European colonizers had of the country's Native peoples, (mis)perceptions that have been handed down through time like a "ritual exchange" moving "in one direction" (n.p.).³⁰ The drawings are of a Mooachaht man and woman, two portraits on adjoining pages. On one side of the portraits is a commentary in which Kearns expresses the typical acceptance of historical records as truthful and objective: "The realism and authenticity of Webber's illustrations are almost photographic. . . . Webber's art was documentary. It focussed on the surface of the world he witnessed" (n.p.). While this column seems to frame the illustrations in a context of truth-telling, there are some slips in what seems to be initially a validation of

²⁹ John Webber was a Swiss artist who accompanied Cook on his expedition with the purpose of recording, in detail, the land and people of the New World.

³⁰ Again, we can see a parallel here with Goldie's theory of Aboriginal signification, but, unlike Newlove, Kearns seems all too aware of this process and wants to draw the reader's attention to what is being passed down through time.

Webber's work. Webber's work is "*almost* photographic"; it dealt with the "*surface* of the world *he* witnessed." This covert challenge to Webber's "documentary" drawings is laid out clearly in the column on the other side of the two portraits. Here Kearns explains the changes that Webber actually made to his sketches when preparing them for public consumption, for "the authorized version of the voyage" (n.p.). However, instead of placing the blame for such "manipulation of words and images" on their author, Kearns points outwards at the "audience": "Such textual liberties, even when taken by me, are entirely for your edification, I assure you" (n.p.). "A man," Kearns writes, "consents to a universe commissioned by his community, consigned by his culture . . ." (n.p.). Early in the poem, Kearns points to the problem with culture. Culture, he writes, is "knowing what you do, doing what you know, living in a place with people, a people who do what they know and know what they do" (n.p.). Culture, in Kearns' definition, seems to be linked to willful narrowness – we are more comfortable with what we know, but, given the connection between Webber's misrepresentations and culture, perhaps such narrowness is also leading us to not see truthfully. The reader, Kearns is arguing, is not only the passive recipient of the past; the reader actually informs the content and presentation of these gifts; the reader consents to and produces culture. We are connected to history by being the audience to and re-gifters of its "words and images" time and time again.

At the same time as Kearns works to create these convergences and thereby invoke a sense of responsibility or culpability in his reader for the actions of key figures of national history, his text also creates a distance between the past (and its documents) and the present. So, while we may be pictured as "links in a chain that binds the universe," Kearns concludes this metaphor and his poem with the qualification that the universe and our chain are simultaneously "fl[y]ing apart" (n.p.). Despite re-framing many of the excerpts with

commentary that is meant to forge a connection between the contemporary reader and the historical text, *Convergences* also expresses a detachment from, even disavows, these same texts and the historical events and figures they represent. Kearns himself expresses frustration at this unbridgeable gap – “[t]hem, and me, and you – the gaps between us, the intervals” (n.p.). – stating in the outer margin that: “I want to tell you everything but how can I proceed when I know so little” (n.p.). By thus foregrounding the problem of historical representation, Kearns draws attention to the impossibility of ever wholly “converging” with the past. This gap extends outwards, into the future, with Kearns continually wondering what the reader is thinking and doing, even wondering who the reader is.³¹ The reader’s “circumstances” (the reader’s frame or context or, as Kearns puts it, “the circle in which we stand” [n.p.]) will inform his or her reading of the poem, just as the “circumstances” of the poem inform its reading of the excerpts. Ultimately, though, Kearns is concerned with the “now” – “the *now* that has moved through each of them in turn, is moving through me, towards you. In fact, it has reached you now” (n.p.) – and he cautions his reader against attaching too strongly to the linearity of time as “[t]he fascination lies in the living” (n.p.).

Kearns refers to this quest for narrative connection between past and present frequently in the outer columns, stating, for instance, that “[h]appening is what is real, but we try to grasp it by storing it as imagery that falls into hazy sequence as we bring it back or speak it out or write it down, so that it forms a structure we must call something, so we call it time, and for those who store these experiences in words on paper, time becomes a line” (n.p.). On one level, Kearns is referring to the unreliability of his own project, the poem we

³¹ At one point, Kearns comments in the margins that he “cannot even dream of” what the reader will “bring to this occasion,” referring to both his own poem and the excerpt from Cook’s journal that appears on the same page. Later he asks the reader what the words of Bayly’s journals mean to him or her, “at a time and place known only to yourself.”

are now reading, which will only be a pale version of “happening.” Later in the poem, Kearns suggests that the reader should not even rely on the excerpts themselves being accurate: “I will give you no assurance as to the absolute accuracy and authenticity of the quotations” (n.p.). However, Kearns is also referring to the problem of historiography more generally, a reference that is made clear by the excerpt which appears on the page’s inner column. Here we have an excerpt from Heinrich Zimmerman’s journal in which a meeting with Aboriginal peoples is described in vivid imagery. We are told that the men had “40 or 50 canoes,” an “exactness of rhythm” and “charm[ing]” “music”; each party had “one member dressed like a harlequin in many coloured garments, which he changed holding different masks before his face” (n.p.). Kearns hints that the reader should question such documentary writing – how accurate are Zimmerman’s “observations”? – and its contribution to historical and national narration. “Do not fasten on that line,” the narrator states, hoping to dissolve the notions of progress and destiny so often associated with history and nation. “It is all flux, without order or meaning or purpose,” he argues, “That is what is given. The rest is consciousness: selection, composition, that is our business, my work for today.”

Historical and national narratives and the narrative of *Convergences* itself work to draw connections to create sequences and chronologies; narratives work to make sense of random events. Kearns is aware of this process and works to undercut this impulse towards narrative in historical and cultural meaning-making. However, there may be a flipside to this disengagement from historical teleology that is less liberating. While Kearns does not deny the material consequences of history, Kearns’ presentation of Canada’s history as a disconnected series of events also seems to diminish very real, concrete issues of political responsibility. This diminishment occurs in a very curious passage towards the beginning of

Convergences, in which an overt linking of generations is undercut by an appeal to the randomness of evolution. Kearns opens his poem with the suggestion that a biological process involving a melding of genes has led to or enables a melding with place: “They [the Europeans] are in this area at this precise moment, their spirits merging with the indigenous ghosts of the place. Their genes move into positions on old chromosomal chains, composing and encoding characteristic details of following generations” (n.p.). Kearns sees this merging in the past and the present as merely the natural course of the universe: “It is neither good nor bad. It is flux. It flows in waves and engulfs us all, a process whose partial record we call history” (n.p.). Strangely, it seems that Kearns is depicting history as inaccessible yet also, somehow, neutral, an approach that stands in direct opposition to the problematic underside of colonialism that has been represented elsewhere in the poem. By appealing to the neutral “flux” of history, Kearns may also be accused of suggesting that Canada is the end product of a natural evolutionary process.

This notion of evolution appears early in the book when an excerpt by the Surgeon’s Mate, David Samwell, on “*the barbarous and uncultivated state of the people*” is re-framed by Kearns’ discussion of the Mooachahts’ attempts at communication, misunderstood by the Europeans. The English, he tells us, heard “the Mooachahts repeating *nu-tka-sshi’a*” and assumed it was the name of the place, when what was really being said was simply “*Come around the point into this cove*” (n.p.). This misunderstanding led to the English renaming the Mooachahts Nootka, a misnomer that stuck: “The word and its mistaken reference go into records and onto the charts and eventually into the minds of all of us . . .” (n.p.). Instead of exploring the colonial implications of this re/mis-naming, Kearns depicts “the random and accidental” error as an evolutionary step: “Mistakes and their perpetuation are the essence of evolution.” Kearns tempers this statement with the question: “what is it that evolves here,

and to what end?” (n.p.). However, this question does not entirely counteract what seems to be the message of the outer column poem, which is that the British renaming of the Mooachahts and the continuation of this renaming is a value-free, even integral component of a natural process.

The concept of natural process recurs throughout *Convergences*, particularly in reference to the impositions of British imperialism. Kearns frequently describes the meeting of the two cultures, Nootka and English, with the metaphor of two waves coming together. For example, an excerpt from Ledyard’s journal that notes the absence of any religion and highlights the typically savage characters of these people – “*they are bold and ferocious, sly and reserved, not easily provoked, but revengeful. . . . and if they sacrifice it is to the God of liberty*” – is downplayed by Kearns’ presentation of this assumed superiority as merely the words of one world that will “move together” with the Mooachaht world to “produce” the nation in which Kearns and the reader now live. This nation, Kearns goes on to explain in later pages, is still home to the Mooachaht people, who are “licking Canadian stamps for their occasional letters” (n.p.), and, while their loss of the land is recognized, Kearns depicts it as part of the ongoing evolution of humanity: “It has been happening for two hundred years, the people coming and turning into this, the context of my life” (n.p.).

The logical conclusion of Kearns’ position is problematic, since it could be used to support a politics of apathy or resignation, one that is at odds with a post-colonial vision of causal contingency. Nevertheless, the poem does genuinely grapple with the dilemma of convergence between past and present, truth and representation, with a complexity that the earlier poets discussed in this chapter do not achieve. The poems of Newlove, Smith, Whyte, and Kearns represent attempts to straddle this divide through re-engagements with the documentary tradition of Canadian exploration history. In the following chapters, this re-

visionist project will be further explored through a close reading of the related, yet very different, projects of George Bowering's *Burning Water*, Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, and John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*.

Chapter 2 – Evading Expectations: Bowering’s Disruption and Demythologizing of the Explorer

In opposition to the nationalist inspired documentary poems of the 1960s and 70s, George Bowering’s narrative re-framing of exploration documents in his 1980 novel *Burning Water* is undertaken with the intention of critiquing national meta-narratives³² and providing an alternative approach to Canadian history. Bowering, like Kearns, is more interested in challenging and disrupting the entire idea of a national historical narrative.

Despite the narrator’s claim in the prologue that he wants to tell the “story of the greatest navigational voyage of all time” (n.p.), *Burning Water* frustrates the reader’s expectations of historical fiction. Departing from Georg Lukács’ definition of historical fiction as the detailed, realistic story of the average man’s experience of past events, Bowering’s novel has magic-realist elements and inserts himself, as both character and author, tripping in and out of the narrative. Perhaps the key component to this troubling of history, fiction, and nation is the use of excerpts from Archibald Menzies’ (the ship’s botanist) and Vancouver’s journals, which Bowering dangles in front of the reader like bait, but ultimately exposes as equally unstable and unreliable as any other narrative. Bowering repeatedly undercuts the document’s apparent veracity and the heroic mystique of the explorer by depicting the expedition and its “heroes” as ridiculous. The documents, included alongside the narrator/author’s own documentation of his archival research, are held up not as windows onto the past (or into a past personality), but rather as yet another discursive shield that refuses any access to historical truth or reality. Bowering’s manifest aim is to create a radical postmodern interrogation of national-historical narratives. While the poets of

³² Here Bowering’s approach seems to be in line with the postmodern as defined by Jean-François Lyotard - an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv).

Chapter One (excepting Kearns) and Wiebe and Steffler all seem engaged in a representation of the exploration period in order to forge a connection between the past and the present, Bowering's text focuses largely on disconnection. *Burning Water* stands apart from the other documentary works this project examines in its desire to not just trouble but to explode national conceptions of the exploration period, and, with them, Canada's self-perception.

This disruption of national history is complicated by Bowering's simultaneous project of demythologizing both the figure of the explorer and the foundational narrative the explorer represents, a project that requires a reliance on the very authority of history that Bowering is challenging. This contradiction between the contingency of history writing and the objective force of actual documents is intentionally foregrounded by Bowering and leads to a complex and, at times, problematic text. Bowering, influenced by Roland Barthes, employs the strategies that Barthes recommends for the mythologist engaged in the act of deconstructing myth. In *Mythologies*, Barthes argues that myth is a second-order semiological system, one in which the signified (or concept, which is the term that Barthes uses for the system of myth) reads backwards to the sign (or form). In normal semiological systems, we have a sign/signifier (Barthes uses the example of a tree), and when we read/hear this sign, we think of the signified (the tree); however, the sign itself does not embody the tree in any way. In myth, which Barthes argues is "a type of speech. . . . a system of communication . . . a message" (109), the form is the essence of the concept, so when we encounter the form it seems to us the essence of the concept that it signifies. Barthes uses the example of an image on the cover of *Paris-Match* in which "a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour" (116), to explain how myth operates. What the pictures signifies to the reader is the concept that

“France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag” (116). The form in this myth is the “Negro giving the French salute”; the concept is French imperialism. The way that myth works is by focusing the reader’s attention on the form as the embodiment or essence of the concept; thereby allowing the reader to forget about or ignore all the possibilities existing outside the margins of the form. For instance, “one must put the biography of the Negro in parentheses” if the form is to be free to receive its signified (118). Barthes is suspicious of mythology and its tendency to normalize ideologies, such as imperialism, making them seem natural and eternal to the reader/receiver of these myths. The object of *Mythologies*, then, is to suggest ways of deconstructing these myths by divorcing the form from the concept through attention to the specific, the local, the individual behind the form (i.e., to the biography of the Negro that we had to put in parentheses in order to accept the concept attached to the image). Such attention to detail, as opposed to essence, allows the cultural critic to see and challenge the ideology hidden in what is so often taken as a given.

Burning Water is, in many ways, a project of demythologizing along the lines that Barthes suggests. By providing a sort of psychological portrait of Vancouver, Bowering is able to individualize and humanize the national emblem of the explorer. This psychological portrait relies largely on the records kept by Vancouver and other members of the voyage, records that Bowering divorces from their potentially mythic status as originary narratives by providing for them a specific context – re-framing them as the account of just one journey written by just one man. The excerpts engage the reader in a direct encounter with the particular words of a particular man, thereby disallowing the process of “transform[ing] history into nature” (Barthes 129) that occurs in mythology. The excerpts, then, act as obstacles to the access of any historical truth, but simultaneously they act as the very site of

the real and the specific – they are the real words of a real man, not just the receptacle of the naturalized concept of nationalism. In other words, Bowering’s de-historicizing and demythologizing programmes often seem to be at cross-purposes. While Bowering’s disavowal of history rests on a muddying of the authority and significance of its records, the project of demythologizing focuses on their materiality and specificity. This contradiction lies at the heart of *Burning Water* and is emblematic of the very struggle to represent history with which Bowering’s novel is engaged. Bowering is making the point that there is no true story, no final narrative, no accurate reading, but, in order to prevent the type of mythologizing that occurs when documents and figures become empty receptacles for ideological concepts, he is also using the documents to ground history in something real and concrete. For much of the novel, this paradox plays out in thought-provoking ways; however, at some points, Bowering seems unaware of the underlying implications of his approach. As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, in the quest to de-naturalize history and demythologize nation, Bowering takes on some contentious topics, one of which is the representation and treatment of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. Due in large part to the postmodern play with which the novel is engaged, the potentially post-colonial politics and concerns are not only impossible to take seriously, but the representations that Bowering is working to deconstruct themselves become elusive and, in some ways, seem to escape the very demythologizing that they are meant to be undergoing.

Bowering and Literature in Vancouver: “Making Post-Modern Canadian History”

According to Bowering, in the late 1950s and early 60s, writers living in Vancouver “knew first void and margin. . . . There was, as far as they could see, no tradition . . .” (“Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry” 103). These writers had to construct a history for

themselves since in Vancouver “history, like most things, was make-shift, amateur . . .” (103). For help dealing with and filling this perceived void, the *Tish* group, and in particular Bowering, looked to the writings of American thinker Charles Olson.

Olson was anxious to redefine and radicalize history, moving away from the contemporary attachment of the discipline to science and social science. In his lecture “The Special View of History” (delivered in 1956 at Black Mountain College), Olson contends that history is a matter of process – history is created by, and continually conceived within, the life of the individual (18, 49). In “Human Universe,” which Trent Keough argues is a key Olson manifesto from which the *Tish* group took their theoretical premises (38), Olson muses on the human tendency to selectiveness. Finally, in “On History,” a discussion at the University of British Columbia in 1963, Olson ties this process of selection to the process of creating the story of history (in *Muthologies* 3). In the same discussion, Robert Duncan reiterates Olson’s earlier suggestion that the past exists only in the present (5), a point which Olson elaborates later with the comment that for the individual, history only has meaning when he can impose his name on it,³³ when he does something to it (14). History, then, is “*our* memory,” existing because we have imposed our memory upon time (15), because we have kept journals, diaries, written records that prove what has happened and simultaneously change it into a story of memory (18). History, in other words, is specific, not mythic. Like Barthes, Olson recognizes in the process of history not some overarching, essential truth or message, but rather the individual, the specific, the local. Olson also recognizes the impact of the present on the way the past is read or interpreted – our own motivations and ideologies

³³ This manner of making history personally meaningful can be seen in Bowering’s recognition of his name “George” in the names of George Vancouver and King George – a connection between author, narrator, and characters, as well as past and present, that will be discussed at greater length in the upcoming pages.

inform the way that we read the form that is history or the historical record. In other words, there can be no final or authoritative representation of the past.

This understanding of history as something created by and imbued with individual meaning and of capital-H History as something of which to be suspicious certainly influenced Bowering's treatment of local history. In an interview with Reginald Berry, he distinguishes between the well known, enduring history of eastern Canada and the new, unknown history of the West. Vancouver writers, he reflects, attacked history as though they were archaeologists, simultaneously digging up and filling in the holes (78). The method of writers from Vancouver, Bowering goes on to explain, has much "to do with the fact that each of us has to go out at the very beginning and be our own historian rather than read what historians do" (78).

Certainly this concern with history and its invention runs through Bowering's prose poem *A Short Sad Book*. Here, the chorus "in Canada writing about history is history" suggests that it is only by writing history that one becomes part of history,³⁴ but also that history only exists because it is being written. While on one hand Bowering seems to be suggesting that one has the power to form/create history, in *A Short Sad Book* history is also exposed as elusive, unstructured, and highly problematic – not easy to become a part of or to write. The author-narrator of the text oscillates between the position that history has a beginning, middle, and end, particularly in its written format, and the position that history "is all middle," going "round & round" (97). Further, the author-narrator postulates that if you forget about history it will eventually forget about you – one must, in other words, constantly

³⁴ In fact, at one point the narrator comments that "history is written by winners . . . & I will write this book" (39).

be writing history in order to remain a part of it. Ultimately, the text and its challenging of and by history is tied to postmodernism: "I'm making post-modern Canadian history" (114).

This "post-modern Canadian history" is central, not only to *A Short Sad Book* but to many of Bowering's other texts,³⁵ *Burning Water* among them. Bowering distances himself from mainstream or canonical Canadian literature and history and instead positions himself as post-traditionalist, post-realist and post-nationalist. A postmodern Canadian history, then, will challenge both a realist history and a history that naturalizes the nation; it will do so by way of textual play, deconstruction, frustration and disruption of meaning. However, it will also do so by reinscribing the materiality of the document, thereby disallowing the type of fictionalizing that takes place when history becomes narrative.

Burning Water as "post-modern Canadian history" can be understood in the context of the work of philosophers and literary theorists of the 1960s and 70s. Bowering himself signals the importance of post-structuralist thought to his own conceptions of history in an interview with Ken Norris. Here Bowering remarks that, in the 1970s, it was expected by fellow B.C. writers that one be able to discuss theorists such as Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others (10). Barthes, as I have mentioned above, plays a particularly important role in Bowering's thinking and writing. For example, Bowering quotes Barthes at the beginning of his essay "Vancouver as Postmodern Poetry" and, in the interview with Norris, refers to Barthes' emphasis on the surface of the text and the inability of narrative to imitate as an explanation for his own writing style. *Burning Water* was specifically affected by Barthes' work as Bowering had been reading and delighting in it prior to and during the writing of his novel (Norris 22). Responding to Barthes' argument in *A Lover's Discourse*

³⁵ See, for example, George, *Vancouver: A Discovery Poem*, which I will be discussing shortly; *Caprice*, a western set in the late 1800s; and, more recently, *Stone Country*, a history textbook published in 2003.

that “History is repressive,” Bowering agrees that the official, capital-H history is usually presented as a force that moves humanity in a “preordained way” (Norris 23) – the mythologizing of nation normalizes this type of history. However, he goes on to suggest that history is, in fact, just an idea, a “story of how we got here . . .” (Norris 23). Such a qualification matches up with Barthes’ contention (in “Historical Discourse”) that “historical discourse is essentially a product of . . . imagination” (153) and places Bowering’s definition of history squarely among that of these post-structuralist theorists.

By acknowledging his debt to Barthes and Foucault, Bowering signals his belief in the discursive nature of history. Like Foucault (in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), Bowering dismisses the vision of history as a predetermined, chronological force of progress, stating that “A lot of people, Marxists for instance, speak of history as if it is a force that moves in a preordained way through our lives, as a wave we are caught up in. History is not that . . .” (23). For Bowering, history should be treated as Foucault suggests in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Instead of trying “to restore what has been thought, wished, aimed at, experienced,” or trying to bring back some originary moment (139-40), the writer of history needs to focus on moments of disruption.

The historical document plays a key role in this new understanding of history, for, according to Foucault, it is the means of tracing the effect of these disruptions on various systems of discourse (in other words, disruptions and their dispersal). Drawing on Derrida, Foucault refers to the document as a “trace,” meaning that it is not a stable and transparent signifier of the past. According to Foucault, documents were typically considered a “decipherable trace” that would eventually reveal the whole story of the past (6). More contemporary historiography, on the other hand, is bound up with the document itself – trying to find “unities, totalities, series, relations” within it (*Archaeology* 7). History has

become the work of transforming “*documents into monuments*” (7). Moreover, the document/monument is regarded not as the subjective, discontinuous, unstable account that it is supposed to be, but rather as the real, true text of history. Because the historian works to erase his own presence from historiography, the fact that the “quality of the interrogator” determines not only the selection of documents but the manner in which they are interrogated remains unacknowledged in the historical work. Foucault’s criticisms of the notion that a text can directly signify (or represent) the “real” past under the condition of invisibility of both writer and reader are similar to Bowering’s criticisms of realism. Indeed, historiography, prior to post-structuralist and postmodernist-informed examinations, could be termed realist. However, the symbiotic relationship between history and literature (illuminated by critics such as Hayden White and Lionel Gossman) has led to a mutual turn away from realism in favour of writing that is self-aware and foregrounds the author and the present context from which he or she is reading the past. What Bowering is trying to do in *Burning Water* is expose this process of selection and interpretation of the document as always already a subjective one. In so doing, he’s calling historiography into question, while simultaneously reinstating the primacy of the document as the site of the real that we will never be able to access because of our inevitably subjective position.

Bowering’s *George, Vancouver* and the Complications of History

In his long poem *George, Vancouver: A Discovery Poem* (1970), Bowering began to explore these theoretical concerns in a way that he would later develop in the novel *Burning Water*. The prologue of *Burning Water*, in fact, makes reference to the earlier long poem; the narrator-author comments that *George, Vancouver* did not satisfy his need to write about history and himself, that the story of Vancouver was “not lyrical” (n.p.). It is true that the

novel more insistently foregrounds its struggle with historiography and its documents than Bowering's first attempt to deal with the explorer; however, it is useful to look at the poem because here Bowering begins to grapple with the problem of representing a historical figure and, in the process, underlines a similar paradox to that found in *Burning Water*. In the poem, official historical documents are used in a way that underlines their authenticity, their role as a source of information.³⁶ *George, Vancouver* displays a reverence for the figures of Canada's past and their stories that is similar to that displayed in the nationalist poems discussed in the previous chapter. Simultaneously, however, *George, Vancouver* represents a departure from this national reverence, as Bowering also works to dispel the authority and meaningfulness so often attached to historical texts and personages.

There is a double movement of construction and deconstruction in Bowering's documentary long poem that complicates the projects of celebrating or challenging history. The inclusion of "real" documents into an imaginative text blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, thereby calling into question the objectivity, authority, and truth claims of historiography. That said, the manner in which these documents are incorporated and the text that re-frames them at times seems to highlight their significance and their originary role both to the poem and to history in general. Even the title of the poem demonstrates this paradox. On one hand, *George, Vancouver* confuses and disrupts the expected categories by reversing the typical manner of listing a name (Vancouver, George), typical, in particular, of library and archival records. The main title also leaves the reader wondering what the poem is about: George Vancouver, George and Vancouver (the city? the explorer?), or George(s)

³⁶ In fact, Bowering explains to Berry that his discovery in a library in London (Ontario) of Menzies' diaries informed him of "a whole pile of things about the Vancouver area," and this information together with his commitment to writing led to *George, Vancouver* (78).

in Vancouver. On the other hand, the comma suggests a continuum, a logical progression through time from the George Vancouver of the past to the George and Vancouver of the present. Equally conflicted is the subtitle, *A Discovery Poem*, which refers to Bowering's self-discovery through the discovery of Vancouver's history. While this equation of Bowering's present discovery with discoveries of the past blurs chronological categories, it also suggests that there is some sort degree of continuity waiting to be discovered and written. Further, it suggests that what George Vancouver was doing was "discovering," a term that conveys a sense of romance, adventure, and origins that runs contrary to Bowering's disavowal of nationalism and nationalist inspired narratives of Canadian history.

These moments of inherent contradiction recur throughout the poem itself. Certainly one can find many instances of Bowering's challenge to History, an approach that tends to keep "[d]iscourse open" (Norris 21). This open discourse "throw[s]" the reader "off guard" and makes him or her "wary" by drawing attention to the surface of the text (Bowering "The Painted Window" 31). By incorporating the historical documents of Menzies' journals, a 1792 list of ships, and other recorded data, Bowering both blurs generic boundaries and suggests that the poet is not "the authority" but is actually a reader of history as well. However, the documents also act as a source of privileged information, information controlled by the poet, and, as such, become the site of tension between the poem's desire to debunk and to recuperate history.

As signaled by its title, this text works to expose the complexities inherent in the notion and act of discovery. As Bowering explains in his recent collection of essays, *Left Hook* (2005), the explorers were always having their expectations and assumptions frustrated by discovery – their actual discoveries generally deviated from those anticipated (63). For example, Bowering underlines the discrepancy between what Vancouver is expected to find

during his journey, the Northwest Passage and gold, and what he actually finds, “new plants & / a number of inlets” (12). The poet/speaker’s discovery is also complicated. The poet finds the subject to be too elusive and overwhelming to represent in any authentic way. The poem begins with an acknowledgement of this difficulty: “To chart this land . . . / an impossible thing . . .” (5). On one level, this description seems to suggest the futility of an activity that has historically been depicted as fundamental to the development of Canada, but, on another level, Bowering seems to be suggesting there is something courageous and heroic about undertaking this impossibility. Further, while this assertion refers to the impossibility of Vancouver’s task, it also refers to the “impossible necessity” of the writer’s undertaking, again both undercutting the importance of the writer’s words and highlighting the determination inherent in writing them anyway. The impossibility of ever representing history is made clear later when the poet states: “I keep losing sight of the subject, / Captain Vancouver seems lost in the poem” (15; emphasis in the original). This losing of the subject may be due, in part, to a confusion of subjects. The writer keeps appearing in the poem as an object – another George, at times seemingly indistinguishable from George Vancouver. In a blurring of subject and object (and past and present), the poem describes how “On entering this inlet, I George, / sail beneath a suspended bridge . . . / half the ship / invisible . . .” (14). Who is the “I”? To which George is this “I” attached? Clearly this blending of Georges also leads to a bleeding together of present and past, as the present George’s trip beneath a bridge melds into the journey of George of the past. Ultimately, the exploration of both Georges is limited by the inadequacy of representation; writing and mapping can never be wholly authentic or complete. However, this acknowledgement of the failure of the poem to represent fully or truly any of its subjects (history, the poet, the explorer, etc.) actually leads

to an opening up of its subjects to continued discourse. The last section of the poem contains a stanza with a twofold implication:

Let us say
this is as far as I, George,
have traveled,
the line
obscured still. . . . (39)

First, the story has only and can only be partially told by either George, and, second, while this may be as far as the Georges can travel, the reader (the “us” who, along with the two Georges, is doing the saying) may continue the process begun by both Georges and by the poem itself of revealing, exploring, and learning “the line.” In some ways, then, the end of the poem points to Bowering’s hope that the reader will continue the recuperation of history that has begun with the poem.

Of course, this recuperation of the past is also continually frustrated by the text. *George, Vancouver* participates in many deconstructive strategies, in particular those highlighted by Bowering in his essays touting the end of realism. The poem refuses to assign any definite meaning to George Vancouver, to the figure of the explorer, or to the act of exploration. This rejection of the poem as the medium of any ultimate meaning or message works to dispel the writer as the source of authority on his subject matter. Bowering disrupts continuity, defies chronology, and slips from subject to subject, in order to trouble the boundary between the “real” and the fictional, thereby drawing on the post-structuralist challenges to history that were emerging around the time of the poem’s conception. Bowering blends past and present, making both seem unstable or contingent and thereby suggesting that history, like the poem itself, is an open discourse and can always be

(re)written, challenged, changed. Simultaneously, the invasion of the present-positioned poet/explorer into the past points to the influence the present always has on the exploring/writing of the past and vice versa. Finally, by throwing the writer's authority into question and by rejecting the notion of art as conveyor of meaning(s) or lesson(s), Bowering is refusing to consign history to one story or one meaning. Through the failed discoveries of both subjects of the poem (both Georges), Bowering works to disappoint the reader's expectations and extra-textual assumptions. Vancouver, for one, is not the mythic explorer. For example, from Quadra's perspective, Vancouver is described not as a gallant or authoritative leader but rather as just another "young sailor / with an appetite" (35). As Frank Davey explains in "The Explorer in Western Canadian Literature," Bowering works to dispel the "false myth" of explorer "as would-be Parsifal . . ." (140). Not only is the reader forced to reconsider his or her idea of early explorers, the actual act of exploring is also challenged by the poem, or the type of exploring that is "goal-directed," at any rate (Davey 140). Vancouver is described, for instance, as missing both the Columbia and Fraser rivers (9) and, at the end, as having been able to only partially map the coast (39). Furthermore, Bowering explains that "it was no grail / he was after, he was not / sailing with that kind of purity" (35), thus effacing the romantic myth of selfless exploration. Exploration also serves as a metaphor for the writing process, as Davey argues, and the poem seems to chart (in the way Vancouver charts the coastline) Bowering's attempts to present a complete picture of history and his discovery that such a task is always impossible.

Despite Bowering's interventions in national history, *George, Vancouver* belies a certain investment in the documents and people of the past. Although on one hand the poem seems to revel in its discontinuities and disruptions, at some points it seems that Bowering is mourning Canadians' ignorance of and separation from national history: "Does anyone by

the name Vancouver live in Vancouver?" (11). At other times, George Vancouver's role as explorer renders him almost heroic, as images of him touching "the coast with fire" and "leaving / an empty sea" (12) return a sense of romance to the period of European exploration. The act of exploring history and searching for a connection between then and now through writing is also presented as courageous: "I must navigate these steep jaws, / neck craned for a sight of the bridge" (14). The writer is bravely entering history and bringing its stories back, making "the bridge" for his readers, which inevitably restores to the national past some of the authority that Bowering is trying to dissolve. Further, the notion that writing can somehow connect the past with the present reader suggests that there is a solid past to be navigated.

The excerpted historical documents play a key role in Bowering's simultaneous complicating and re-valuing of history in *George, Vancouver*. The incorporation of these documents in some ways suggests a rejection of rigid genre classification and hierarchy – lyric and official history become, not only indistinguishable, but equivalent. For example, at the middle of the book (pages 20-21) lies "A LIST OF VESSELS OF THE N.W. COAST OF AMERICA IN THE YEAR 1792." Divided by countries of origin (i.e., English, Spanish, French, etc.), this list provides a record of each ship's name and the name of the ship's captain. This dry historical data is surrounded on either side (on the other side of both pages) with the poetic chronicling of Vancouver's personal experience of charting this "N.W. COAST." On the page prior to the list of ships, Bowering explains Vancouver's "job" and links his assignment to "check on foreign squatters, especially Spanish" with the names Vancouver gave to various islands in the area. This linking of the prosaic and factual (Vancouver's national duty) with the creative act of naming, parallels the connection that Bowering is trying to draw between the historical document and the fictional one. More

specifically, these official ship names were probably arrived at much in the same arbitrary, accidental way that Vancouver arrived at the islands' names, much in the same way that Bowering, himself, came to the writing of this poem about a man with the same name as himself. The page preceding the list of vessels continues the poetic charting of Vancouver's experience. Bowering compares and contrasts the formal, intellectual, and abstract method of locating oneself – via measurements of latitude and longitude – to the concrete, palpable encounter with space: "Where they saw two huts & some / Indians curing fish, which they bought / with small trinkets" (22). Here again Bowering is trying to illuminate an inevitable blurring of the official, recorded facts with the imaginative experience, both Vancouver's and his own. The document of the vessel names and the history it represents, then, are shown as no more authoritative or real than the poetry that surrounds them, and the entire text is presented as arbitrary, whimsical, without any foundation in some ultimate truth and without any projection of some essential meaning.

While Bowering's re-framing of the excerpts certainly invoke a skeptical perspective on history, the poem also retains a distance between the documents and the lyric, a distance that marks the documents as official and significant. The longer excerpts, the list of vessel names, and an entry from Menzies' journal, are located in time by date and are each given their own pages (not entirely incorporated into the main poem). Moreover, the list of vessel names is actually located in the exact middle of the book, a suggestion of the document's central importance to the poetic context by which it is being re-framed. This importance, while it is in some ways denied, is also affirmed by its new setting. The poems on either side of the document demonstrate the continuing relevance of the past it represents. For example, Bowering writes of the B.C. Government Ferries which "move between islands," thereby linking the vessels of the document with the present-day space of the poem's conception

(19). Further, the names of the vessels in the document are mirrored in the action of Vancouver naming islands and inlets in the poem, names which Bowering makes clear have persisted into the present day: “Some of the islands are called / Quadra, Texada, Aristazabal” (19) and “This was / Jervis inlet” (22). This linking of the past with the present in a way that discloses the abiding significance of history would certainly seem to suggest a certain reverence for the documents that Bowering is also trying to disrupt.

Bowering seems to be enacting a similar paradox in his re-framing of Menzies’ October 1st journal entry. The entry is positioned directly after a poem that contains the imagined reflections of Vancouver on the triviality of Menzies’ records. Here, Bowering, through adopting the persona of Vancouver, is able to introduce the excerpt with a statement that suggests the uselessness of the accounts the men are keeping:

We’ll all go home
the long way, empty-handed
but for my charts
& his weed book. (26)

This stanza connects the expedition’s return to Britain, where their work will be commemorated, their accounts of their journey published, with the term “empty-handed.” The “but for” introducing these accounts that will become official records of history makes them seem like an afterthought, as though despite their voluminous writings, these men will still be empty-handed in a more important way. Finally, labeling Menzies’ journal a “weed book” (not even a flower book) highlights the superfluous, even trivial nature of the texts that have become the source for our own, largely unchallenged, versions of history.³⁷

³⁷ Another possibility is that Bowering is trying to signal Vancouver’s lack of foresight regarding what books or records will be important in the future.

Of course, by having Vancouver call Menzies' journal a "weed book," Bowering references the contents of the excerpt that follows and sets up an exchange between the fiction of his poem and the history that the excerpt represents. In Menzies' account these weeds are elevated to a place of social and scientific importance. Menzies labels them "valuable Plants" and demonstrates their significant national impact by remarking on their inclusion in "his Majesty's Garden" and "at Kew" (27). This excitement over the export of New World plants would seem valid within the context of the rest of Menzies' writings and within the context of the historical tradition in which these writings were written and to which these writings contributed.³⁸ However, Bowering's poetry as a new context for the excerpt challenges the value given to both Menzies' scientific activities and his records. The term "weed book" enters into a discourse with Menzies' "valuable Plants" and the very book in which he discusses them; it forces a reevaluation of not only the importance given to the plants but the importance given to this type of historical record.

Bowering is not only interested in using the poem to recuperate the excerpts; he also uses the excerpts to validate the poem. As with the list of ships' names, which I have argued points partially to the arbitrary process by which Bowering came to write *George, Vancouver*, Menzies' journal entry reads or even writes back, forcing a reconsideration of the poem itself. If Menzies' journal is, indeed, a "weed book," leaving these men virtually "empty-handed," then cannot all texts be understood in this manner? Are all records of experience merely "weed books"? Certainly the poem that follows Menzies' excerpt seems

³⁸ There is a comparison being drawn here between weeds and historical documents and the type of histories they perpetuate. Weeds are ubiquitous, hard to eradicate, endlessly multiplying; weeds also choke out the flowers; they are suffocating. The official and/or populist historical narrative that pictures history as progressive, logical, chronological, etc., is equally hardy and oppressive. This type of perception of history is almost impossible to weed out, but Bowering is here trying anyway.

to suggest such a perspective. Here, Bowering mimics eighteenth-century vocabulary and typeface in a description titled “Shape.” After a longer stanza in which the reader struggles to discern the words and features being named,³⁹ Bowering quickly summarizes the information in a plainly-worded, brief stanza:

In other words
an English explorer,
Dutchman. (28)

Coming directly after Menzies’ “weed book,” the implication of this poem seems to be that we need to consider all texts as potentially superfluous, all language as overblown, overabundant, practically inapplicable. Bowering is playing with words in the first stanza, and the last stanza represents the core of what he is trying to say. The poetry, then, is almost mimicking Menzies’ excerpt in overvaluing something that really boils down to just being a weed. Even the weed, the core of the description, is shift and indefinite – Vancouver is both English and a Dutchman. Words cannot capture him, just as words cannot capture the history that these excerpts seek to record. One point being made is that writing and representation is all play, from Menzies’ historical journals through to Bowering’s contemporary poetry. The various geographical notes incorporated into the lyric sections of the poem further this equal validation and invalidation of poetry and official documents. Bowering’s description of the landscape both in terms of latitude and longitude (22) and in poetic imagery such as “blue mountains” and rains that “nourish maidens’ bellies” (37), speaks to a rejection of the typical privileging of fact over fiction, or, for that matter, the literary privileging of imagination over fact.

³⁹ For example, describing what we assume to be Vancouver’s body, Bowering writes: “more than of a middle stature; / broad shoulders, narrow fides . . .” (28).

That said, the manner in which Bowering incorporates the historical documents seem to suggest that they cannot, in fact, be reduced to the same thing as fiction writing. The inherently different status of the documents from fictional writing highlights the tension between objective factual reality and the ways that it is mediated by interpretation. Bowering is not suggesting that the documents themselves contain this objective factual reality; however, as the source of Bowering's interpretation, which exists at two removes from the actual events and figures, the excerpts are, in a sense, more true than the poem. Or, at the very least, Bowering's inclusion of the documents that are the source of his interpretation suggests a sort of homage to them; he may be calling their objectivity and factuality into question, but he is not denying their historical importance. The manner in which Bowering re-contextualizes the excerpt from Menzies' journal also seems to indicate this validation and valuing of the historical record. The poem preceding Menzies' journal excerpt may reveal Menzies' writing as just as much the result of textual play as the poem surrounding it (both are "weed books"), but in the same introduction Bowering also mentions Menzies' lack of imagination and his rigorous note-taking, characteristics which, because the reader is told that Menzies is always recording every detail, lend credibility or, at the very least, a more serious aspect to the excerpt. Further, by describing Menzies in the act of recording, Bowering reminds us that it is this very act of original recording, and the records that it produced, that have in turn allowed the production of the poem we are now reading. In other words, the excerpts can never be entirely discounted or invalidated as they are, in fact, the source and the seed of their re-contextualization; a fact that their inclusion in this new context seems to both reflect and commemorate.

Finally, most of the excerpts include material that the reader cannot place since no historical context is provided. Menzies' journal refers to men and goings-on with which the

reader is unfamiliar as they are not mentioned elsewhere in the poem. The list of vessel and captains' names not only showcases Vancouver and, hence, the British Empire's importance to history and the poem by placing the *H.M.S. Discovery* first, it also leaves the reader longing for more information about the other ships and their voyages. The effect is not that History becomes meaningless, but quite the opposite: history begins to seem privileged – open to only the initiated.

This impression is furthered by the poems following Menzies' journal entry. Here, as I mentioned above, Bowering takes up an archaic typesetting of the small 's' appearing as 'f' in a description of Vancouver, diseases, and "places" (28-29). Because the reader is forced to decipher much of this section of the poem, the reader's separation from and unfamiliarity with the language and material of history is foregrounded. This distancing effect is counteracted by the poem's refusal to identify whether or not these excerpts are indeed real documents or Bowering's made-up contributions, and Bowering's highlighting of history through grammatical difference reminds us that we are reading these documents second-hand – that Bowering has chosen and arranged them. Bowering's reminder of his own role as mediator alerts us to the biased nature of any historical narrative; it also reminds us that the author is still the final authority on our perception of both Vancouver and himself.

Ultimately, it is clear throughout *George, Vancouver* that the documents are the "source" for the poem – that this is where Bowering found both his muse and his information. By continually referring back to Menzies' "eye's charter" and Vancouver's charts, Bowering casts the historical documents in an originary role. Though the inclusion of these documents may blur boundaries between author and subject, past and present, history and fiction, it simultaneously highlights these divisions. Moreover, the distancing between the documents and the rest of the poem imbues the excerpts, their authors, and their historical

context with a gravity that sets them against the playful troubling of them that goes on in the rest of the text. The doing and undoing of history with which the poem is consumed can perhaps best be summed up in the speaker/poet's reflection on Vancouver's published account of his journey: "An engrossing book, this Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific & round the World / but is it to be believed?" (29). This is the very complexity with which the poem is absorbed. Bowering wants us to question the same historical narrative that has enthralled him and, he hopes, us.

Burning Water: The Rejection and Recovery of National History

In the prologue of *Burning Water* there exists a similar expression of this seeming conflict between creating a narrative that simultaneously discredits capital-H History and presents the past as a viable and vital subject of interpretation. Here, the narrator describes Vancouver's mission as "the greatest navigational voyage of all time . . ." (n.p.). Certainly Bowering is half-humorous when he labels the expedition as such, and much of the novel is invested in challenging, by way of textual play and parody, the romanticism ascribed to the period of European exploration. However, in some ways, Bowering is also in earnest, a fact that is pointed to by the excitement of his author character over the research and writing of Vancouver's story. Yet the narrative that follows inevitably explodes this vision of Vancouver and his expedition as "the greatest."

The novel form allows Bowering more room than the long poem for deconstructing the prior historical positioning and narration of Vancouver's story. As will be discussed below, in *Burning Water*, Bowering is able to develop a number of postmodern ideas and strategies only gestured towards in the long poem: the confusion of past and present, subject and object; the rejection of closed historical or narrative meaning; and the disruption of the

historical document's authority or truth value in favour of a leveling of fact and fiction, of history and story through the recognition of the discursive nature of historiography.

Bowering re-frames the exploration period and its documents within a context that de-authorizes them, a gesture which points to the unreliability of his own imaginative re-vision of national history.

In his individualizing of Vancouver and his use of excerpts as specific instances of history grounded in that individual, Bowering is also working to carry out the deconstruction that Barthes states is the task of the mythologist. While this demythologizing illuminates and challenges ideology, it also represents an investment in history, at least in its specific instances, figures, and localities. While much of my examination of the novel will focus on Bowering's troubling of historiography, particularly his exposure of the excerpts as discursive shields, I think it is also important to consider the parallel, yet conflicting demythologizing project that Bowering is undertaking. In *Burning Water* the excerpts are not only discursive shields; they also become re-invested with significance as sites of the specific.

Before examining the explicit and intended movement of the novel towards deconstruction, it is necessary to explain briefly the levels of characters and authors that occur within *Burning Water*. First, there is George Vancouver, the fictionalized historical figure, whose exploration is being narrated and re-contextualized in the majority of the text. Then there is the character of the writer George Bowering, whose exploration of George Vancouver and whose struggles to capture this historical figure in prose serve as a metafictional level in the text. These two characters reflect the site of the specific that is meant to demythologize the narrative; they force the reader to focus on the individual socio-cultural context of the writer(s) of the text(s) being read. These two Georges are also a

component of the text's refusal of stable meaning as they are often confused as there is a flipping back and forth between the pronouns "he" and "I"; this confusion of pronouns is further complicated by the addition of the reader, who is referred to as "you," while simultaneously being identified with both Georges. The reader, in other words, is reading and writing (in the sense of being actively involved in the production of the text) the writer, who is reading and writing Vancouver. But there is one more layer, there is the author Bowering – who is ultimately writing all of this reading and writing. Throughout my discussion of the novel, I will refer to the three Georges as Vancouver, the George Bowering character, and the author/narrator.

The Prologue of *Burning Water* provides us with a sort of microcosm of the entire novel as it demonstrates, on a small scale, the various questions, challenges, and strategies that are developed throughout the novel itself. "Bowering's 'Prologue'," as Michael Greene expounds, "establishes a number of instructive contrasts between the ethos of traditional history and the dynamics at work in his postmodern novel . . ." (73). The first lines of the prologue point to a plethora of subjects or Georges; there is the author/narrator, a George Bowering character, George Vancouver, and King George. This proliferation of Georges becomes a confusion of "he"s and "I"s in the novel,⁴⁰ which serves to highlight the shakiness of the subject and the self. The unstable position of the author/narrator and the wavering division between who is writing and who is written is one method of diminishing both the author's and the text's authority. In addition, by joining, even entangling, the personal and the historical, Bowering undermines the convention of historical objectivity (Greene 74).

⁴⁰ Towards the end of the prologue, Bowering writes: "I feel that I cannot spend these pages saying *I* to a second person. Therefore let us say *he*, and stand together looking at them" (n.p.). Already the division between "I" (the writer), "he" (the subject), and "you" (the reader) is unclear.

The desire for historical objectivity is further diminished as the author goes on to explain his connection with history. This book, he tells us, will be “filled with history and myself” (n.p.); in other words, through writing about history in general, he is also writing about his personal history and his personal experience of history. Again, here Bowering is doing two things: one, he is drawing our attention to the specific instance of this writing, and, by so doing, alerting us also to the specific moments during which exploration narratives were written, thereby removing them from the mythic position accorded them by other narratives of Canada. Two, Bowering is reiterating the impossibility of ever writing an objective history – historical narratives are always suspect because they are always inflected with the personal. Lest we begin to think that the narrator has a privileged connection with history, Bowering goes on to display the arbitrary nature of this connection between himself and George Vancouver. The George Bowering character inserts himself into this story of history simply because of a shared name, with both the King and the explorer, and because he lives in Vancouver. As John Moss points out, the connection between past and present, between history and the story being told is based on “accidents. . . . The connections are not spatial . . . and not temporal . . . and certainly not in deference to logic” (“Himmler’s Got the King” 262). Almost immediately, then, Bowering is refusing the convention of both realist fiction and historical realism – the assumption that what happens is part of some pre-destined or causally related progression, an understanding that assumes the accessibility of fixed meaning. In fact, more than refusing, this novel, the narrator claims, is going to work to address “the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken” (n.p.). As Greene explains, “the novel endeavours to reveal what is ‘strange’ (and fanciful) about the fact that history is so often taken as (a) given” (76). Bowering, by not presenting it as a direct representation of the past, wants to make history strange for his readers, providing

enough distance to see history as a produced and producing discourse. Further, he wants the reader to recognize that history is not, in fact, a *given* – a conception of history that myth aims to create.

Indeed, in the next line Bowering clearly points to history as artifice, stating:

“Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor” (n.p.). While Bowering seems to be assigning himself the task of resurrecting Vancouver through story, this assertion also serves as a reminder that Vancouver has, of course, had many storytellers, which is why he is permanently entrenched in history. The point Bowering is making here is that history becomes history because some author(ity) chooses to tell it, and tell it in a certain way.

Moreover, Bowering is working to dispel the mythic status of Vancouver (and explorers in general) by pointing out the transformative process whereby a regular person (“a dead sailor”) becomes the vessel for ideology and meaning. On one level, Bowering is making himself a sort of anti-storyteller, working in the opposite direction of most myth-making narratives by showing the unexceptional Vancouver. On another level, though, Bowering is just this “storyteller” that he refers to, drawing out the exceptional or unique in Vancouver in order to complicate the notion of Vancouver as a representation of a period of Canada’s past that is often mythologized in nationalist histories. This mythologizing can only occur when a society turns a blind eye to its participation in the enculturation of ideology. Bowering uses the prologue to alert us to our co-production of a naturalized history: “We are making a story, after all, as we always have been, standing and speaking together to make up a history . . .” (n.p.). For the purposes of demythologizing, Bowering wants us to be aware of and work against our role as what Barthes calls “a reader of myths,” meaning one who “consumes the myth according to the very ends built into its structure” (128). Bowering wants us to become “mythologists” instead by recognizing both the typically

unacknowledged mythologizing that occurs all the time and the complexities that this mythologizing omits.

Bowering finishes the prologue by describing the novel as “a real historical fiction” (n.p.). Aligning “real historical” and “fiction” serves, as Linda Hutcheon argues, as an “affirmation of the common nature of both history and fiction: both are discourse . . .” (*Canadian Postmodern* 73). The notion that history and fiction are equally discursive certainly played a key role in the conception of *Burning Water*. In an interview, Bowering defends himself against negative responses to the book’s disruption of history by explaining that “the version of Vancouver’s life we had before my book is just a version . . .” (Norris 22). No version has ultimate authority he goes on to suggest by pointing out that the statue at City Hall, which is the main source of peoples’ visual image of Vancouver, was copied from a painting, which, as it turns out, may not have been a portrait of Vancouver at all, but of his brother (Norris 22). What Bowering is arguing, in other words, is that history is a dynamic discourse, shaped just as much by misunderstanding as understanding, as much by falsehood as truth. There can never be an absolutely accurate representation of some real past; history is only ever one version of the always elusive past.

Such a troubling of realist history is apparent not just in the prologue of *Burning Water*; throughout the text, Bowering continually disrupts conventions of objectivity, chronology, determinism, and even accuracy. Patently not a realist novel,⁴¹ the flow of the narrative in *Burning Water* keeps being interrupted by the intrusion of the writer writing. The

⁴¹ In fact, at one point the narrator gets nostalgic for the realist form, when the writer “just had to describe the setting and introduce into it the main characters” (23). However, his setting of the realist novel in “the good old days” (23) lets the reader know that this is a now defunct form of writing that can no longer be employed. There is even a further play here, as by referring to the “good old days” Bowering is also referring to the period when Vancouver was alive, a time that is exposed through the narrative as not so “good” at all.

character of George Bowering, his trip to Trieste, his research and his often failed attempts to conceptualize history all highlight the writer's lack of objectivity and, in fact, his entanglement with the subject about which he is writing. For example, towards the end of the novel, the George Bowering character is described as "straining for a comparison, or even a connection, with Nootka" and as trying to make "Captain Vancouver . . . as alone as he had made himself" (217). This vision of Bowering producing the narrative we are reading challenges not only the authority of the writer but also the authority of the history being written. The George Bowering character's investment in and manipulation of the subject he is writing about help Bowering, the author, emphasize the fact that history is never autonomous, never exists outside the act of writing it and the lives of those who write it. Complicating this conception of history, however, is the corollary implicit within it that every narrative originates from a specific instance of time, a specific place, and a specific person; an awareness of this specificity helps us challenge and deconstruct the myth, finding the ideology subsumed within it.

While Bowering is, on one level, drawing attention to the materiality of history by describing concrete instances of its production, he is also challenging the authority of history through an irreverent treatment of chronology. While he bases his historical novel on the exploration reports of Vancouver's journey, as Martin Kuester points out, "he rearranges the events so as to make his readers lose any sense of chronology based on the European calendar" (106). Bowering arranges the story in a way that defies any realist notions of chronology as well. Often the chapters seem to follow no logical progression, and it is unclear whether they follow each other in time or are just random forays into Vancouver's story. There is never the sense that the story is developing towards an ending – it is, as Bowering describes history in *A Short Sad Book*, all middle. This refusal of narrative

progress, as Moss contends, “break[s] us [the reader] free of linear time and our obsession with the present moment as the culmination of an historical sequence . . .” (“Himmler’s Got the King” 258).

By beginning the novel with the accidental connections between the Georges of the Prologue, Bowering exposes the illogic of the common conception of history as progressive. Time and again, the narrator expostulates on the arbitrariness of historical fact. Such a reflection, in fact, opens the novel: “It was June 10, 1972. It could have been June 20 for all the men who watched from the shore could care” (13). Here the narrator is undercutting the traditional importance given to dates by Western historiography. Dates, he suggests, are not important in and of themselves; like the history that they are used to delineate, dates become important only in the context of our interpretation of them. Towards the end of the novel, this matter of the importance applied to what are often arbitrary, if not incorrect, dates, is demonstrated to a far greater degree when Menzies suggests that the Los Mojos islands do not actually exist. Such a fact would mean that the Spaniards visited the Sandwich Islands before James Cook, a possibility which Vancouver states “would not be an acceptable fact in my view of history” (202). What this passage points to is both the possibility that historical “facts” are incorrect and that these errors are left unchecked because changing them would have a negative impact on particular renderings of reality. Further, Vancouver’s statement links back to one of the overarching themes of the novel – the historical is always already personal. A fact that does not fit into an individual’s or a society’s “view of history” can simply be repressed or discarded. Conversely, however, those facts that do suit a nation’s perception of itself can be developed and expanded in the narrative of its history.

Fact, as the narrator frequently underlines, is dependent upon imagination for its development. In a conversation with Vancouver, the Spanish sea captain Dionisio Galiano

expounds upon this relationship. Fact, he declares, may be “a fine basis upon which to gauge,” but the imagination is just as integral to the success of any mission: “You speak of [the imagination] as if it were the opposite of facts, as if it were perhaps the enemy of facts. . . . The imagination depends upon facts, it feeds on them in order to produce beauty or invention, or discovery” (154-55). This quotation, I would suggest, neatly encapsulates the very tension that Bowering is examining throughout this novel. Fact and imagination are equally important in the activities of exploration (both Vancouver’s exploration of the New World and Bowering’s archival exploration) and in the activities of representation (Vancouver’s maps and Bowering’s text). Imagination needs facts as a means of measuring and as a source of inspiration, but it is imagination, the sea captain argues, that leads to “discovery.” In *Burning Water*, Bowering is working to subvert the perception and treatment of fact and imagination as dichotomous; they are, he posits, intimately and eternally connected. The seeming conflict between demythologizing and de-historicizing is Bowering’s way of showing that these two activities are not mutually exclusive. The imagining of history “depends upon facts” “in order to produce beauty and invention,” and the facts are not enough on their own. Facts need imagination if they are to ever reveal anything “engrossing” or important about history.

Deconstruction and Reconstruction: Vancouver and His Writing Re-contextualized

At the centre of Bowering’s grappling with this problem of balancing fact and imagination are the excerpts from the official documents of Vancouver’s exploration. As argued above, these excerpts act as a kind of enticement, lulling the reader into the passive position assumed by the reader of realism. On one hand, the excerpts seem to signal the real, the specific that is needed for the process of demythologizing that Bowering seems to be

undertaking here. However, because the framing text of the novel also works to discount any sense of authority or stability, the official documents and their version of history are, at other times, rendered as questionable as the surrounding text.

One way Bowering destabilizes the historical status of the documents is by citing not only Vancouver's and Menzies' journals, but a variety of literary sources. As Bowering's acknowledgements make clear, *Burning Water* relies not purely on historical sources but on such diverse literary sources as Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The novel itself is rife with allusions to other literary figures and texts. The third chapter, for example, focuses on William Blake's life and the negative reaction his work received from King George the Third (one of the novel's Georges). Describing Blake's process of creation, his struggle to represent the human form, Bowering pleads with the reader to avoid George the Third's reaction of "Take them away!" (Greene 79).

On a grander scale, the novel's recurrent invocation of facts, imagination, and fancy is a reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817). This allusion to Coleridge is later expanded with Menzies' callous shooting of an albatross (86-87), which, by alluding to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, adapts and re-writes what can be seen as a master narrative (Kuester 117). Moreover, as Martin Kuester explains, the novel's title may be a reference to lines from the same poem that describe tropical waters as "burnt green, and blue and white" (l. 130) and the sea as "burnt away" (l. 270) (117). Bowering's re-visioning is further complicated by the fact that these same lines by Coleridge were inspired by James Cook's journals (Kuester 117), so Coleridge is reframing Cook, who is re-framed by Vancouver, who is re-framed by Bowering in part by reframing Coleridge. What this infinite reframing suggests is both the impossibility of locating any originary authority for any

narrative and the openness of all discourse, be it literary or historical. Finally, it suggests that the literary (Coleridge, Bowering) and the historical (Vancouver, Cook) are, as products and producers of discourse, indistinguishable and inseparable. As Carla Visser argues,

“Bowering’s use of both ‘historical’ and literary intertexts . . . stresses the fact that all sources from which we may learn historical facts are textual . . . even ‘authentic’ historical documents are products of a human mind and its language, not of reality itself” (100).

In other words, Bowering refuses to let the exploration document stand as a direct representation of any authentic or true history. While the document may, on one hand, prove that Bowering’s subject is indeed a historical one, on the other, “the document itself is no more than another instance of writing, and is not exempt from its own context . . .” (Scobie 122). Through this new context, which focuses on and enacts the process of melding fiction with fact, Bowering is trying to suggest that the excerpted documents are no more objective or real than the literature that he both alludes to and produces. However, as Scobie suggests, the document is never “exempt from its own context,” so these excerpts bring with them into this fictional (con)text the historical narrative and the actual history that they represent, the context from which they can never be divorced.

Some critics have seen this re-contextualizing of Vancouver’s and Menzies’ journals as the postmodern trick *par excellence*. Moss, for instance, argues that, through reading the rest of the blatant fakery in Bowering’s narrative, the reader has become “so wary . . . of language that even hints at historicity that [the] excerpts . . . seem a sham, a narrative trick . . .” (“Himmler’s Got the King” 258). The new context for these historical documents, in other words, works to almost unwrite their historicity. Certainly in *Burning Water* the excerpts will unavoidably be read against an avowedly fictional frame narrative, with the document’s

authority weakened by this entanglement. Because it becomes confused with and contradicted by the fictional frame, the veracity of the document is challenged almost to the point of disintegration. Simultaneously, however, the document is reinforced, becoming more real in comparison with the often blatantly fantastical text surrounding it. Other critics, then, have read Bowering's fiction as a development of the documents' untold stories. The conflict between Vancouver and Menzies, the Indians' reactions to the Europeans' arrival, and life on board the *Discovery*, Lars Jensen contends, are "hinted at in the journals, but effectively censored by the journalists themselves or their editors . . ." (111). *Burning Water* makes history "intriguing" by developing these sub-narratives (Jensen 111).

Critics have thus interpreted the documents in *Burning Water* as inauthentic or as compensating for the absent elements of the historical "story." I would like to build on their assessment by suggesting that the excerpts, in fact, lie at the centre of the novel; it is the history or story of the excerpts that the rest of the novel is working to deconstruct and, perhaps problematically, reconstruct. The excerpts are from official records of Canada's exploration period; they represent not only the type of colonialist narrative that Bowering is writing against, but also the type of historiography that *Burning Water* is troubling. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault criticizes this type of historiography for its over-reliance on documents that it treats as verifiable fact. The presence of the documents in the text reminds the reader of the ways Canadian historiographers have treated historical records in this manner. The excerpts lull the reader with their familiarity, but the fiction that frames the excerpts forces the reader into a position of alienation from these documents and their historicity. Indeed, the new context exposes and disrupts the document's old context.

Re-framed, the documents are not just alienated from national history; they are also used to demythologize the type of national ideology they have been used to represent. These two sometimes symbiotic and sometimes conflicting purposes can be seen, for instance, when Bowering imagines Menzies and Vancouver in the act of writing in their journals. For example, Bowering describes Menzies recording his observations of a fight between Vancouver's crew and that of a Spanish vessel (54). Bowering is, on one hand, reminding us that his source is historical, but he is also reminding the reader that this historical source is produced, much in the way he has produced the novel we are reading. We have then a sort of *mise en abyme* in which Bowering writes Bowering writing who writes his characters writing whose writing we are also reading. This *mise en abyme* effect alerts us, once again, to the fact that discourse is continually added to and that it has no definitive origin or end. At the same time, however, by identifying the writers of this discourse, Bowering refuses to allow it to become representative or emblematic of anything other than itself.

Bowering adds to the discourse in part, by turning an ironic eye on the documents and their pretensions to authority. An excerpt from Menzies' journal that praises the "persevering intrepidity & manly steadiness" of the surveyors on the expedition is rendered humorous by the narrator's observation that "In the eighteenth century they were fond of nouns and Latinate abstractions" (101), an observation that exposes the excerpt preceding it as pompous, even ridiculous. Menzies' glorifying of naval life is undercut by the narrator's continuing reflections on Menzies' distaste for its "ceremonial aspects" (101). The narrator is suggesting here that we cannot trust what these historical records tell us, that they are just as much a lie as the narrative surrounding them. Bowering describes the tradition of firing guns each time a ship met up with another ship, and quotes Menzies' scornful remark that this purposeless tradition had led to such a shortage of ammunition that the expedition could not

defend themselves “from the treacherous Indians” and were “obliged to get supplies . . . from both the Spaniards and the Traders . . .” (102). The narrator’s comment following this quote – “The natives felt about fireworks the way the Admiralty felt about gold and silver” – works to topple the hierarchy that Menzies’ complaint creates, suggesting a leveling of the Europeans and the supposedly “savage Indians.” Both the expedition members and the Indians like shiny things and are pushed to violence because of them. By showing Menzies’ myopic vision, Bowering is challenging his status as an objective recorder of history. In this section of the novel, the text re-framing the excerpts undercuts Menzies’ record of the voyage as official by suggesting that Menzies’ words cannot be trusted, by overturning his authority, and by poking fun at his pretentious writing style. In other words, this version of history is very much the product of its socio-cultural context, symbolized by Bowering’s reference to the contemporary preference for “Latinate abstractions.” Of course, by referencing a socio-cultural context in order to indicate the written-ness of History, Bowering is also suggesting a historical reality, thereby highlighting the paradox that resides at the heart of his exploration of historiography. Bowering wants to challenge the idea of a real history, but he also wants to demythologize national narratives; in order to do both he has to invoke the very reading of history as specific and concrete (as material) that he is undercutting, thereby highlighting that “impossible necessity” that lies at the center of any representation of history.

Following this attack on official history is the longest excerpt of the book, almost an entire letter that the historical Vancouver wrote to Admiral Stephens. Bowering, of course, has deliberately placed this letter after his deconstruction of Menzies’ excerpt and far enough into the novel that the reader cannot help but approach it critically. The new context in which the excerpt is placed both exposes and disrupts its original context. The letter describes the

“dreary” and “inhospitable” land explored and the crew’s pleasant and dangerous interactions with the Indians. Vancouver also explains the “Chart” or map that he has included in an attempt to locate the events he is detailing, thereby making them more concrete (103). This “Chart” allows Vancouver to refer to various experiences by means of geographical measurements. For example, Vancouver recounts his near fatal encounter with Indians: “on the 12th of August last at Escape Point, near Traitor’s Cove, in lat: 55° 37’ & Longde 228° 30’ where myself, accompanied by Mr. Puget, in the pinnance, on a very long excursion, nearly had, & I believe inevitably would have been cut off, and everyone murdered . . .” (104-05). Bowering wants his reader to question the authenticity of all the information contained in the letter, from the seemingly innocuous acts of measuring and charting to the characterizations of the “Indians” as murderous savages. We cannot take this letter as an objective historical account; because of the textual play in the framing narrative, Vancouver’s attempts to validate his narrative with specific dates and details seem suspicious. Vancouver is trying to represent the outrageous and dramatic story of his near-murder in a way that makes it seem factual and real. However, because Bowering has all along been showcasing the writing of these journals, even without the direct commentary that surrounds other excerpts within the novel, the reader is aware of Vancouver’s strategies, which, in turn, make the reader question whether this story has any more authority than the fiction that is surrounding it.

In fact, the novel could be read as suggesting that Vancouver’s version has even less authority than Bowering’s, a fact that Bowering highlights through metafictional reminders of his activities of selecting, arranging, and interpreting Vancouver’s writing. Bowering, for instance, ensures that we read the final lines of the letter ironically by cutting Vancouver off mid-sentence. While in the original document Vancouver claims to have written “in a

cursory manner” in order to convey to “future visitors” the “advantages and disadvantages” of the country, Bowering’s interruption of the letter, signaled in the novel by an incomplete sentence trailing off to ellipses, suggests that Bowering, the author, has grown impatient. The letter is not at all cursory; like Menzies’ log entries it is full of “abstractions.” By editing the letter thus, Bowering also discounts Vancouver’s offer of “information” to “future visitors.” For these future visitors, the Canadians reading the novel, Vancouver’s official information has little relevance compared to the fictional narrative that surrounds it. Indeed, this excerpt is followed by the George Bowering character’s reflections on the speed of present-day travelling (106), reflections that contain none of the specific details of Vancouver’s letter, but are equally discursive and far more cursory.

As Kuester suggests, by this point “Bowering’s parodic flaunting” of official historical records “would have destroyed any faith that the reader might have had in historical accuracy . . .” (119). This unsettling of faith in history, however, returns Bowering to a similar paradox upon which *George, Vancouver* rests. As part of this “parodic flaunting” of “real” historical documents, Bowering sometimes has to highlight the documents as documents in order to then trouble their authority. For example, introducing a quotation from Vancouver’s journal, Bowering writes: “This is what Vancouver had to say about the former Cook’s River . . .” (64). On one hand, this type of introduction suggests that “what Vancouver had to say” is only one opinion, one version and not the ultimate truth that some historic accounts make documents out to be. On the other hand, it sets the excerpt off, makes it unique from the fictional text surrounding it, and reminds the reader that it is indeed “what Vancouver had to say” about everything that is the source for the novel he or she is reading.

If we return to the two documents that I have just discussed with an eye to their role in this demythologizing, other aspects of the excerpts and the framing texts come to the

foreground. For instance, the fictional text surrounding the excerpt from Menzies' journal refuses any details that might help the reader to actually ground the words in a concrete instance of time. The narrator only lets us know that Menzies "wrote this of the boats and the men he was continuously with" (101) but gives us no indication of what prompted this particular observation, of where it appears in Menzies' journal, of when during the journey he wrote it. Further, the fact that Bowering follows the excerpt with a comment that seems to be mocking and undercutting the authority of Menzies' observations preempts the possibility that the reader might take this version of history seriously. However, at the same time, the narrator's comment about the socio-cultural context of the eighteenth century – the type of language that was preferred – also places the excerpt in a material history. The other details that follow the excerpt also reattach it to a specific time and place. Here the narrator provides us with a bit more information about Menzies and the context that surrounded the writing of this excerpt. Following the observation that Menzies was not overly fond of military ceremonies, the narrator tells us that "[w]hile they were ensconced in the harbour of Nootka, they observed the visits of many foreign vessels. Every time a Spanish, Russian, American, even French ship neared the post and fired fourteen or twenty-one guns, the *Discovery* would reply with fourteen or twenty-one of her own, till the air was thick with mired smoke and mist" (102). Appearing between the two excerpts, this text is filled with the type of specifics that disallow the mythologizing of Menzies or his journal, the process whereby Menzies might stand as the essence of the country's foundation or discovery. The narrator tells us where, specifically, the expedition was staying when Menzies was writing these excerpts – "in the harbour of the Nootka." We are given the names of other countries whose ships the expedition encountered; we are even given concrete numbers to allow us to picture the

military ceremony that Menzies' disapproved of, and, finally, the narrator provides us with a description that allows us to visualize the air surrounding the boats following this ceremony.

These details in the fictional text draw our attention back to the excerpts where we find further details that help ground this story in a concrete historical moment. For instance, we learn that their rifles required powder; we learn that the British traded with the Spanish; we learn what type of activity and level of strength was involved in operating the smaller boats sent off from the *Discovery* and the *Chatham* to survey the coastlines. The fact that the letter from Vancouver, the longest excerpt in the novel, follows this exercise in specificity is no coincidence. We are meant to bring to this letter not only an uncertainty of its authenticity and an irreverence towards its authority, but also an appreciation and awareness of its particularities and peculiarities. Although the measurements of latitude and longitude (Vancouver supplies five different measurements) could be read as Vancouver's attempts to make the imperial empirical, they also contain the potential to help demythologize the exploration period. This data, as well as the dates that Vancouver mentions ("15th of June last," "12th of August last," and "3rd of September"),⁴² locate the related events in space and time.

The record of the events themselves also foreground the specific. For one thing, Vancouver mentions several people and places by name: Mr. Puget, Mr. Johnstone, Cape Caamano, Traitor's Cove, John Carter, Desolation Sound, etc. Moreover, details such as the number of Indians that attacked the men ("two hundred & fifty) and the weapons the expedition fired ("some musquets, & a swivel loaded with grape-shot") seem to ground the

⁴² The inclusion of this date could be juxtaposed with the beginning of the novel where Bowering suggests that things such as dates or chronology are irrelevant, that history is just a series of random events that could happen anywhere, any time.

excerpt in the real. This grounding in the real, which is accompanied by the awareness of a particular man, at a particular time, in a particular place writing this document, works to demythologize the image of the violent, savage Indian contained within the excerpt. Because Vancouver (unwittingly) and Bowering (intentionally) will not let us forget who this representation is coming from, it is impossible for us to just accept it the way that Barthes suggests a “reader” of myths might. The excerpt forces us to become “mythologists.” As mythologists we are also led to question another ideology that exists outside these journals but is imposed upon them in the production of the nation as the outcome of historical progress and predestination. We know that these are the words of one of Canada’s explorers/discoverers; often in mainstream Canadian culture these documents signify, even embody the founding of the country. However, in *Burning Water*, because of the fictional text surrounding them, we cannot simply fill the “form” with the requisite meaning/concept. Vancouver’s description of the mapping of this country as an “irksome, tedious, & laborious task,” for instance, challenges the importance ascribed to the discovery of Canada, making it seem instead like just another boring job. Moreover, Vancouver’s personality, rounded out by the surrounding fictional text, is indelibly inscribed in this letter, which means the letter itself cannot be seen as a symbol or repository of any preeminent concept. It is just a letter, one letter; it is not an exemplar of imperialism, nor is its writer.

This is not to say that the excerpts do not contain any important information. In fact, at times they seem to perform a sort of pedagogical function; however, while this pedagogical function can be aligned with Bhabha’s description of the production of nation, Bowering is working to illuminate and deconstruct the ideology implicit in the idea of nation or, at the very least, in the idea of Canada. Disrupting one of Canada’s nationalist myths and, thereby, disrupting the country’s overarching mythology, Bowering foregrounds the very

details and particularities that are effaced in the process of making history “natural.” By forcing us into a direct engagement with the materiality of history, he is refusing to allow Vancouver or his expedition to stand for anything other than itself. Vancouver is an individual, his writing is singular, and by ensuring that his readers recognize this, Bowering is also ensuring that Vancouver and his words cannot be perceived or conceived as the essence of any national identity or ideology. *Burning Water*, then, while it works to de-historicize also works to re-historicize in order to demythologize. The text’s rejection of History is coupled with a surprisingly materialist view of the past, which subverts the grand narratives of history and nation in favour of the individual story which is not meant to represent anything except itself.

Part of this demythologizing project is Bowering’s psychological portrait of Vancouver, a portrait that he creates in order to position his story not in some mythic past but rather in a specific place and time with a main character who is not an epic hero, but an ordinary man. Vancouver’s flaws, the narrator explains, are complex and myriad. Herb Wyile contends, in *Speculative Fictions*, that Bowering “sees [Vancouver] as a potentially creative figure with a stultifying rationalist fixation and a thwarted desire to be the stereotypical colonial hero, a trajectory that . . . brings about his demise” (48). Certainly Bowering’s addition of Vancouver’s love affair with the Spanish sea-captain Quadra to the official history seems to support this notion of repressed creativity. Early in the novel, after a scene in which Quadra and Vancouver are talking in bed, Bowering has Vancouver reflecting on “how much he had given for pride and history, and how little they were going to be able to give him back now” (74). Vancouver is depicted as aware of his goal to be part of history, and also aware of its failings. Further, by then having Vancouver think about “his log and the absence of his greatest discovery in those pages,” Bowering constructs a

Vancouver whose experience includes a degree of emotional complexity and self-awareness, neither of which are present in the mythology of exploration. When Vancouver receives word of Quadra's death at the end of the novel, he takes to his bed and remains there. Soon after he learns that he has been forgotten by his superiors overseas, news that he deals with by laughing hysterically and then ordering various sailors flogged for a few days, although always halting "the proceedings after a few lashings" (235). Such a reaction epitomizes Vancouver's inability to express himself and his ineffectual means of trying to cope with this defect. We can assume that Vancouver's inability to express himself has led to an absence in the records which has, in turn, created a space for the imposition of ideology rendering Vancouver (and other explorers who are equally closed-lipped in their journals) mythic. This absence of personality is what Bowering is working to fill out in order to counteract the use of the explorer as an empty receptacle for ideology.

The end of *Burning Water* contains a far greater alteration of the facts of history than the romance between Quadra and Vancouver. Instead of the lackluster death that official records and Bowering's long poem recount (Vancouver dying in England of complications from consumption or hyperthyroidism many years after the expedition), the Vancouver of *Burning Water* meets a far more dramatic demise. Bowering has the antagonism between Vancouver and Menzies culminate in Menzies' murder of Vancouver. Menzies shoots Vancouver, and Vancouver, who holds onto the railing of the ship in pain, is lifted by a gust of wind overboard and into the sea. Kuester argues that this final and monumental alteration of history "destroys the historiographic aspirations of the book" and "illustrates that history has been turned into fiction" (120-21). Through disrupting and revising the historical accounts of Vancouver's expedition, Bowering can free both himself and his characters from "historical strictures" (Kröller 89). As discussed above, in some ways this freedom

deconstructs realist, objective historiography and challenges the authority and meaning which typically produce and are produced by the narration of the past. But what history “has been turned into” complicates the challenge to the official version contained in Vancouver’s journals and in the history books that Bowering is working to disrupt. Glenn Deer argues in his discussion of the rhetoric hidden within the novel that “Bowering’s postmodern playfulness and ideological innocence . . . are constantly undermined by a psychological probing of Vancouver . . .” (364). Deer is here picking up on an important conflict in the text; this “psychological probing of Vancouver” does seem to complicate the text’s postmodern or post-structuralist treatment of history.

Bowering’s decision to hold these two different accounts of historical authority in suspension works to highlight the ideological nature of all historical narratives. In order to demythologize the legend of Vancouver, Bowering must reinvent Vancouver as less a mythic hero than an ordinary man. We can see this when we look at the manner in which the narrator interprets the excerpts for us. Whenever Bowering mentions Vancouver’s journals it is in order to deepen our perception of this figure. For instance, Bowering refers to a “ribald passage” involving Juan de Fuca, John Meares, and Miguel Fuentes, all of whom falsely claimed to have found the Strait of Anian: “A rather fanciful and comical picture for all its unacceptable coarseness. It shows that George Vancouver . . . was not always a severely straightlaced man” (52-53). Not only is Bowering interested in developing Vancouver’s individuality by giving him a sense of humour, Vancouver’s entries are also re-framed in a way that illuminates the specific time and world in which he was living. As Jensen points out, one of Bowering’s concerns in the novel is “Vancouver’s inability to step out of Cook’s shadow” and the fact that he is “forced to spend season after season discounting myths which

have arisen because of Cook's and others' unsubstantiated conclusions . . ." (113).⁴³ While the crude journal entry about de Fuca, Meares, and Fuentes reveals bitter cynicism about the incompetence of previous explorers, thereby revealing Vancouver's ordinariness through his pettiness, Vancouver's entry on Cook's River is used by Bowering to demonstrate the heartbreak that Vancouver was enduring. The excerpt itself is fairly bland and only contains hints of emotion: "If Cook had dedicated one more day to its [Cook's River's] further examination, he would have spared the theoretical navigators the task of ingeniously ascribing to this arm of the ocean a channel, through which a Northwest passage . . . might ultimately be discovered" (64). The narration surrounding and re-contextualizing the excerpt, however, provides depth of feeling to Vancouver's experience and highlights the tragic nature of the anti-discovery:

That night Vancouver was very quiet at dinner. . . . The young officers did not say a word or move in their chairs when Vancouver picked up the bowl that held his sauerkraut and carried it with him through a banging door to the deck, and threw it as far as his weakened body would permit. (64-65)

Vancouver's silence at dinner mimics the silencing that Bowering is suggesting occurred in the official accounts of the expedition. Also the silence here is meant to refer to the silence that surrounds the making of mythology – the stories that go untold in order to forward a particular ideology.⁴⁴ Further, Vancouver praises sauerkraut throughout the novel for its medicinal properties, trying to force it upon his sailors despite their disgust, and even using it

⁴³ Note Bowering's use of the term "myth" here. Vancouver can, in some ways, also be seen as a mythologist. Contained in his own text is a process of de-mythologizing akin to that of Bowering's narrative.

⁴⁴ Remember Barthes' discussion of the "young Negro" on the cover of the French magazine and how, in order for the image to stand as a representative of French imperialism, the biography of the man had to be put "in parentheses" (116-18).

in an almost ceremonial manner at one point.⁴⁵ By having Vancouver throw the sauerkraut overboard, Bowering is signaling a moment of revelation – Vancouver is acknowledging the inevitable failure of both his means and his ends. No matter how much sauerkraut Vancouver might eat, his body is still too “weakened” and limited for its purposes, just as no matter how much Vancouver may explore and chart the land, all that is left to discover are the errors of his predecessors.

The frustration and despair of anti-discovery is made even worse by Vancouver’s suspicion that no one, not even the king who has sent him on this mission, even cares about his progress. Towards the end of the novel, an excerpt from Vancouver’s notes is framed by a scene in which Vancouver wonders if he is mad and another in which he rages against “the great naval thinkers” who do not do any exploring themselves, who only “dust their wigs and hang their overcoats in the closets at Whitehall!” (239). It is a short excerpt and only states: “It seems that the Admiralty has forgotten all about the king’s little commission in the North Pacific” (238). In the novel, however, the excerpt shows Vancouver being “haunted” by his encounter with Captain Pitt of the *Daedalus*, who brings him none of the news or commands he was expecting from the king (235). Again Bowering is suggesting that Vancouver wanted his work to be remembered, wanted to be part of history, but foresaw instead only failure and omission. Of course, Bowering is in some ways enacting this very failure to be transformed into history by creating an anti-mythic Vancouver highlighting the unexceptional nature of this man – this is the type of figure we build national mythology around?

⁴⁵ When a lieutenant on the ship comments on the smell of the sauerkraut, Vancouver describes making the food as “religious preparation for the coming voyage,” as lighting a candle to his saint, and as “the Communion I celebrate in the . . . expectation that I will be safe in the companionship of the facts . . .” (56).

Of course, the questioning of Canadian mythology that pervades the book is accompanied by the equally critical eye that Bowering turns upon himself. He is not claiming here to have any of the answers about how to represent history truthfully. In fact, by including himself as a character within the novel, Bowering is signalling his awareness of his own lack of objectivity; like Vancouver, the Bowering character is limited, a “ne plus ultra.” The Bowering character tries to envision the length of the *H.M.S. Discovery* (34) or the type of hat that Vancouver wore (192). He tries to draw parallels between Vancouver’s voyage and his own trip via airplane to and from Trieste. While Vancouver is trapped by his imperial position, the Bowering character is trapped by the limitations of his own fiction. The author’s initially stated goal of writing the “greatest navigational voyage of all time” (n.p.) is countered by the frustrations and challenges the Bowering character faces throughout the book, leading to his eventual silencing at the novel’s completion. This double silencing of Vancouver and Bowering works to ensure that neither become the mouthpiece of mythology.

Bowering’s Representational Paradox and Problem

On one hand, Bowering’s poststructuralist treatment of history seems to suggest that we should forget about ever accessing any real or concrete singular version of history; on the other hand, the movement to demythologize the explorer, exploration, and even nation itself forces us into a direct confrontation with the materiality of history both in the persona of Vancouver and in his writing. Certainly Bowering’s interrogations of transcendent truth and attempts at demythologization work to explode grand narratives and overarching ideological systems, but they approach this task from almost opposite tacks. Throughout the novel Bowering tries to efface any sense of a real history, but he is also creating a complex psychological portrait of an individual, using Vancouver’s own words as a site of specificity

in order to unpack the mythology surrounding his role as an explorer. When we encounter the First Nations that Vancouver himself encountered, however, the demythologizing component of Bowering's project seems to fall away. These First Nations are not individuals; their specific words or ideas are not recorded; instead they are referred to as "first Indian," "second Indian," etc. Although Bowering is undoubtedly trying to mimic the perception of the explorers, poking fun at their Eurocentric worldview, because he never tries to demythologize these "Indians" himself by offering evidence of the specific or local, the First Nations characters in this book remain tools, useful only in what they reveal about the explorers and about Bowering himself.

Given the many instances in the novel where Bowering seems to be gesturing towards a post-colonial politics, it could be argued that *Burning Water* exists in a sort of tension between wholly discounting history and recuperating history in order to redeem or at least acknowledge the violence and exploitation that lies at the root of Canada's "discovery" and settlement. Bowering, at times, is invested in a rejection of any attempt to represent the real past, but he is also invested, at other times, in revealing the past for what it really was. The narrator himself highlights this paradox, addressing the audience while he contemplates the purpose of the text that he is writing: "If the truth be known, and of course we are in a position to know it, or whatever purchase one makes on the truth in a work of imagination, if that is what we are engaged in, that being the entire issue we test here" (84). Here Bowering self-reflexively ponders the problem of getting at the truth, suggesting, on one hand, that it can be known, while on the other hand suggesting that the truth is relative and elusive. The narrative is also subsumed in this contradiction; the question of whether or not this is "a work of imagination" and the connection this possibility has to the truth is identified here as the central purpose of the text itself.

So what, we might ask, does Bowering want for/from this novel? It seems he wants *Burning Water* to deny the possibility of ever representing the truth about history (or anything else for that matter), but also to somehow “discover” the truth that lies behind the vicissitudes of historiography through a narrative that balances fact and imagination by incorporating the real words of a real man into a fanciful context. This paradox, for the most part, conveys the challenges of representing history in a clever and intriguing manner. However, one of the underlying implications of Bowering’s approach is the problematic way in which the novel attempts to deal with issues involving the treatment of Canada’s First Peoples by the explorers and by subsequent generations of White Canadians. On several occasions Bowering imagines conversations between his “Indian” characters. These “Indian” characters invariably speak in contemporary language, using Anglo-Canadian slang terms and speech patterns. For instance, the opening scene of the novel has two Indians watching the boats of Vancouver approaching their coastline. We are privy to their dialogue and to their inner thoughts about each other, and Bowering has them using words and phrases such as “lifeguard” and “[l]ittle prick” (16). Clearly by having these Indians speak and think in the modern, White idiom, Bowering is trying to signal the forced assimilation of these people that follows the invasion of these Europeans. The other argument Bowering is making is in line with Terry Goldie’s in *Fear and Temptation*. Bowering, himself a White writer, is explicitly acknowledging the fact that White culture has and probably always will recreate the Aboriginal in its own image. There can never be a true representation of the Aboriginal, Bowering seems to be suggesting, so why even try? Of course, this disavowal of not just history but materiality in general is part of Bowering’s overarching disruptive treatment of imperial/colonial ideology, which, by signaling the impossibility of ever getting at the truth

of the First Nations historical experience and contemporary existence, ends up muddying the post-colonial message implicit in both the Indians' language and in what they are saying.

This effect is even more apparent later in the book when Menzies begins questioning two "Red Men" about whether Indians do, indeed, eat people: "I'm not accusing you now, you understand. It is my vocation to collect knowledge for my people, and this I do without blaming anyone for anything" (112). Bowering is obviously referencing the early depictions of the Aboriginal as savage and cannibalistic, a misunderstanding that produced (and was produced by) the European desire to conquer and civilize these people at the same time as claiming and cultivating their land. Also Menzies' description of himself as an objective collector of "knowledge" is belied by his obviously morbid fascination with this idea of cannibalistic savages. Initially the "Indians" refute Menzies' belief, but then seeing that he will not let them alone until they confirm what he imagines he knows (not that he or any other European will truly let them alone from this period in history on), they offer some vague stories and rumours about "ancient people eating societ[ies]" (112). The crux of this dialogue, however, comes when Menzies asks his final question: "I would like to know for what purpose these elusive people-eaters eat people" (113), and the "first Indian" responds: "I cannot be dead certain, but I believe I remember hearing that one person would eat a second person in order to consume that second person's imagination" (113). Although this entire conversation can be seen as a reference to the consumption of Native peoples and their culture (their "imagination") by the European "people-eaters," it also connects back to Vancouver himself and the various discussions and concerns throughout the text regarding Vancouver's lack of imagination.

While throughout *Burning Water* Bowering seems to be trying to get close to the specifics of Vancouver (and also himself), the First Nations people continually elude him.

Bowering seems to be able to conjure his version of Vancouver through the records Vancouver has left behind, but the Nootka are always already invisible. As we are told when Menzies turns to gain a final glimpse of the Indians, “They were gone from his sight, and so why think about them more” (113). The observation that links this invisibility of the First Nations with the decision to not think about them could be read as Bowering’s comment on the general treatment of these people throughout history. However, he does little himself to rectify this situation; unlike the treatment of Vancouver, there is no sustained attempt to demythologize the First Nations people through depicting them as individuals. Bowering, in fact, continually seems to suggest that it’s a hopeless task.

Because Bowering has been so playfully meta-textual throughout the novel, readers end up in a kind of double-bind. Yes, we can only see Aboriginal people through the lens of our own ideology, but if that is the case, then the postmodern treatment of history and nation in the text acts as another instance of this. While Bowering draws our attention to the written-ness of Vancouver’s journals by re-framing the excerpts in a manner such as the one discussed above, this written-ness is not only meant to deconstruct history; it is also meant to help us recognize the specificity of both texts by confronting us with the individuals who wrote them. Bowering, for obvious reasons, is unable to do this with the First Nations people, so, while Vancouver appears as a complex individual, the First Nations characters are not representative of any material history; they are receptacles of Bowering’s own voice and his postmodern perspective of history.

But then an evaluation of national history and its multiple proponents is what Bowering is writing against, after all. *Burning Water* is focused not on Canada’s past as a whole because that sort of focus would undermine both the project of deconstructing the idea of historiography in general and the project of demythologizing the nation. As I argued at the

outset of this chapter, Bowering is here engaged in a sort of anti-nationalist narrative. The destabilizing of the authority and authenticity of history's documents and figures is an obvious component of Bowering's disruption of the idea of Canada as a product of a pre-destined and progressive development. Bowering's focus on the specifics of history, seen in particular through his focus on the excerpts and Vancouver's personality, also works to challenge the notion of a unified and naturalized Canada by refusing the type of mythology necessary for such an understanding of nation. Ultimately, holding the concepts of fact and imagination in tension throughout the novel allows Bowering to present Vancouver's "navigational voyage" as elusive and impossible to represent but also as material and singular, a paradoxical understanding of history that confounds nationalist ideology.

Chapter 3 – Rudy Wiebe: Making the Strange Unstrange

In his 1988 collection of critical essays, *Imaginary Hand*, George Bowering reads Rudy Wiebe's short story "Where is the Voice Coming From?" in a way that may say more about his own authorial preferences than Wiebe's. Wiebe and Murray Bail (an Australian writer) are described as reaching "their erasers back to the late nineteenth-century" and as writing "in the newly cleared space with post-historical irony" (53). While Bowering's historical fiction is engaged in this attempt to disrupt the historical records and ironize the project of historiography itself, his interpretation of "post-colonial culture" as "an obvious agent of deconstruction" confuses the means and ends of postmodern and post-colonial texts (53). As my previous chapter demonstrates, Bowering relies heavily on postmodern strategies such as fragmentation, genre blurring, and metafiction in his attempts to create historical literature that engages with the problem of historical recoverability. His assessment of Wiebe and post-colonial literature in general is interesting as it points to some critical differences between Bowering's and Wiebe's historical fiction, namely that Bowering is engaged in a playful deconstruction of history and national mythology while Wiebe is troubling both in order to create a new, more ethically grounded historical national narrative. Like Bowering, Wiebe is interested in using historical documents to complicate national mythology, although the conclusion Wiebe reaches through such specifics is markedly different from that suggested by Bowering's work.

Bowering makes two key statements in his article that nicely summarize the struggle that both his postmodernist and Wiebe's more post-colonialist approach face when representing history and the paradox engendered by the struggle to access the past. On the one hand, Bowering ties the "preoccupation with national identity" in historical fiction to the desire to "escape from colonial status in our histories, or *vice versa*" (53). In other words, he

reads these texts as trying to write themselves out of their colonial past (and a colonial mentality in the present) through revising history and as trying to “escape” history by writing themselves out of colonialism. At the end of the article, Bowering makes the second, equally pertinent point that through interrogating and rewriting national history instead of simply accepting it, authors are learning and exercising their “power to make history” (60). Writing the exploration-documentary, then, constitutes both an “escape” from and a (re)making of history. What is intriguing are the different strategies each author employs to “escape” history and the kinds of history these strategies seek to create.

This chapter will argue that Wiebe’s “escape” is enacted by giving voice to the marginalized and silenced figures of our national past, and that, through this re-visioning of Canada’s history, Wiebe uses his “power” to “make” a history that is hopeful, even affirmative in its vision of a pluralist Canada. In the novel *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994), Wiebe revises the narrative of the first overland Franklin expedition (1819-1822), relying on historical sources such as Franklin’s *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1819, 20, 21, 22* (1823) and the published accounts of other officers on the expedition. The expedition’s purpose was to arrive at the mouth of the Coppermine River via land and map the eastern Arctic coast. Along the way the men were to take detailed notes on the continent’s weather, geography, natural life, minerals, etc. The expedition met many obstacles and, in the end, was a failure due to the officers getting trapped too far north during the winter. Nine voyageurs on the expedition died, along with the Inuit translator, and Robert Hood, one of Franklin’s officers. *A Discovery of Strangers*, while it relies on European source material, also makes use of scholarly research on the Dene (the First Nations people who assisted and eventually rescued the remaining members of the expedition) as well as collections of Dene stories. In so doing, Wiebe gestures towards the possibility of reaching

beyond the document. Wiebe, therefore, is able to revisit the official accounts of the journey from the perspective not just of Franklin's officers but also of the Dene whose lives are irrevocably changed by the strangers in their midst. In particular, Wiebe focuses on Keskarrah, an older, important man in his tribe; his wife, Birdseye, who is dying of melanoma and who has dreams that reveal the dark future both for the expedition and for her people; and his two daughters, one of whom, Greenstockings, becomes the object of adoration for Robert Hood.⁴⁶

Most of the book is written in third-person, limited omniscient, flipping back and forth between the Denes' experiences and those of the officers. Wiebe devotes large sections of several chapters to Dene stories, such as the legend of "The Stolen Woman" and the Dene creation story, a gesture that suggests that Wiebe is, himself, trying to share the telling of this narrative with the Dene. Unlike Bowering, Wiebe tries to ensure that this history is told in voices other than his own. Although the various Dene stories are mediated by Wiebe and selected for his own purposes, Wiebe is aware of the problem of appropriation. In interviews concerning the publication of *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe frequently distinguishes himself from W.P. Kinsella, another White, male, prairie writer who attempts to represent First Nations people fictionally. Unlike Kinsella, whom Wiebe has accused in the past of cultural appropriation, Wiebe recognizes the importance of research, and he ties his novel's grounding in fact and his personal connection with many First Nations writers to what he perceives as a more honest and accurate representation of Canada's first peoples. At the same time, however, Wiebe, through fiction, is trying to push past the facts: "The factuality means almost nothing unless there's a larger story there. . . . And I think the fiction writer can often

⁴⁶ Greenstockings is also more aggressively courted by Back. Wiebe, and the historical sources on which he relies, suggests a rivalry between Back and Hood for Greenstockings' affection.

get at those basic human truths best” (Bergman 46). Through his creative intervention into history, Wiebe is trying to re-remember and recreate a more nuanced version of Canadian history.

Along with speaking for/with the Dene people, Wiebe also writes some chapters in the first-person voice, such as those semi-fictional versions of events given by Lieutenant George Back and John Hepburn (a lower-class, low-ranking member of the crew).⁴⁷ The statements by these men, the perspectives of the Dene, and the third-person examination of the motives, conversations, and sentiments of Franklin’s officers all deepen the existing records of the expedition, records that Wiebe incorporates into his narrative by placing journal entries at the beginning of each chapter. Wiebe’s fictional text re-frames the journal excerpts of members of the first Franklin expedition (namely, Robert Hood and Dr. John Richardson) in a way that highlights the hubris of colonial history. However, the fictional text also interrogates the official records and the history they represent for a contemporarily relevant moral, that is, for a lesson that can provide Canadians of the present with guidelines for cross-cultural communication, thereby giving a positive antidote to the hegemony and intolerance of the settler-invader past. Finding the absence of such a lesson in the Franklin story that has been culled from the original records and from heroic national celebrations of exploration and discovery, Wiebe creates a narrative that simultaneously exposes and resolves this lack within the historical documents. Through the character of Robert Hood, notably his growing awareness and respect for the New World and its Native peoples, Wiebe is able to offer to the contemporary reader a model of a heterogeneous Canadian history (and

⁴⁷ Semi-fictional because Wiebe uses Back’s journal for information on the events that he has Back speaking about and because there is some evidence for Hepburn’s statements about the rivalry between Back and Hood over Greenstockings and for the suggestion that English sailors did engage in cannibalism (see Robertson 1995).

present) that incorporates European and Aboriginal perspectives. Further, Wiebe uses Hood's struggle, in his paintings, to represent the land and the people that he is "discovering" as a metaphor for Wiebe's own struggle to represent this period of Canada's history and the people that were profoundly affected by it. Like Hood, Wiebe is searching for (and producing) a meaning or truth behind the complex world that surrounds him.

In an interview, Wiebe has articulated his belief in "a larger meaning in life, a larger meaning of the universe, which all the universe is going towards" (Neuman 234). For Wiebe, history is a vehicle and emblem of this "larger meaning" towards which humanity is moving. What history reveals if looked at the right way, and if written properly, is what Wiebe has referred to as "eternal human values that must be spoken for" (interview with Alan Twigg 211). History may not always exhibit this basic and prevailing connection; in fact, as much of *A Discovery of Strangers* demonstrates, the actions of the past often revolved around establishing binaries or hierarchies, manifested in the outright cruelty of some people against others. However, if history can indeed be seen as moving towards a "larger meaning," then even these acts of cruelty and willful ignorance can be used as negative examples in the creation of mutual respect and a recognition, preservation, and honouring of similarities in present and future human societies. In other words, while Wiebe is self-reflexive about the difficulties inherent in representing the historical, he ultimately seems to be suggesting that, through reading and writing history in this more self-aware manner, we can access a profound truth. *A Discovery of Strangers* revises the narrative of Franklin's expedition through the lens of Wiebe's idealized pluralist vision. In doing so, it posits a rereading of Canada's past in order to re-imagine the Canada of the present and future.

This ideal, pluralist Canada derives from a hybridization of European and First Nations cultures. While Wiebe in many of his previous texts perceives these "eternal human

values” through the lens of God and Christian values – “I think Man is good. He longs for good things. Often our basic humanity gets perverted but Man has been made by a good creator. So I’m basically hopeful . . .” (interview with Twigg 218)⁴⁸ – what Wiebe espouses in *A Discovery of Strangers* is a more moderate vision of a multiculturalism that includes but is not limited to Christianity. Here, Wiebe is not prescribing or espousing a monologic version of Christianity; his Christianity is adaptable and open to cross-cultural influence. Christianity and Dene spirituality seem to co-exist in this novel, at times uncomfortably, and, at other times, blending together, a blending that can be seen in particular in the interactions between Hood and Greenstockings. The conclusion of the novel underlines this mixing of systems of belief, with first Robert Hood and then his and Greenstockings’ child acting as symbols of this cross-cultural vision. This embracing of Aboriginal and Christian perspectives seems to be Wiebe’s solution to the problems of colonial history; while, on one hand, Wiebe uses Hood self-reflexively to signal his struggle to represent history, he also uses Hood to signal the truth or meaning that can be found there.

Nevertheless, the application of a Christian overlay to a retelling of a story of First Contact does carry with it inevitable risks. Although every writer of historical fiction is influenced by his or her perspective on history and historiography, it is important to keep Wiebe’s particular frame of reference in mind when assessing his post-colonial project. While Wiebe is aware of and certainly foregrounds the fact that *A Discovery of Strangers* is an interpretation (particularly through the metafictional device of Hood’s art), it is difficult not to note the potential compromise that arises in conjoining a Christian perspective with a

⁴⁸ See also, his interview with Eli Mandel in *A Voice in the Land*, in particular, pages 154-55 his interview with Brian Bergman in the same volume (163-69); and Donald Cameron’s *Conversations with Canadian Novelists 2*, in which Wiebe explains that writing about First Nations people poses few “human problems” because “[i]n every way that’s important they are the same as you and me” (150).

retelling of this history. While Wiebe genuinely and earnestly wrestles with how to imaginatively reconstruct Canada's past in a fair and balanced manner, because of the history that is being re-visioned in *A Discovery of Strangers*, even hints that a Christian interpretation or moral can be taken from the period of First Contact may be at cross purposes with Wiebe's post-colonial examination of Native-European relations because Christianity, in Canada, is perforce negatively connected to the colonizing of First Nations people. What is at issue here is the way that Wiebe invokes a colonial religion in order to write against colonial history. Ervin Beck has pointed to this contradiction between Wiebe's "Christian position and the theory and criticism of mainstream postcolonialism" (855). Post-colonialists, as Beck explains, tend to view Christianity with a good deal of suspicion, seeing it as "the handmaiden of empire" (878). It may be that Wiebe is not as self-conscious as he might be about this aspect of his novel. However, it is also important to consider this element in the context of his overall ethic concerning Native/non-Native relations. In effect, Wiebe is articulating a notion of how Aboriginal spiritual and cultural values might be seen to offer a transformation of the more oppressive applications of Christianity that were imposed on Native peoples. In this way, he is positing an understanding of the past as a truly hybrid exchange of cultures, an exchange that he feels has been disallowed in many historical accounts.

Finding Meaning in the Documents and Narratives of History

While Bowering may see the function of historical fiction as a sort of demythologizing of history, Wiebe uses the genre for its generative effect. Wiebe's rejection of a radical deconstruction of history and nation occurs in two ways: one, through a post-colonial retelling of history that is recounted in the voices of those who have thus far been

silenced; and, two, through a search for truth and meaning in the archives of history. As such, *A Discovery of Strangers* moves past the radical deconstruction taken up by Bowering in *Burning Water* and instead is part of “the post-colonial search for a way out of the impasse of the endless play of post-modernist difference . . .” (Brydon, “White Inuit” 99). The way out that Wiebe enacts is almost the opposite of that offered by a text such as *Burning Water*; Wiebe’s work attempts to find and draw out an overarching meaning from history. As he explains in his essay “On the Trail of Big Bear,” “the stories we tell of our past are by no means merely words: they are meaning and life to us as *people*. . .” (134). In other words, although Wiebe is invested in recovering the particular voices of history, *A Discovery of Strangers* works by asserting a transcendent narrative that incorporates other narratives into it.

In an interview with Eli Mandel, Wiebe argues that in order for Canada to discover “where the voice is coming from,” Canadian writers have to “unearth” the “genuine voices of [First Nations] people” (153). This search for “genuine voices” seems part of Wiebe’s multicultural vision for Canada. His novels, Wiebe contends, “get underneath” conventional history “to find out what was really happening,” in particular what was happening to the “Indian people” (interview with Reimer and Steiner 130). The need to address and rectify what Wiebe sees as an “essential [national] gap” (Fee 26) is, as David Williams argues, a paradigmatic Canadian preoccupation (326). The Native comes to fill in the space left by what Jonathan Kertzer calls the “national ghost” (43). Canada, as Kertzer demonstrates with reference to various literary and critical texts,⁴⁹ suffers from the absence or, at least, the perceived absence of national spirit (41-43). The First Nations people become an emblematic

⁴⁹ Most of these texts are mentioned in my first chapter; they include Dennis Lee’s *Civil Elegies*, Margaret Atwood’s *Survival*, Earle Birney’s “Can. Lit.,” and Gail McGregor’s *The Wacousta Syndrome*.

response to this issue – they stand both for the present diversity and for a truer, more indigenous Canada. As Terry Goldie explains in *Fear and Temptation*, the Native becomes the symbol of myriad components of the nation, for example, nature and landscape and the past. “Nationalism,” Margery Fee contends, “is the major ideological drive behind the use of the Indian in contemporary English-Canadian literature” (17). As a writer, Wiebe sees himself as constructively involved in this building of national identity, in the task of “articulating what we are in word” (“Canada in the Making” 124). It is art, he contends, that “fights for [a country’s] memory and soul” (124), thereby linking the past (what is remembered) with the nation’s soul. It is stories that “truly shape nations” (127). For Wiebe, the meeting of First Nations and Europeans and a merging of their spiritual systems are an essential part of this national story.

This merging is enacted in *A Discovery of Strangers* through Wiebe’s recuperation of early historical documents into a frame narrative that both exposes and expands their limitations. Wiebe makes an illuminating remark in this regard in an interview with Shirley Neuman and Robert Kroetsch. Discussing the archival work that informed his writing of *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Wiebe reflects that his reliance on history is grounded in a belief that it already contains more richness than the invented story can offer. This richness, he goes on to contend, is merely waiting to be uncovered by the writer: “I have a sense of trying to get at the truth of things – I think the truth of things can be gotten at still – by setting the diamond of the document in the artificial set of the fictive situation. The diamond shines so much more clearly, showing its true nature” (237). For Wiebe, it is this tension between two levels of narrative – documentary and fiction – that facilitates an exploration of the historical construction of national mythologizing. In *A Discovery of Strangers*, the excerpts, while they may be representative of the monolithic, imperialist history that Wiebe is writing against, are

simultaneously employed in the reinstatement of a nationalist vision, although of a new type. In a sense, it is because of what they omit that they are used to validate Wiebe's project of writing meaning into history, or, ostensibly, of "uncovering" that meaning. This narrative uncovering of meaning or truth in the past renders the documents both a site of absence and a point of departure for the re-visioning of Canadian history according to Wiebe's commitment to a more diverse and inclusive Canada. They contain both the instance of their original inscription and the re-interpretation created by their new context, allowing the reader to engage with them on two levels: as specters of an Anglo-European colonial history and as necessary, and, thus, meaningful steps in the present redemption of Canada through their re-narration. The excerpts, in this rendering, become an active part of the reader's present participation in national history. As Penny van Toorn explains, Wiebe places historical records "into the zone of contact with the unfinished open-ended present, where their meaning remains open to negotiation" (114).

Comparing the nation-building role of literature to that of the railroad, Wiebe has said: "The story-teller, like the engineer, makes new things out of old. The difference between them is that he does so without doing violence to the originals" ("Canada in the Making" 127). The railroad engineer, Wiebe argues, forces the nation's development regardless of the destruction wrought on the country's physical landscape and first peoples. But while Wiebe may be working out a national narrative in *A Discovery of Strangers*, it is a national narrative that is, for the most part, written against the mainstream Anglo-European one. A major component of Wiebe's rewriting is tied up with the figuration of the North, both in exploration documents and in the mythology growing out of those accounts. In her provocative study of the North's place in Canadian identity, Sherrill Grace argues that the North has become "a discursive formation," meaning its production and ongoing function are

ideologically rooted (15). Renée Hulan makes a similar observation in her *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture*, in which she contends that our notion of experiencing a true or real versus an imagined North has become a key component in the attempt to create a stable national identity. Writing about the North, then, is an essential part of writing Canada, and our writing of the North, Grace claims, has been virtually unchanged for 150 years (184), making it a highly pervasive national narrative.

One of the key mythologies in the Canadian narration of the North is the story of Franklin. As Grace points out, Franklin stands for more than his own story; like Tom Thomson, Grey Owl, and other historical figures, Franklin is “continually reproduced by northern narrative because [he] fit[s] the script” of imperialist daring and bravery (185). Franklin’s life seems to “authorize and thus legitimate the story” of the White, male hero who faces the North’s wild and savage space, and who, even in defeat, is victorious as he becomes a legend of heroism (Grace 185). Indeed, the story of Franklin’s expedition has been “told and retold” in Canadian literature.⁵⁰ Although there were three Franklin expeditions, it is the third and final one that has led to a panoply of retellings. In May 1845, Franklin and his crew of 135 men sailed from England on two fortified, well-provisioned ships, *Terror* and *Erebus*. The goal of the expedition was to find the much sought-after Northwest Passage in order to improve trade for Britain, and thereby increase its power. While the real impetus behind the expedition may have been economic, “both the excited

⁵⁰ Atwood provides a nice catalogue of this national obsession in *Strange Things*, where she suggests that E.J. Pratt’s *Titanic* is inspired, in part, by his research on Franklin. Atwood then goes on to examine Gwendolyn MacEwen’s verse play *Terror and Erebus*, along with Mordecai Richler’s irreverent treatment of the story in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, ending, finally with the lyrics of Stan Rogers’ famous song *Northwest Passage*. What Atwood helps to make clear is that this type of consistent retelling can, in fact, reveal a lot about a culture.

press of the time and later recountings have glorified it with other and loftier adjectives, of the *brave, heroic, daring, and selfless* variety” (Atwood 12).

While the Franklin story may signal a national need for an identifiable, romantic, mythic, heroic figurehead, as Grace argues, the story of Franklin is “above all . . . imperialist” (185) in its depiction of the North as enemy and in its inscription of the European explorer as colonizer, even if/especially if only through narrative. It is this heroic mythologizing of imperialism that Wiebe is trying to remind us of and correct in *A Discovery of Strangers*. A number of Wiebe’s choices highlight this desire to rectify this imperialist-based national myth, much as Bowering’s drawing out the particularities and specificities of Vancouver’s journey is meant to do. Wiebe writes not about the final Franklin expedition; instead it is Franklin’s first attempt to locate the Passage that is the center of the novel. Unlike the third voyage, this expedition’s failure was neither glorious nor mysterious – the crew barely made any headway, and they foundered due to a combination of incompetence and their refusal to listen to their Native guides. Also, the loss of men was nowhere near as significant as in the third expedition, and only one of the casualties, as Wiebe archly points out in *Playing Dead*, was British. By dealing with the first expedition, Wiebe is able simultaneously to escape and refuse the mythology that surrounds the third one. The other way in which Wiebe counteracts the mythologizing of the Franklin story is by displacing Franklin himself from the narrative. In *A Discovery of Strangers*, Franklin is a shadowy character, appearing only as “Thick English” for the Denes and as a vague authority figure for his employees. We never hear directly from Franklin, in the way that we do through the invented journal-style chapters featuring George Back and John Hepburn, nor do any sections of the novel focus on his dreams or his conversations in the way they do with the Denes, Keskarrah and his family. Finally, Wiebe has not included any excerpts from

Franklin's published account of the expedition in the novel, favouring instead those of his employees. As James Skidmore elucidates, "Wiebe's focus on the less-central figures of the received historical record draws attention not only to the shortcomings of that record to relay historical reality, but also to Wiebe's writing itself, and, one can suppose, the political or social message implied by these new perspectives" (256). If Franklin has been telling his story non-stop for over 150 years, Wiebe is forcing him into silence here in order to give other stories an airing, stories that work to reveal and resolve the imperialist ideology that lies behind accounts of this key period in Aboriginal-European contact.

Wiebe is not only writing against the narrative of the White man's encounter with the North, and Franklin as exemplary of it, he is also trying to rectify the image of the North that has been indoctrinated into the Canadian psyche, in part, through this narrative. An important part of Wiebe's project is revising the descriptions of Canada's North and its peoples that were informed by colonizing practices, namely, the "North" of the European explorers' journals. The North is typically represented as a negative space.⁵¹ It is against this emptiness that the European explorers work and write. The acts of discovery, mapping and naming were used to fill the landscape, and writing about these acts represented an attempt to articulate the inarticulate. What Wiebe argues through his alternative version of the exploration narrative is that this perception of the North is fundamentally wrong. *A Discovery of Strangers* suggests that the North was never empty; rather, it is the constructs of the Europeans themselves – their language, their representations – that are empty. Franklin's first expedition failed, Wiebe suggests, because the British officers ignored the advice of the

⁵¹ Robert Service's nineteenth-century poems picture it as the "land of death" ("The Cremation of Sam McGee") or as "the Great Alone" ("The Shooting of Dan McGrew"), F.R. Scott describes it as "inarticulate" in "The Laurentian Shield," and explorers' records by and large portray it as empty and inhospitable, or empty because inhospitable.

Denes. However, as Kathleen Venema contends, “Wiebe’s subtler point” is that these men “did not know how to listen, hear, or understand in the radically unfamiliar space” of the North (143-144), and so not only their mission but their records of it fail to draw out anything meaningful. Wiebe sets up a contrast between the conceptions of the landscape the explorers harbour, conceptions that are eventually broken down by their experiences,⁵² and those of the Dene people, who have lived within the supposedly empty landscape for years. While the Europeans are operating within the ideology that the natural world is a “neutral and profane” object, the Native peoples see the land as a sacred subject within “the interlocking processes of land and people and animals” (James 77). By positioning Native ideology alongside that of the European explorers, Wiebe is able to question the prevailing image of the North that haunts Canadian national identity.

If the explorers enacted an emptying and filling out of the North, then Wiebe’s novel performs a similar operation: it empties, or exposes as obfuscating, a national history based on these colonizing acts. The journal excerpts play a key role, then, as they come from the very texts in which this colonial/imperial emptying and filling occurred. A large part of the absence that Wiebe finds within the official records of exploration can be attributed to the editing, even censorship that these documents underwent. There has been a tendency to treat these journals as factual, objective accounts of the expedition and the land and people encountered. As recently as 1965, Northrop Frye declared that these documents “are as innocent of literary intention as a mating loon” (“Conclusion” 822). However, since Frye,

⁵² As Claire Omhovere puts it, “Wiebe’s rewriting of the first Franklin expedition takes the British crew on a pilgrimage through a landscape which gradually get stripped of the composition lines that anchored Western representation in time and space” (81).

scholars⁵³ have begun reading early explorers' writings as consciously constructed works of literature, replete with literary tropes, rhetorical effects, and ideological investments.

In the article "History or His/Story? The Explorer Cum Author," R. Davis examines Franklin's publications and argues that they are the product of a "conscious process of authoring" tailored "into public narratives" (94). The texts, Davis contends, are manipulated "to accommodate – not the subject matter – but the audience" (94). Davis differentiates between the journals, which were written for a select group of Admiralty officers, and Franklin's narratives, which were the journals revised, rewritten, and restructured in order to appeal to nineteenth-century British popular readers. In a sense, then, we can understand Franklin's two published expedition accounts as co-written "by a European audience who had never before crossed the Atlantic," knew nothing about "distant and unknown arctic regions," and who merely wanted "their prior cultural attitudes toward landscape and New World peoples affirmed rather than expanded" (Davis 108).⁵⁴

One of Wiebe's main objectives is to alert his audience that the history derived from these exploration texts is essentially a constructed narrative. While Franklin and the other European members of the expedition may try to position themselves as omniscient and unbiased narrators of the events they recount, Wiebe highlights "the actions of the colonial censor" (Wyile 41), reminding us that these accounts are based on and represent culturally limited perspective and knowledge. These texts suppress as much as they express. Wiebe, therefore, often shows the officers in the act of writing in their notebooks, a strategy that highlights the constructed nature of these texts, and in doing so, forces a comparison between

⁵³ Such scholars include Germaine Warkentin, I.S. MacLaren, and T.D. MacLulich.

⁵⁴ While in his "Acknowledgements" Wiebe cites the journals of Richardson and Hood separately from those of Franklin, the writings of Richardson, Hood, and Hepburn's testimony were included in the original published edition of Franklin's journals and can, therefore, be understood as part of Davis' analysis.

what they are writing (the excerpts that Wiebe includes) and what is going on around them. For example, at one point Richardson's ceaseless measuring and recording of numbers, in particular the water's temperature, is interrupted and juxtaposed with a conversation in which Franklin suggests they have to teach the Indians about money in order to civilize them (59). Richardson's response to Franklin's frustration over the Indians wanting "so little" is the ironic observation, spoken as he is closing his notebook, that "They must want more than they need. That is civilization" (59). The message here is twofold: one, Wiebe is aligning this European conception of civilization with the data that Richardson is constantly recording – an alignment with money, numbers, and ways of measuring. What Richardson writes, then, can only be and must be understood within the context of European ideology and not as a factual, true rendering of reality, of the events of history (if such a thing were even possible). Second, Wiebe seems to be implying that Richardson himself is aware of and uneasy about the limits of his civilization, and so what he is writing in his notebook must also be mined for these types of hidden disclosures, for this desire for more than what is being recorded.

Another suggestion that the "colonial censor" potentially discloses even as it represses occurs towards the end of the novel when Hood is reaching the delirium phase of starvation and exhaustion. Here Wiebe is more overt in making his point, having Richardson reminiscing about Greenstockings and Hood's relationship and reflecting that "it is all detailed in his notes, facts upon dangerous facts. And in his memory. In his report he will arrange and edit them properly, as always, so they will make proper and decent, acceptable sense" (247). The facts of which Richardson speaks are those of sexual impropriety and competition amongst the British expedition members, as well as inter-racial sex. We learn here that there is a fundamental difference between Richardson's notes and his memory, or rather that the "dangerous facts" will have to be tamed, the danger left only in his memory,

and the written text only disclosing the “decent” in an “acceptable,” commonsensical manner. There is no room for the unfamiliar or unspeakable in the written records. It was a part of the colonial project to uphold the reputation of the British Admiralty. As Richardson goes on to wonder if his notes should, in fact, be burned, it becomes clear that what is suppressed is suppressed because the British reading audience would not, could not, understand the memories “like ineradicable teeth,” memories that must be “crush[ed], burn[ed]” in order to write an “acceptable account of what can be properly reported” (248).

Wiebe’s novel counters this impulse for “acceptable” history by imagining and exposing the “dangerous facts” that the original records omitted. Wiebe is writing to a readership conscious of post-colonial issues, and his re-framing of the Franklin expedition is designed to challenge them. As several critics have pointed out,⁵⁵ Wiebe inverts the typical colonial discourse in which the White European “discovers” the New World and in which the New World’s people are pictured as strange. In this story, the strangers are the Europeans, and they are discovered by the Denes. The implications of the title, however, are more complex than a mere reversal of the expected binary; while “a discovery of strangers” may occur within the narrative, I would argue that Wiebe is also referring to the text itself as “a discovery.” The reader, therefore, is also participating in this act of discovery, and in far more ways than the characters of the story. First, the reader is discovering the Dene people and their silenced version of Canada’s past. Second, through the perspective of the Dene, the reader is rediscovering/reconsidering the European explorer and finding this familiar figurehead of Canadian identity suddenly strange. Further, in finding this national ancestor unfamiliar, in feeling alienated from such a key cultural identifier, the White, Canadian

⁵⁵ Such critics include Herb Wylie, Sherrill Grace, Heather Robertson, and William Closson James.

reader discovers him/herself as strange. Ultimately, through this multileveled strangeness, Wiebe's novel creates a distance between the reader and colonial history, allowing room for the discovery of a new narrative.

The excerpts play a seminal role in this discovery. On one hand, they signal the past that the present-day reader is finding strange; on the other hand, their presence allows the reader to re-read this history and find fresh stories and meanings within it. The documents, then, represent both the discoveries charted in official history and the re-discovery of a different version of national foundations that Wiebe's narrative enacts. The role of the excerpts as agents of official history is made clear by Wiebe in a number of ways. Wiebe sets the excerpts off from the narrative, placing them on separate pages and using a different typeface (italics). The excerpts appear in chronological order, while the narrative itself is often fragmented; because each excerpt is prefaced with a date and the author's name, the journal entries provide a linear narrative, almost making sense of the text surrounding them. At the end of the novel, Wiebe acknowledges his sources in great detail; his story is backed up by recorded fact. In contrast to Bowering's purposeful confusion of sources, *A Discovery of Strangers*, as Michèle Kaltemback explains, is grounded "in a dependable referent" (78).

In their capacity as official history, the excerpts lend validity and authority to the narrative that Wiebe is constructing (Fruwald 138). Simultaneously, however, the excerpts are juxtaposed with their surrounding narrative, a juxtaposition that, as I have argued, makes them seem as strange and cold as the North that their writings describe. This hollowness is both highlighted and rectified by the fictional setting in which these excerpts appear. Wiebe's novel attempts to write its way through the strangeness into the discovery of meaning and truth behind the hardness and artificial transparency of this history. What is being sought is a transcendence of the limitations of the historical record, an escape from the

suppressions and rigidities of a singular, colonial account of the past in favour of a narrative that showcases and offers a more open and inclusive version of national foundations.

Troubling Representation, Searching for Truth

Wiebe's reworking of national historiography revolves primarily around the character of Robert Hood. Through the experience of Hood – which includes a growing acceptance, even assimilation of the Dene's beliefs and lifestyle – Wiebe is able to evoke an idealized Canadian community. The actions of the White-European “founders” of the country and the mainstream history that not only focuses on, but glorifies these actions are not irretrievable or irredeemable. Hidden inside this history, in Wiebe's view, is the possibility of a more positive national past. Canadians do not have to take their ideological cues from these European explorers, nor from the stories that have been told about them; Canadians can choose instead the middle way as epitomized in the discovery that is made by Hood. Hood moves from the staid and rigid English man of his journal to the receptive, tolerant man of Wiebe's narrative, whose final moments demonstrate an idealized blending of cultures. In Wiebe's account, the events of the expedition thus contains within it a moral and spiritual lesson that leads in the direction of a universal respect for humanity that appreciates all cultures.

While relying on the published accounts of Franklin and George Back, Wiebe only actually quotes from the journals of Robert Hood and Dr. John Richardson. I have explained above the reason for Wiebe's omission of Franklin's records. His choice not to use Back's journal is, I think, related to the fact of Back's rise in the Admiralty to a position that was comparable to Franklin's: Back eventually led his own expeditions (MacLaren 276), making him another figure of imperial conquest. Also, the tone of Back's journal is witty and abrupt.

Back's experience of the expedition was one of motion, of muscular striving – he avoided, even guarded against, tragedy through his actions. Even the name Back signals his connection to the physical, to the body. Hood and Richardson are more suited to Wiebe's purpose. Hood is an artist and the son of a clergyman, signaling his connection with Christianity. Hood is also responsible for the sole pictures of the Dene people who helped the expedition, in particular, a now famous sketch of Greenstockings. That he attempted to capture their likeness suggests, perhaps, some empathy or understanding that was lacking in Back, who was also an artist, but who, according to Wiebe's narrative, was better able to draw landscapes than people. The casting of Hood in the novel as an artist who is able to represent the Dene people with some accuracy reflects Wiebe's own desire to come close to a truthful presentation of the personalities and events he sketches in this novel. Finally, Hood was the sole British member of the expedition to die, and, as such, is an unfinished story; his death and the abbreviated ending of his journal leave space for Wiebe's imaginative additions. Further, by dying, Hood becomes distinct from the other explorers and is almost exempt from responsibility for the narratives that sprang from the expedition. Richardson, on the other hand, is an apt representative of such narratives. The excerpts from his journal provide a negative example for the reader; they symbolize the restrained, empiricist mentality against which Wiebe is writing. Richardson, in both the invented narrative and the cited entries from his actual records, seems, at times, close to reaching an awareness of his own ignorance and of the wealth the Dene culture has to offer; however, he always reverts to the narrow British or imperialist perspective that is evident in the memorializing of the Franklin expedition. Richardson witnesses Hood's suffering, realization, and death, yet seemingly learns little from the experience. This blind witnessing makes Richardson, particularly the Richardson documented by his own journals, an ideal foil for Hood's

developing receptivity to ways of living and thinking that change his limiting and limited ideology.

Wiebe, then, plays the novel against the excerpts. The excerpts, because they are primarily from Richardson's account, become a model of how not to think. We cannot forget, however, that the source of these excerpts is the root of the story that re-frames them, so, in some ways, the parable of Hood's revelation leads us to re-read the excerpts for hints of this more open-minded perspective towards culture and spirituality. Wiebe's presentation of the excerpts both helps and hinders this process of uncovering the message of the narrative within the excerpts. Wiebe's minor alterations to the documents themselves are worth noting as they showcase this paradoxical position. Some of the changes are practical; for example, in the interests of space, Wiebe often combines a number of entries under one date or omits phrases or sentences. As a result of this editing or sometimes simply because the original is unclear, Wiebe does add information necessary to make the excerpts readable. In an excerpt from Richardson's journal dated August 18, 1821, for instance, Wiebe identifies the Coppermine and Hudson Bay as points of comparison (217), whereas in the original Richardson merely said "the above mentioned places" (114).

Other practical alterations to the excerpts make Wiebe's "re-reading" more apparent. In the second entry by Hood that Wiebe includes, all identifiers associated with the Dene people are changed. "Indians" in the original here becomes "Yellowknives," "the slave dance" becomes "the Dogrib dance" and "Gros Pied" becomes "Bigfoot" (40). Certainly these re-visions are undertaken in the name of clarity, but Wiebe is also trying to establish a growing awareness of the Dene's personhood, cultural specificity, and spirituality in Hood's journals. Some alterations to Richardson's journals suggest a similar desire to allocate meaning and awareness. For instance, in the first entry from Richardson's journal Wiebe

adds an acknowledgement of what the women in the camp were occupied with, “splicing and drying meat” (93), whereas in the original the concerns are only with the male activity of conquering and claiming territory and building Fort Enterprise. It would seem that Wiebe is adding an element of political correctness to both the journals and the scenes they describe. His alterations emphasize an acknowledgement, inclusion, and respect for both racial and gender difference. By identifying the “Indians” as a specific cultural group, Wiebe is forcing the European explorer and the reader to avoid generalization and stereotyping; by describing the women’s activities, Wiebe is disallowing the typical privileging and normalizing of male activity. However, this insertion in Richardson’s journals of a short sentence (five words to be exact) about the “women” simultaneously alludes to an earlier passage in the novel’s framing narrative wherein the narrator muses on “These English,” juxtaposing their naming so much of the country’s mountains and rivers to the fact that they never bothered to learn the names of “the women who spliced meat and tanned hides to sew endless clothing for them that first fall” (22-23). In other words, Richardson is typical of “These English” in his grouping all the women together and then dismissing them – in contrast to Hood who makes a profound connection with at least one of these “women.”

At some points, Wiebe adds more than just a made-up phrase to the excerpt. Richardson’s entry for January 15th, 1821, for example, is half imagined. The remarks on Hood’s “sedentary habits” and ill health, as well as the ardency of his pursuits,⁵⁶ cannot be found in the original publication. The inclusion of these comments casts Hood in a romantic role: he appears both passionate and fragile, a foreshadowing of his imminent death. These comments also seem to imply a concern in Richardson, an investment in the lives of his

⁵⁶ Richardson mentions “his drawing and other associations,” which we can only take as an oblique reference to Greenstockings, again suggesting that Richardson is aware and invested in the men surrounding him.

fellow men, beyond the stiff prose that he uses to detail his frustrations. They also foreshadow Richardson's later role as a witness and reporter of tragedy, suggesting that he may see more than he reveals.

While Wiebe's modifications and additions to the excerpts go some way towards injecting personality and emotion into the historical documents, the real work takes place in the text surrounding them, text that makes us read them differently. The first excerpt that Wiebe includes is from Robert Hood's journal, signaling the importance of this character and his voice to the story. It describes the expedition setting forth from Fort Chipewyan at Franklin's insistence. Hood makes it seem as though Franklin merely suggested continuing, using the term "proposed" instead of ordered, and he also criticizes the three English sailors who refused to come "by the dread of famine and fatigue," suggesting that they disgraced their country. The excerpt from Hood's journal is contrasted by the narrative following it in which Wiebe details the return journey fifteen months later, the men's "frozen feet blundering along the track the Tetsot'ine hunters tramped down in front of them" (13). He also notes that neither Hood nor the voyageurs, whose daftness Hood complains about in the excerpt, make it back from "the northern ice" (14). Read in this retrospective manner, Hood's emphasis on military determination and national loyalty ring hollow.

The emptiness of this ideology is further highlighted by the narrator's reflection that the "grand attempt" of these men to "rename the entire country" ironically had them naming spaces that they never even saw. Further highlighting the irony of the trip, Wiebe puts the label "discovery excursion" in quotation marks and makes clear that the discovery actually led to starvation, disorientation, and eventually being rescued from the land they were discovering by the very people they were trying to rescue from primitivism. Emphasizing the Dene coming to the aid of the English also provides a foil to Hood's excerpt in which

Franklin wants to “proceed northward to Fort Providence and the Yellowknife Indians with all speed” (13). In Hood’s excerpt, it is the English who are the men of action, who are the decision-makers; in Wiebe’s narrative, the English are motionless, and it is the Dene who come to them. This transfer of power or agency is made clear also by Wiebe giving Keskarrah a voice, thereby balancing out the quotation of Hood’s records with a Dene perspective. Keskarrah’s first comment both deflates the heroism and authority that Hood’s excerpt assigns to Franklin: “I laughed to myself when I first saw their boss, Thick English,” Keskarrah says. This scene challenges the Europeans’ presumptuous casting of themselves in the role of discoverer and rescuer: “When he [Franklin] explained to us that it was for our benefit they had come to find what was in our land, I should have laughed again. Louder” (14).

It is, however, Keskarrah’s second comment that the land warned the English – “The lake and river ice thundered cold at them” – and his asking “How much more did These English have to be told?”, that firmly undercuts Hood’s excerpt. While in Hood’s records, and, indeed, in many subsequent renditions of the Franklin myth, the explorers are pictured as brave, as “pushing forward” against all odds, from the Dene perspective the explorers were ruthlessly ambitious, ignorant, and refused to listen to anything that did not correlate with their own plans and assumptions. Wiebe’s narrator links this unhearing to a deafness to all but their own voices, their own stories: “It seemed they had heard only their own telling, as told to themselves” (15). With this observation, Wiebe gets right to the heart of the novel – it is against this narrow, self-perpetuating colonial narrative that Wiebe is writing. As Grace explains, “such a ‘telling’ is the only way to understand what happened when these English were discovered, the only way to make the past speak in Canadian voices, and to

enable this story of cultural encounter to rewrite a history told as the discovery of a new world by white European men” (190).

The second re-framing of Hood’s journal, the re-framing that follows this one, is important as it represents Wiebe’s description of the ways European story-“telling” answered European story-“telling,” a narration of history that enables the creation and maintenance of deafness. Here the excerpt from Hood’s journal, which details a drunken evening with the Dene and the journey of the following day, is followed by a first-person discourse on the same events in the voice of George Back. The excerpt and Wiebe’s narrative can be seen as talking to each other, as confirming their respective tellings. However, on closer examination, this is a case of repetition with a difference, and the difference allows us to re-read Hood’s excerpt from a fresh angle.

The language with which Hood describes the impromptu party at Fort Providence is detached in tone, as though he is making scientific observations. The English, in their role as benefactors and leaders, “divided a few gallons of rum between the Canadians and the Yellowknives” (40), the implication being that they themselves did not partake in the alcohol. Hood then describes the dancing and play-acting of the Canadians, and how this performance led the usually grave chief to “violent bursts of laughter” (40). Again with the distanced voice of an impartial observer, Hood tells of the chief’s urging his men to give a reciprocal performance and of the movements of the Dogrib dance that followed. There is a slightly superior, mocking tone when he details the participation of the drunken Denes “to the great discomfiture of their sober companions” (40).

In Back’s narrative, this tone is anything but subtle – that the English feel themselves far superior is made abundantly clear in Back’s repeated assertions that the Dene are too primitive to understand the sophistication of European civilization. For example, he

highlights their overvaluing of the English flag (42) and their incomprehension of, even lack of a word for, property (43). Further, Back's assumption that the various reactions of the Dene to the English exploits and explanations signal awe and admiration plays a prominent role in this section of the novel. For example, he notes their silence at the size of the British ships, "bigger than a hundred voyageur canoes," and the wealth that the English can bring (42). Wiebe, however, makes sure to inject a level of irony into Back's statements, forcing his reader to turn the critical lens back onto Back, thereby undermining his observations to a certain extent. It is with scorn that Back speaks of the Indians' "elementary hostilities," suggesting that they could never comprehend the complexities or grandness of European war (44). However, from a contemporary perspective, informed by the lingering horror of two world wars, such an assertion seems ridiculous. Further, it is only six pages later that Back describes the near mutiny of the voyageurs and Franklin's threat to "blow their brains out" (52).

However, while Back himself exhibits the more unlikable traits of the English, his contrast with Hood is telling. Back speaks of Hood's and Franklin's Christianity with derision, comparing Hood to a "small clergyman" (50) and speaking with scorn of Franklin's hope that the reading of daily scriptures will convert the Dene (54). Back paints Franklin and Hood with the same brush – even calling Hood a "junior Franklin" (55) – but Wiebe makes clear that there is a fundamental difference in the Christianity of the two men. Franklin is trying to impose his religion on the Dene people; he blindly reads from the Bible, ignoring the fact that it is not in a language the Dene even understand. Hood, on the other hand, demonstrates a growing understanding and respect for their ways. He suggests that Keskarrah might not want to have his picture painted and worries that the tribe will starve if the English take all their best hunters. While Back may react with disgust to Hood's

“insufferable rectitude” (50), because Wiebe has already shown Back to be self-congratulatory, delusional, and unreflecting, we are less likely to accept his opinions. Instead we understand Hood’s observations and concerns as a hint of a more moral humanity underlying the stiffness of his journals.

This framing encourages the reader to interpret the next excerpts of Hood’s journal (August 13th, 1820 and August 20th, 1820) as evidence of his humanity. In contrast with Back’s hyper-critical, bigoted account of events, Hood’s relation of the events at Dissension Lake expresses some sympathy for the voyageurs’ position: “Few could have borne the hardships they endured without murmuring” (57). Also, Hood empathizes with the voyageurs’ fears. He describes the land as “a naked desert of coarse brown sand” and links it to the voyageurs giving “up all hope of relief” (57). Despite his sympathy for the voyageurs’ position, Hood’s own description of the land is full of promise. Following his comment that after eating the meat of two reindeer the voyageurs were content, he explains that the expedition has “penetrated into the native haunts of the reindeer, whose antlers were moving forests on the ridges of the hills” (57). The implication seems to be that nature will provide for them and ward off the threat of further mutiny. This feeling of hope is furthered by Hood’s final observation that they have arrived “at the most eligible place that offered itself for our winter abode” (57). These excerpts seem to suggest a growing appreciation of and faith in the land – a realization that the expedition has to work with the landscape. This realization cannot be extended to all members of the expedition, but Wiebe’s choice of documents makes clear that we should understand Hood as having begun the process of adaptation.

The third-person narrative that follows the excerpts furthers this idea that Hood is experiencing the beginnings of some kind of realization. Wiebe describes Hood's attempts to draw the land that their canoes are moving through:

Robert Hood had been trying all morning to capture once more, on a small piece of paper, a coherent quadrant of the world through which he was being carried. But even after an exhausting year of continuously widening vistas, he was tempted to look sideways, tugged towards a periphery in the corner of his eye that, when he yielded, was still never there. (62)

The first sentence connotes the English explorer's desire to conquer, to own the New World both physically – on maps, through renaming, and through settlement – and in discourse, “on a small piece of paper.” It also implies that this is a ceaseless and impossible activity – Hood is “trying . . . to capture once more.” The second sentence points to why this capturing is never complete because there is more than what Hood sees, more than what can be captured on paper. There is something that defies frames, images, words. Hood's frustrated attempts to capture what he sees on paper also mirror the process with which Wiebe is engaged in this novel. Hood's constant self-assessment and his worry over being “betrayed by this light distortion” and not getting the picture right echoes Wiebe's own struggle to represent history and his ongoing “discovery” that, no matter how much we might try to secure the past or the present, to make it knowable, “the continuous world [is], nevertheless, not at all or anywhere ever the same” – the world we discover will always be strange (62).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Wiebe even challenges the very activity of recording things by considering it through the perspective of the Dene people, in some ways undercutting his own project by having the people whose history he is trying to consider question the act of writing. “They're always making marks,” Keskarrah says, “marks on paper that any drop of water can destroy. As if they had no memory” (75). Obviously here Wiebe is contrasting oral with written culture, but, more significantly, he's also voicing his awareness of the instability of all narratives, including his own.

Not that this strangeness should stop us from trying to render truthfully this world; in fact, through Hood's experience, Wiebe seems to suggest that sometimes, through challenging ourselves to represent the unrepresentable, we can actually uncover something truer than what we initially see. Hood continues to struggle with drawing the lake ahead of him: "and then his eyes discovered that the falls, instead of falling down into spray, appeared to climb out of the bristle of brush, climb into the air above their surrounding rock – like a column of ice pasted against space and darkness. Amazing" (62). This inverted vision seems to undo the mind's work – when we see things, we actually see them upside down, but our brains flip them around. Hood is, in some ways, seeing things more truly – he's symbolically seeing things without the interference of his mind and all its baggage (ideologies, biases, expectations, etc.). And this corrected vision displays a "column" of transparent light that is "amazing" (a word that evokes reverential, religious meanings) because it illuminates the "space and darkness," an illumination that Wiebe himself is trying to achieve through finding the right way to see things, both for himself and his reader.

That the Dene and their own religious experience appear in the paragraph following this revelation is certainly no coincidence. In fact, Hood's "amazing" vision is disrupted by the sound and sight of the Dene people "twitching, spastic" on the very rock out of which the falls emerge (63). The Dene, having just received news of the death of two of their hunters, erupt into a Dionysian expression of sorrow, burning and destroying everything in sight, including themselves. The Dene's grieving process, the chaos that it brings, breaks into and seems connected with Hood's vision of "something beyond" the frame that he is trying to

create for his sketch.⁵⁸ The something beyond disrupts frames, and it is rooted in the type of unadulterated expression that the violence of the Dene's mourning represents. Much like Hood's endeavours to capture the landscape, the English face this fresh perception with the same ineffective attempt to frame what they are seeing within their own ideology. Both Franklin and Hood struggle to stop what they perceive as madness, to salvage what things they can, arguing that the Dene "*want* us to save their things" (65) and "seem thankful if we stop them" (64). Richardson's reaction to Greywing's nakedness in the harshness of the "cold sunlight" causes him almost to wish "it were possible for him to wail as they did, beating themselves into exhaustion and emptiness" (65). It is Hood, however, who actually admits these emotions, crying along with the Dene people. Further, Hood acknowledges the culpability of the expedition for the Dene's grief as it was while hunting for the Europeans that the men were killed. To Hood's outpouring of sorrow and guilt, Richardson invokes "duty" and the legalese of their arrangement with the people: "They contracted to hunt for us . . ." (65-66). In the face of Hood's emotion, Richardson shakes himself "into thinking reasonably. On this wailing island Hood's emotion was clearly inappropriate, as was his own" (65).

Although Richardson comes close to perceiving the brink to which such grieving can bring a person, he turns away from this unbidden perception. The English emphasis on restraint, empiricism, and ownership does not fit in this world, but none of them are ready to relinquish this notion of civilization. It is the relinquishing, Wiebe seems to suggest, that allows us to see what it is "tugging" us towards the "periphery" (*Discovery* 61). In order to

⁵⁸ Again there is a connection between Hood's pictorial frame and the frame that Wiebe is trying to erect around the excerpts and the history they represent. Like Hood's frame, Wiebe's frame is also constantly being disrupted by the Dene's culture and ideology – a disruption that Wiebe is both aware of and, in some sense, enacts.

“look sideways” we have to let the rawness of human experience in. The English are not able to “look sideways” (61) at the something beyond until they experience the desolation, the stripping bare that the Dene willingly evoke and endure. What Wiebe aims to do in re-framing the journals and in re-visioning the official history is to take the English through this process of being stripped of their assumptions and ideology and demonstrate the important recognition that one of them experiences. By taking the reader through this reconsideration of a key national historical narrative in this manner, Wiebe is able to gesture towards new meaning, a something beyond in the events of Canada’s past, and allow the reader to experience the “amazing” discovery of national possibilities contained in history seen from a fresh perspective.

The excerpts from Richardson’s journal that follow this allusion to Hood’s development show a return to prosaic concerns and provide a contrast to Hood’s growing awareness. Richardson writes of the building of Fort Enterprise (September 7th, 1820) and provides details of the newly constructed officers’ house (October 6th, 1820). However, Wiebe has arranged the entries in such a way that these two descriptions of the English attempts to recreate and impose upon the land their civilization’s divisions of inside/outside, of natural space and human space, is interrupted by Richardson’s observations of Keskarrah’s seemingly more effective blending with the elements. In the entry from September 9th, 1820, Richardson recounts the trip that he, Franklin, Keskarrah, John Hepburn, and Samandr  took to the Coppermine River. Richardson explains that due to the “frozen ground” and the men’s “small quantity of bedclothes” they simply slept without undressing, hoping to keep warm that way. In contrast, Keskarrah “stripped himself to the skin, and having toasted his body for a short time over the embers of fire, he crept under his deerskin . . . and coiling himself up . . . fell asleep instantly” (93). While Richardson himself

certainly wrote of this episode in order to express the Native man's eccentricity, the way that Wiebe has positioned the excerpts, combined with the frame narrative, leads us to question the divisions that the English choose to set up between themselves and the natural world. Perhaps they would sleep better if they exposed their bodies and souls to the elements in the way that their Dene companion does.

Another contrast drawn by Wiebe's narrative between the English and the Dene viewpoint is the means and matter of story-making. Whereas the source for the explorers' journals is the dry, physical facts that surround them, the Dene get their stories from dreams or other indeterminate sources. These disparate story-telling methods are obvious when the dryness or stiffness of the explorer's journal excerpts is compared to the flowing, open-ended and spontaneous stories told by the Dene characters. The English see narrative as a way of organizing and controlling the world around them and assume that they are in control of the narratives they create. The Dene, on the other hand, see stories as independent entities, as choosing to come or not come to a recipient, who must then "pull" them "into words" (118). Finally, the subject of the Dene stories is clearly juxtaposed with the contents of the journal excerpts; the Dene share narratives that guess "why the world is the way it is," point to the future, and explain the past (118). The English see their discourse as a recording of fact and observations. Despite these differences, Wiebe is simultaneously suggesting that the English rely on narrative just as much as the Dene to try to answer the question of "why the world is the way it is" and understand the past, the present, and the future.

Wiebe, in fact, parallels the stories of the Dene and the explorers in the novel. For instance, in a chapter focused on the Dene, Keskarrah tells one of his peoples' stories, which then bleeds into a discussion of and incredulity over the European's creation story (121-23). These stories, of course, are not just stories; they are religious interpretations and

engagements with the world. By considering the creation story that much of the Western world takes for granted, Wiebe is hinting that we need to dismantle the hierarchy of narratives that exists, a hierarchy that typically privileges the Bible's version of events over the narratives of non-Judeo-Christian cultures. These ways of understanding and experiencing the world, Wiebe seems to be suggesting, should be held in balance, particularly in Canada, which is unique because of its multicultural makeup. Further, because these stories are religious in nature, Wiebe seems to suggest that the spiritualities they represent need to be treated with mutual awareness and respect in some way; that Christianity still has a place in the New World, but only when combined with the spirituality of its original inhabitants.

We can see Wiebe's struggle to create a balanced representation of both the Dene and the explorers when the narrative takes up the story of the "Whitemuds" that Birdseye tells. While Richardson's relation of events that precedes chapter seven, "Entering Exhaustion," is brief and sparing of details, Birdseye's premonition is long (it goes on for days and nights) and circular,⁵⁹ instead of the linearity typical of English journal entries. The key point, however, is the agency that the story gives to Birdseye. Birdseye is able to control the movements of the explorers: "the Whitemuds begin to tire her and she forces them to move more slowly" (147). This imposed slowness teaches them to appreciate details of the land on which they trespass: "Sometimes for an entire day she describes one single rock. . . . Or she tells them, with extreme care, of the wolf standing against the sky" (147). This endowment of agency is Wiebe's way of taking the story back from the European records; it is his way of giving the Dene a chance to tell the story that they were a crucial part of despite their

⁵⁹ As Keskarrah comments at one point, "this story is becoming like the wolf's track often is, it goes farther ahead into where it will happen, on and on, until it leads into beyond, and only then can it circle back to us again" (152).

subsequent marginalization in history. However, there is a problem with this telling as, even though it comes from the mouth of a Dene, it is still about the English and their fate, a fate which, in the Dene's telling, seems divinely determined, spiritually rooted: "whether they knew it or not, the trek of These English coming has always been there waiting for them" (153). Wiebe rectifies this seeming focus on the English by joining the trek of the English back to the Dene. As Keskarrh reflects, the story is circular and "will come around soon enough until it returns to find all the People here again" (153). Through Birdseye's premonition Wiebe is able to imply a continuous cycle that draws together the English and the First Nations in a narrative that suggests there is some profound connection between the two peoples. It is a similar operation, I would argue, that he hopes to achieve within the novel as a whole.

Revealing the Ideal Nation: Canadian Diversity

This idea of an idealized merging of cultures is perhaps best exemplified in the dialogue that Wiebe creates between Greenstockings, Keskarrh, and Hood. Of course, Hood and the Dene speak different languages, so built into this dialogue is the ever-present threat of miscommunication and misunderstanding. Simultaneously, however, Wiebe works to blend their voices and words and, in so doing, suggest a possible blending of cultures.

Hood approaches Keskarrh, Birdseye, and Greenstockings with his pencils and paper in hand, asking permission to draw Greenstocking's picture. As earlier in the novel when Hood was trying to draw the landscape, Wiebe takes this moment to comment, metafictionally, on his own task of representing these people. Birdseye worries that "It's too dangerous" (81), highlighting Wiebe's own awareness of the potential harm such

representation can cause; part of the background context for Wiebe's narrative, for instance, is the impact that Hood's journalistic records of these people had on the future perception and treatment of them. Representation, Wiebe is implying, is never free of politics; any representation (be it artistic, literary, etc.) is both a product and producer of socio-cultural effects, and it is these effects that prevail as indubitable historical facts (the very "facts," indeed, that the post-colonial author seeks to uncover and, if possible, address). Through Keskarrah, Wiebe goes on to question the stability of representation: "Why does he do that? . . . He can look at you, he can see you different every day, why fix you on his paper once?" (81). A representation can only ever get close to the truth because everything is constantly changing, and we can never capture that change. Greenstockings' answer to her father's question – "Maybe he has no memory" – is an echo of her father's previous statement regarding the explorers' constant recording of information in their journals. Of course, this suggestion also foregrounds the issue of historiography, tying the need to record with the need to remember. Wiebe may be suggesting that there is, indeed, something wrong with White men's memories, a suggestion that is proven by the narratives of Canada's founding, narratives that often seem to have forgotten whole sections of the population and their perspective on events of the past. Of course, raising this question of memory is also fraught and self-reflexive, for Wiebe himself, like Hood, is struggling to represent and narrate his corrected version of the past; in so doing, he is trying to fix and recall forgotten events to historical memory. Wiebe is indirectly asking us, as readers, to reconsider what we think of as memory and to reconsider how we remember. The Dene have an entirely different idea about what memory means and of how to memorialize. Wiebe is perhaps suggesting that getting closer to a more truthful vision of Canada requires a rethinking of the way we talk

and think about history, a rethinking that would include other methods of listening to (and telling) the stories of the past.

Once Hood begins to draw Greenstockings, Wiebe gives us a vision of what this new type of thinking might encompass. Here the monologues of Hood, Keskarrah, and Greenstockings layer over or beside each other, creating a sort of palimpsest. Keskarrah tells Hood about Dene life and about the importance of the snowshoes that Greenstockings is making to that life. Hood, feeling himself free of the rigid communication of his fellow explorers, begins singing, “Keskarrah’s bass sustaining him like a grand organ” (87). Keskarrah begins to tell the story of “the birth of humanity,” while “Hood’s sound plays a skipping harmony over” Keskarrah’s chant (89). Hood begins to sing the song “Greensleeves,” blending Greenstockings’ European-assigned moniker with a European song – drawing her into his own socio-cultural context.⁶⁰ The peacefulness of this scene and the musical sounds of the two men’s voices allow Wiebe to figure the potential harmony between European and Dene cultures. While the two do not communicate in any conventional sense, since each speaks a different language, Wiebe is suggesting that there is a more profound communication occurring here. This is a communication beyond language, which is preferable because if history and the novel thus far have taught us anything, it’s that language, words, and writing often lead to misinformation.

This communication beyond language continues in Hood’s and Greenstocking’s interaction. Here, again, there the singing is palimpsestic and interactive – Greenstockings sings songs of her mother and father, while Hood sings with “the acceptable melancholy of the English manse knit into each cell of his personal, endless longing” (163). In the rhythm

⁶⁰ Although this attempted connection between the two cultures is also ironized by Wiebe having Hood sing a song that is about a woman who rejects a male lover’s advances.

of Greenstockings' "unintelligibility" Hood begins to hear one of his own childhood rhymes, a rhyme to which he feels connected because of his name, "Who Killed Cock Robin."

Through this scene, Wiebe is gesturing towards a more important level of communication – one that all humans, by way of being human, are capable of. However, it is important to note that Hood and Greenstockings are still using language to express themselves – it is just that now their stories and other cultural narratives are revealed as not so disparate, even as somehow connected. Of course, at the end of the scene, Hood and Greenstockings, through having intercourse, symbolically enact this blending of culture.

As I have argued above, Wiebe's imaginative rereading and rewriting of previous narratives contains an implied vision of an ideal Canada. This Canada is one that genuinely remembers and interweaves diverse cultural perspectives and histories. The novel itself, then, acts as a sort of revelatory text; both Wiebe's and Hood's struggles to represent the world around them are, ultimately, attempts to get as close as possible to a truth of some kind. For Wiebe this truth is rooted in a dialogue of Dene and Christian spirituality, an idea I would like to discuss and make more clear through an analysis of the novel's final chapters, which recount the men's experience of starvation, Hood's death, and Michel's murder of Hood, but end with the suggestion of a more promising national future, a future that comes out of and gives meaning to the seemingly failed expedition.

Wiebe relies on Richardson's journal as a means of collapsing time while still providing the reader with a chronology. Using excerpts from June 4th, 1821, through to October 4th of the same year, Wiebe is able to provide a brief account of the events leading up to the dissolution of the expedition as its members struggle to survive the onset of an

Arctic winter. The excerpts chart a growing concern over dwindling food supplies⁶¹ which leads eventually to a state wherein the men no longer feel the “sensation of hunger” (219). Whereas the earlier sections of Richardson’s journal convey a sense of confidence, a certainty in the rightness and righteousness and consequent success of the expedition, the excerpts that Wiebe has chosen as an introduction to the chapter “Offering Strange Fire” contain a barely concealed tone of worry, disappointment, even desperation. Richardson describes the absorbing “terror” that the “privation of food” holds for the voyageurs. The previously measurable, chartable, nameable landscape becomes more rebellious and savage; for example, Richardson recounts the 25-mile journey via sea in these dramatic terms: “The swell and height of the waves was such that the mast-head of the other canoe was often hid from our view” (218). Moreover, this recounting does not conclude with a tone of triumphant conquest; here, nature wins by “smashing the sides of one canoe and splitting the head of the other,” a victory that is completed in the following entry wherein the expedition’s last canoe is broken (218). Finally, the excerpts also demonstrate a switch in the relationship between the First Nations people and the English. As opposed to Richardson’s earlier concerns that the Dene would drain the food supplies, here the men have to negotiate with the Hook, the leader of another Dene community, for bags of pemmican and have to rely on the “Yellowknives” for hunters. Further, by commenting on the expedition’s rapidly dwindling food supplies and then, in the next excerpt, noting that the expedition has “encountered neither Indians nor Esquimaux,” Richardson seems to be acknowledging the reliance of the explorers on the very people to whom they once believed themselves to be superior. The concluding sentence of the final excerpt confirms this growing appreciation: “We estimate

⁶¹ For example, on July 26th, Richardson worries that their “small stock of provisions is waning rapidly” (217), and by September 23rd he is documenting the fact that the men are eating “several of their old shoes” (218).

we are now no more than 55 direct miles from Fort Enterprise, where we hope to meet the Indians” (219).

Wiebe’s fictional narrative that follows these excerpts develops more fully the ideas hinted at in Richardson’s records. Richardson’s hope of meeting Indians is transformed in Wiebe’s telling to the fervent belief expressed by Franklin and echoed by Richardson that it is “the Yellowknives who alone can save us all” (222). This newfound faith in and reliance on the Dene is the result of the realization that, as Richardson explains to Hood, “This is their place” (223). This realization is matched by the Englishmen’s gradual understanding of the land through its refusal of their impositions; for example, by overestimating the length of summer and by therefore getting caught in the sudden onslaught of winter, the men have learned “that motionlessness is of all possible postures most dangerous” (221). What Wiebe seems to be suggesting is that, through this gradual physical breakdown, a breakdown that is mirrored by the separation of the expedition’s members as certain men fall behind and others push ahead, the English are experiencing a breaking down of some of their ideological assumptions. Accompanying this fracturing of European ideology is the making of space for other ways of thinking, for a merging of cultural perspectives. The final lines of Richardson’s journal entry, then, can be seen as referring to a meeting in two senses. The English want to physically meet up with the “Indians,” but, taken in the context of the theme developed by the framing narrative, we might read into this excerpt a hope on the Englishmen’s part to metaphorically “meet” the Dene, on a spiritual and cultural level.

The physical emptying out of the body as a result of starvation can be understood as leaving the men and their story open to be filled with the spiritual. As Hood muses towards the end of the novel, “until this unutterable north he has always had enough to eat” (237), and it is this absence of material sustenance that leads to a more expansive spiritual

sustenance. Richardson makes a similar observation: “starvation . . . was their complete and mutual confessor” (245). Hood becomes, for Wiebe, the model of this spiritual awakening as he adapts the teachings and writings of Christianity to account for his experiences in this new land. Hood’s thoughts as he moves further and further into delirium are portrayed and experienced as an uncovering or creation of a sort of hybrid religion or culture. The chapter opens with this blending of immediate experience of the New World with Christianity as “[p]rayers stagger through Robert Hood” much in the way that Hood and the other men are staggering through the Arctic. Hood’s prayer, “*what may befall me this day O God I know not but I know that nothing can,*” is interrupted by the reality that he “can no longer walk” (220). While Hoeppner argues that Wiebe is suggesting that Christianity is not appropriate for the lived experience of the North, I would contend that these passages and the numerous others in this chapter instead imply that a flexible Christian ethos is a meaningful presence in this unfamiliar country.

Hood’s death-bed musings, as Wiebe imagines them, contain a blending of Christian theology with the spirituality of the Dene people. For example, Hood moves from the wish that they could see the raven to the notion that the Arctic is indeed the place of the Dene to a biblical verse that pictures the prophet Elijah receiving food from ravens (223). As Omhovere explains, here the “swaying paratax of the Scriptures . . . is made to echo native experience” (85). Later, Hood’s confused “scrap of memory” combines the “fiery furnace” and angels of Christian lore with the accidental burning of the British flag that occurred early in the expedition near the lake the Dene call “Like a Woman’s Breasts” (224).

The predominant framework for this hybrid Christianity, however, takes the form of hymns, biblical verses, and prayers mixed with nostalgic, even sensuous thoughts of Greenstockings. Imagining the progress of the Franklin-led group, Hood thinks of Fort

Enterprise and the possibility that Greenstockings is there “with caribou heart . . . stuffed stomach turning in smoke there and the heat of her long brown body” (227). This image leads directly into an expression of faith in God’s will: “*dear God my God nothing can happen to me which Thou hast not foreseen ruled willed ordained . . .*” (227). This prayer, in turn, cycles back to Greenstockings, with Hood tying together the eternity of God’s plan with his own plea to “*bless her*” for all eternity (227). A similarly circular incantation occurs when Hood alters the words to the Lord’s Prayer, incorporating the prayer into the realization that the map Keskarrah drew for the expedition was showing them the best way to “return from the east,” and hence was signaling their “possible salvation”: “*O God her father our father which art in heaven*” (232-33). Hood is not aligning Keskarrah or Greenstockings with the Christian God, but his reflections seem to suggest a deepening of Christian belief through an interaction between its theology and the Dene’s lives and knowledge.

The insufficiency of rote Christianity in this New World is demonstrated in this chapter by the readings Richardson performs of the Bible, readings that Hood and Hepburn struggle to relate to their current experience. Wiebe highlights this estrangement by juxtaposing the contents of Leviticus – “And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them . . .” – with the contents of Hood’s thoughts: “Hood is contemplating his stinking arm. . . he continually thinks, eat, his English duty is EAT” (234). Later Richardson’s repetition of remembered passages from Leviticus cause Hood to laugh at the out-of-place quality of Richardson’s “cathedral solemnity” (243) and at the recollection that his father, the Clergyman, refused to read that passage due to its reference to nakedness (243-44).

While the external performance of Christian duty is useless, even ridiculous, in the face of the expedition’s current situation, on another level there is a turning to a more profound and more relevant Christian belief that assimilates and is assimilated into the lived

experiences of these men. This inner Christianity acts as a thread through the chapter “Offering Strange Fire”; its final expression comes in Hood’s realization as death approaches that he does not need to see the words of the various books of the Bible, that they are already there “dragging through his mind” (249). It is these words running through Hood’s thoughts that effect commonalities and connections, revealing the “something beyond” that exists just outside the frame of representation (Hood’s pictorial representation, the representation contained in the explorers’ journals and history in general, and perhaps even outside the frames of Wiebe’s novelistic representation of these events). The blending of English nursery rhymes, such as “Who Killed Cock Robin,” with Biblical imagery and addresses to God, suggests not a leveling of religion with the silliness and arbitrariness of the nursery rhyme; it instead suggests a reconsideration of the trivial as also potentially fraught with messages, patterns, truths, profundity. Further, as Omhovere points out, the inclusion of these nursery rhymes “does not merely collapse the neat distinction between the sacred and the profane,” it also suggests that, like the First Nations, British civilization has a component of oral culture (85). In other words, there are connections between the seemingly disparate groups, and these connections must be unearthed in order to both grasp and formulate a vision of inter-cultural dialogue.

As in his other novels,⁶² in *A Discovery of Strangers* Wiebe presents a more flexible Christian vision; such a Christianity, he seems to imply, is the only kind that is appropriate to the New World context. This religious dynamism is perhaps best showcased in the passage following Hood’s reflections on his family’s “ritual goodness,” on their Sunday “parade of Anglican clerical perfection,” and the absurdity such a life now holds for him, as well as the

⁶² In his earlier Mennonite novels, Wiebe demonstrated the drawbacks of creating an exclusive Christianity and a corresponding insular community. His point was always that Christianity must be able to exist in a world of infinite variety.

alienation he now feels from such a Christianity (244). Christianity must be adapted, and this adaptation is symbolized in Hood's application of Leviticus to Greenstockings and the child that they have produced. Indeed, it is this child that stands as a metaphor and a hope for the future, an idea to which I will return shortly, and the combining of Christian rituals of purification with the Dene's way of life suggests a positive future for Native and European peoples in Canada. Hood describes the "sweetest washing" of "sand and smoke and ashes" that the Dene experience each day and ties this ritual to the necessity that Greenstockings and his child also perform the rites commanded in Leviticus (246). Richardson further demonstrates this interaction of European religion with Arctic life when he reads the proclamation from God to Moses that an atonement of either a lamb or two young pigeons will cleanse the woman who has given birth and considers replacing the pigeons with ptarmigan (247).

The rightness of this more flexible Christianity for the New World is highlighted by the excerpt from Richardson's journal that interrupts the narrative flow from the death of Hood at the end of this chapter to the birth of his child and the blending of European and First Nations worlds in the next chapter. The limiting/limited Christianity of the official records is nicely showcased in Richardson's entry, and, due to its placement in the novel, this version of Christianity is again shown to be incongruous with the life that it attempts to comprehend, define, and control. Written on October 24th and 25th, 1821, Richardson's account of Michel's death downplays the acts of violence Michel both committed and met with, focusing instead on the reasons behind his actions. Michel, Richardson argues, seemed "good and respectful to the officers" prior to his attack on Hood (253). However, beneath this respectful façade, Richardson goes on to explain, was a lack of "belief in the divine

truths of Christianity,” and it was this lack that led to his inability to “withstand the pressure of severe distress” (253).

Richardson then states that Michel was not instructed “of the duties inculcated by Christianity; and from his long residence in this part of the country seemed to have imbibed, and retained, the rules of conduct which the Indians here prescribe themselves” (253). There seems to be a vast difference between duty and belief, but Richardson perceives them as inseparable, taking Michel’s turning away from duty as a sign of the absence of belief. Michel’s conduct, which was “good and respectful” at the beginning, suggests that one can follow the duties of Christianity without ever believing; Michel, then, was Christian at a surface level. While certainly Michel’s obedience to Christian duty – which entails not placing one’s own needs above another’s – crumbles with his cannibalism and murder of Hood, the problem is less one of duty, than one of belief. If Richardson wants to equate duty and belief, then there is a conflict, for in murdering Michel have not Richardson and Hepburn also demonstrated a slipping away from duty and, thus, according to Richardson, an equal deterioration of belief? The quotation, taken in the new context of Wiebe’s frame narrative, forces us to consider two things: one, the possible instability of Richardson’s own Christianity in the face of “severe distress” (253), and, two, the fact that perhaps this duty-bound Christianity is not the adequate model for understanding or coping with life in this unfamiliar country.

The inadequacy of European ideology is highlighted in the chapter following Richardson’s excerpt. In “Out of the Lake,” there is a lengthy discussion between Keskarrah and Bigfoot that elucidates the incongruity of the English lifestyle and the one appropriate to the Arctic. As Keskarrah points out, the “Whitemuds” are always working to accumulate things and think the Dene should too (265-66), but all these things are not suited to the

nomadic lifestyle that is necessary in a land where stillness only leads to death. Moreover, the English have brought new sicknesses to the people (264). Finally, Keskarrah reflects that the need of the “Whitemuds” to conquer and possess land will only end badly for either them or the Dene people (266). These prophecies of doom and Wiebe’s depiction of the negative impact the presence “These English” have on the land and its people are offset, however, by the birth of a half-White, half-Dene child. Greenstockings’ pregnancy suggests that perhaps the interaction of cultures need not have only detrimental effects. When Keskarrah makes dire predictions to his daughter – “These English are deadly. Their coming will destroy us” – her response, “Hood didn’t destroy me,” reminds the reader that, in fact, Hood’s presence resulted in something positive (269). Perhaps the arrival of the strangers can also lead to creation. While certainly Wiebe relies on the history of this expedition, and the ones before and after it, to predispose the reader to take up Keskarrah’s view that the Whitemuds bring only ruin to the First Nations and to the land, Wiebe also uses history to imbue his revised national narrative with hope. In some ways, then, the discovery the past contains is one of possibilities and healing for the future.

The last chapter of *A Discovery of Strangers* also relies on documented history to achieve its vision of reconciliation and promise. As Heather Robertson and Wiebe himself (in *Playing Dead*) explain, there is documentation of the presence of a child, declared on the 1823 census as the orphan of Hood (Robertson 24). Wiebe picks up on the prospect of this child and uses it as a symbol for the idealized hybrid nation his narrative is trying to envision: “It is Wiebe’s way as a storyteller of taking the fact of this historical birth and imagining it as a vision of hope and possibility for future relations between Natives and Europeans . . .” (James 86). This possibility is captured in the baby’s eyes, one brown and one blue. It is also signaled by Greenstockings’ assertion in the novel’s last chapter that she

found her baby in a caribou hoof, which, according to Dene belief, means the baby will be “a person Who Knows Something a Little” (304). In other words, Hood and Greenstockings’ baby represents the nation that could still exist – a nation of respectful and peaceful cultural co-existence, and a nation of people who have learned from their past or at least from the past presented in Wiebe’s novel, people “who know something a little.”

That Wiebe’s narrative is forward-looking is unsurprising given the messages of his previous historical novels. Both *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People* revised the past with a vision to the future. So, too, with *A Discovery of Strangers*. As I have argued throughout this chapter, Wiebe’s overarching purpose in re-framing national history is to disclose its revelatory nature and to include the reader in this process of revelation, pointing to a more pluralistic Canada. It is not necessary that the message Wiebe uncovers in the past be a wholly positive one – he does not need these explorers to come out of the novel looking heroic, daring, or ambitious. What matters is not the success or failure of the expedition, but whether or not there is something to be learned for the present-day reader.

I cannot agree with Kaltemback who, based on Hood’s death and Hepburn’s interpretation of it, argues: “As for their noble fight which took them to the limits of endurance, it proves to be utterly useless once we realize that Nature in the Arctic provides for those who respect it” (84). While I have suggested that Wiebe’s narrative forces a rereading of the excerpts in a way that partially leads us to perceive hints of understanding and development in them, the main objection I have to Kaltemback’s reading is it seems to me that Wiebe’s point is neither to redeem nor condemn the figures of the past, but to use the past to relay a message for the present. It could be argued that by re-narrating the past through a reliance on its documents, Wiebe is doing exactly what he criticizes when he has

Keskarrah comment: “It seemed they had heard only their own telling, as told to themselves” (15). In other words, by responding to the old texts with a new text, Wiebe is participating in the very insular self-narrating that his novel exposes.⁶³ As soon as a writer takes up documents from Canada’s past, he/she is inevitably engaged in a dialogue with the people who wrote them. However, Wiebe is aware of this problem, which is why he uses Hood’s struggle to act as a mirror of the writer’s struggle to work with this material and still reach some sort of place of truth outside of it. This entire novel is about trying to get outside of that insular community of Europeans; it’s about an opening up of narrative, communication, and minds. If including excerpts from Richardson’s and Hood’s journals does create a seemingly privileged narration of history, the inclusion of these excerpts, because they are re-framed by a narrative that enacts the kind of cultural hybridization that Wiebe is promoting, also look outside themselves and are in some ways exploded by the other stories and perspectives that surround them. From the outset, Wiebe’s framing narrative lets us know how we are to read not only the excerpts, but the men who wrote them. Wiebe’s narrative also suggests how to re-read Canadian history and re-imagine Canadian nationhood. As John Moss explains, the Native people and Franklin’s men should be read as “projections of the author’s own sensibility” (“Wiebe’s Dreamvision” 43). Robert Hood becomes the key figure in Wiebe’s vision of the ideal nation. Not only does Hood epitomize the dialogue of cultures that Wiebe sees as necessary for the pluralistic nation he envisions, but Hood’s development within the narrative becomes a model for the experience the reader is meant to have while reading the novel. By using Hood in this manner, Wiebe renders him a sort of ideal “Canadian” prototype. In the end, it is not the Dene, nor a White European, but a mixed race baby who

⁶³ For example, by placing Hood’s and Back’s accounts side by side in the chapter following Keskarrah’s observation.

comes to represent the promise of the nation contained in the novel. Although the Dene may have the final words of the story, and notwithstanding the birth of the mixed race child, it is Hood's experience of the Arctic and his tragic death that forms the spiritual focus of the novel. *A Discovery of Strangers* does struggle with the problems of representing the history of a colonial country imaginatively and subversively, while still celebrating the past out of which the contemporary nation evolved. Wiebe, through the experiences of Hood, is able to recognize the exploitation and intolerance present in Canada's past, while still finding positive meaning in a history that many other writers have worked to simply disavow.

Chapter 4 – The Sins of Settlement: John Steffler’s *George Cartwright and Communal Confession*

John Steffler’s 1992 novel *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, like Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers*, undertakes a re-visionary engagement with colonial history while foregrounding the difficulty of such an endeavour. Steffler is self-reflexive about the problems of historiographical representation through his use of a structural device that precludes any slips into the mimetic mode. Like Wiebe, Steffler uses a third-person narrative, but it is interspersed with or interrupted by real excerpts from the historical Cartwright’s records and the fictional character’s imagined entries from an “afterlife” journal. This overabundance of narratives and perspectives highlights the constructedness of the novel – and of the various versions of the journal – and works to keep us at a distance from both Cartwright and the history he represents. *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* does not, however, contain the same demythologizing of history that is prominent in Bowering’s novel. Steffler uses Cartwright to tell a story with an explicit trajectory and purpose. Unlike Bowering, whose interest lies in disrupting teleological and historical myth-making, Steffler, like Wiebe, discovers in history a sort of resolution and restitution. What separates Steffler’s re-vision from that of Wiebe, however, is that Steffler actually has to lift Cartwright out of history in order to effect a resolution of the colonial past.

Steffler rehearses the same tension as Bowering, and like Bowering, anchors this focus in his use of actual historical documents, but from the opposite direction. Bowering, coming from a self-consciously postmodern perspective, effaces history by reducing it to so much fiction, but at the same time, he does so in order to recuperate history (the narrative power of specifics) as part of his demythologizing project. Steffler, by emphasizing the historical wrongs that were perpetrated in the name of imperialism, insists on the reality of a

history whose crimes we cannot ethically ignore; but at the same time, he does so in order to efface this history by subordinating it to a re-visionary alternative. By playing the original Cartwright off against a more enlightened version who understands all of this in retrospect, Steffler not only aligns himself with history (the past errors which his novel catalogues) in order to erase this history in the name of a more progressive alternative, he dramatizes this process as a central element of his narrative. And like Bowering, he performs these multiple strategies through his deliberately contradictory use of actual documents. On the one hand, their inclusion insists on the reality of a past whose force we cannot responsibly ignore; on the other hand, his explicit descriptions of the later Cartwright's re-vision of these documents, and of their necessarily selective and partial nature, highlights the dubious nature of these texts as reliable historical documents. The original explorer's journals offer a window onto history, but the later Cartwright's reflections on the extent of what they left out (often for important strategic reasons) exposes the fallacy of the transparent relation to the past which the journals seem to offer. But Steffler also goes one step further by dramatizing his own construction of a morally superior Cartwright, aware of the moral problems of his earlier behaviour. Where Bowering effaces history only to embrace it as part of a demythologizing project, Steffler embraces history only to efface it as part of his own mythologizing project.

The Afterlife of George Cartwright examines the "life and times" of one of Canada's early explorer/settlers through the imagined thoughts and recollections of Cartwright after his death. Cartwright, an 18th-century European adventurer and the protagonist of Steffler's narrative, left his home in England in 1765 to travel to Labrador with hopes of making his fortune there. From 1770 to 1786, Cartwright ran a settlement and trading operation on the Labrador coast. Initially, he lived closely with the nearby Inuit community and even brought

an Inuit family to England in 1772, with the hope that their presence would help him raise funds for future endeavours in North America. On the ship back to Labrador, however, the Inuit family contracted smallpox, all of them dying but one. Years later, Cartwright learnt that the entire community of Inuit had died, and he suspected that they had also contracted smallpox from the one survivor of the trip to England. The details of Cartwright's time in Labrador are recorded in his diaries – published as *A Journal of Transactions and Events* (1792) – a text that used to be required reading on the Newfoundland school curriculum. Steffler knew immediately upon reading Cartwright's "fascinating, appalling Labrador journal" that he "wanted to do something with it, and with the life of this person of my past" ("Memorable Images" 8). What Steffler did with the "journal" of the historical Cartwright was revisit it through fiction and re-imagine it as a vehicle of atonement for both Cartwright and the period of Canada's past that he represents.

The novel contains a third-person narrative that oscillates between describing the actions and motives of the historical Cartwright and the ghostly Cartwright. Much of the third-person narrative that is focused on Cartwright's time in Labrador is taken directly from journals the real Cartwright kept and published during his lifetime. Partially alerting us to the presence of these original journals are excerpts from various entries written by Cartwright, which are generally identified by a date and appear throughout the section of narrative focused on Cartwright's stay in Labrador. These historical excerpts, however, are revised by the invented entries from Cartwright's afterlife journal. Nicola Renger argues that this mixture of third-person narrative, imagined entries, and historical documents creates a "polyphonic" or "dialogic" framework which "interrogates the form and structure of history. . ." (81). Certainly Steffler questions the availability of any transparent historical narrative or structure, especially in terms of "the contents and themes of Canadian history" (81). His re-

vision of Canadian history and the records from which it is culled implies an alternative emphasis on the contingent nature of historical narratives. The afterlife entries, I will be arguing, formulate what becomes a confession and, in so doing, engage the real journals in a process of recognition, penance and forgiveness. This re-contextualizing of the excerpts results in a problematic message since the novel delineates a dubious process of absolution. It seems as though, for Steffler, Cartwright, his journals, and the history they represent are somehow lacking. As Steffler himself explains in an interview following the publication of the novel: “Most of the time, I didn’t like this guy. Sometimes I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to go on. But he is a man of his time. And I tried to make him into an ancestor of ours” (interview with Val Ross C2). By revisiting Cartwright in the afterlife, Steffler is able to make Cartwright the national ancestor he needs him to be – one cognizant of his errors and willing to atone for the sins of settlement. This is Cartwright as he should have been, as we, in the post-colonial present, would have wanted him. In and through his portrait of Cartwright, Steffler is able to naturalize his (re)vision of history as fraught with the same kind of regret and crises of conscience that he believes consume the nation today.

Steffler projects this regret over Canada’s colonial past onto Cartwright, punishing him for the damage he wrought on the New World in the name of imperialist capitalism. Instead of admittance to heaven, after his death Cartwright finds himself in a sort of purgatory. Cartwright, the narrator tells us, “sensed the end coming” and, musing on “what lay beyond,” imagined “a brief audience with his Maker” (7). Cartwright foresees also an audience with old acquaintances, friends, family, believing that “[f]orgiveness and understanding would likely prevail” (8). When Cartwright actually passes away in his sleep, however, he wakes up to find himself in the same inn where he had been living prior to death. Alone and forced to roam the English countryside with his hawk, Kaumalak, day after

day (which is actually the same day – May 19, 1819), Cartwright returns to his journals in hopes of tracing the steps that have brought him to this haunting and haunted existence.

A division is therefore created not just between the contemporary, politically aware reader and the historical Cartwright, but also between the afterlife Cartwright and the Cartwright who actually lived. Steffler alerts us to this division when he has the ghostly Cartwright reflect in an afterlife entry: “It’s strange that God allows us to make mistakes and go on living for years in situations created by our mistakes, situations very different from what would have been had our lives taken another course. In effect we become strangers to our real selves . . .” (226). It is this strangeness that Steffler’s choice of placing Cartwright in a sort of non-place, non-time attempts to convey. This de-contextualizing of Cartwright as an historical figure allows the re-contextualizing of him by the frame narrative that surrounds his journals and suggests a form of continuity between the concerns of the past and present nation. Cartwright’s removal from the world not only symbolizes, but enables, a separation from himself and the consequent perspective this separation allows. It, of course, also allows a separation from the materiality of the real Cartwright and his actual journals. Moreover, because this disconnection is so glaring, it allows Steffler to position the afterlife Cartwright as a protagonist in search of reintegration. Like other sinners, Cartwright’s wrongdoing has led him to feel alienated from himself and ostracized from the human community, so he is motivated by the desire for reintegration. It is this search for social reintegration and psychic wholeness, as I will outline below, that is the hallmark of confession.

It is through realizing, recounting, and seeking redemption for his actions that Cartwright is finally admitted into the world that his actions most harmed. This reintegration comes at the end of the novel when the ghostly Cartwright is not only at last able to see Labrador but actually to return there from the English countryside where he has been

trapped. Cartwright is then consumed by a white bear, an animal that is connected to Attouick's (Cartwright's Inuit friend) Torngarsoak,⁶⁴ as well as to an incident of excessive and unnecessary slaughter in the historical Cartwright's life.⁶⁵ The consumption of Cartwright by the bear would seem to suggest a forgiveness and acceptance of Cartwright – and possibly British colonizers in general – by the land, the people, and history. As I will argue towards the end of this chapter, this re-casting of Cartwright and his journals into a confession that then leads to a purification, almost an erasure of past sins, is troubling. What Steffler's narrative seems to suggest is that the evils of European imperialism and colonization can be wiped away and we can start again, if we are just sorry enough (Wyle 184). In *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, the excerpts not only become re-contextualized, they ultimately de-contextualize the historical moment from which they arise. Read against the afterlife entries, the excerpts become inseparable from the confession with which the novel is consumed⁶⁶ and thereby come to seem the words of a repressed, flawed, but redeemable man, a man seeking reintegration. In other words, the same documents that are used to represent the reality of Canada's imperialist past, including its ignorance, exploitation, and oppression of First Nations people, are erased and written over by a

⁶⁴ Earlier in the novel, Attouick relates the story of how he became an angakok (priest) to Cartwright in the third-person narrative. Attouick had to be separated from his village and had to fast until eventually his Torngarsoak came in the shape of a white bear and consumed him: "He came straight to me and ate me slowly, limb by limb. I was only a skeleton lying there" (128). After being consumed by the white bear, Attouick is ready to find his spirit guide, his torngak, and assume his rightful role as angakok for his village.

⁶⁵ In a particularly gruesome hunting expedition recorded in both the historical Cartwright's journals and in the novel, Cartwright kills six white bears, including two cubs. Cartwright and his men are not even able to move the bodies of these bears nor turn them over to skin them, so the slaughter is not only an example of exploitation but also of waste. When the afterlife Cartwright comes face to face with a bear that then consumes him, it seems to represent a confrontation with his excessive violence and a punishment that leads to a reintegration into the community he has wronged.

⁶⁶ Steffler, in fact, highlights this lack of separation between afterlife and historical journals at the end of the first chapter, when the narrator informs us that Cartwright sometimes "finds himself rewriting passages almost word for word" (26). What this observation suggests is that the historical excerpts included in the novel are actually also written or re-written in the afterlife, that they are versions of entries from the real journals.

framing narrative that imagines for the national past an acknowledgement of and forgiveness for such wrong-doings.

Confession and the Post-Colonial

According to Terrence Doody, Robert Phillips, and Peter Brooks, this search for reintegration is the essence of confession. As Brooks explains in *Troubling Confessions*, the Roman Catholic Church made confession obligatory in 1215 at the same Lateran Council that “established an inquisition for the extirpation of heresy” (2). This attachment in Christian dogma between enforced revelation and punishment for things revealed suggests that one motivation behind confession is a sort of “moral cleansing” (2). It is this notion of “cleansing” that informs the preeminence of confession in psychology, psychoanalysis, therapy of many kinds. Theodore Reik and many others have long argued that humans have a “compulsion to confess,” and that the latent impulses, feelings, even thoughts repressed in our unconscious will invariably be expressed somehow. Through expressing these “suppressed ideas and tendencies,” the patient/confessant gains “a measure of relief,” even “pleasure,” and the “[c]onscience has . . . reacquired the ability to speak” (Reik 206). Confession can also act as a sort of moral policing, which is its usual role within the judicial system. When a criminal admits guilt, the justice system can hand down punishment not only secure in the fact that the right person is being punished but also with the sense that this punishment is accepted, even desired (Brooks 2).

These various incarnations of confession have been a central part of Western literature for centuries, from Augustine’s *Confessions* written in 399, to Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* published in 1781. While Augustine’s and other spiritual confessions base their value on their ability to provide “an exemplary model of fall and

redemption,” Rousseau’s *Confessions* is wrapped up in the modern ideology of the individual. The definition of confession with which Rousseau is working, as Brooks observes, “both creates and is created by a new sense of selfhood. . . . Without a sense of the self and its narrative, there could be no confession; and without the requirement of confession, internally or externally mandated, there would be no exploration of this selfhood” (97). While before the Middle Ages the individual was “vouched for by the reference of others,” by his community, over time the only proof of the individual’s authenticity must come from himself and his own “discourse of truth . . . concerning himself” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 58). In this way, the “truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization” (Foucault 58-59).

As this concern with identity grew and the importance of the individual moved to the forefront of Western civilization during the nineteenth and twentieth century, “the confessional mode flourishe[d]” (Brooks 73), and the idea of confession in a more general sense grew in popularity. From Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* to James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the confessional mode came to define the characteristics of the fictionalized “confessional hero.” According to Peter Axthelm, the confessing protagonist is one “examining his past as well as his innermost thoughts, in an effort to achieve some form of perception,” perception much needed in order to provide a return to balance, in order to right his world through writing/righting his wrongs (8-9). These and various other confessional texts also examine the process and complications of the confessional act. “A certain looseness is,” as J.M. Coetzee elucidates, “inevitable” when confession moves from the religious context to a more secular one (252). Suddenly there is no omniscient check on truth-telling, and the self being examined and, in some ways, created by the confession faces “problems of . . . self-recognition, deception and self deception”

(Coetzee 252), problems which invariably end up almost preoccupying the confessional narrative. There is a persistent split in the modern confession between the autobiographer's desire to present himself as a good person and the narrative of "acts and consequences in which the autobiographer profits from the misfortunes of others and plays some role in the production of those misfortunes" (O'Rourke 2). Further, because there is no final auditor or authority listening to this avowal, the question remains whether the secular confession can ever lead "to that *end of the chapter* whose attainment is the goal of confession" when there is "no confessor empowered to absolve" absolutely (Coetzee 253).

Despite or perhaps because modern confession offers no final resolution, mainstream Western culture has demonstrated a consistent and thriving investment in the individual's laying bare of his or her soul. This complete self-exposure has become so prevalent it is "nearly banal, the everyday business of talk shows" (Brooks 4). As Foucault famously observes in *The History of Sexuality*, "Western man has become a confessing animal" (59). The practice of confessing has become "so deeply ingrained in us" that we have come to believe that "truth, lodged in our most secreted nature, 'demands' only to surface. . . ." (Foucault 60). Although confession has clearly departed from the more stringent conception of it that informed the mandate of the Lateran Council, there are still some fairly solid and recurring principles that remain linked to the notion of truth-telling. These principles can be seen in Steffler's presentation of Cartwright's story as a confession.

Ideally, confessing signals a form of self-recognition, an acknowledgement of culpability for any misdeeds, and, as such, it is an essential step in "rehabilitation" and in "the end to ostracism" both from oneself and from the "human community" (2). However, in its search for purification and acceptance, the confession does not always come from or express unfettered truth(s). As Sissela Bok notes, confession exists on the thresholds of both

“concealment and revelation” (73). While it may be “based on a model of communication,” confession is also “exploited” “because it provides room for evasion” (Foster 2). This evasion is linked to the confessant’s ultimate authority over the material being disclosed. The confessant not only interprets the sin(s) and arranges them into a narrative, he or she edits and manipulates the confession in order to draw readers in: “The confessing sinner is thus both penitent and tempter” (Foster 17). In some ways, then, the confessant, in confessing, actually sins again. Regardless of its disparate motives, the confession, Bok argues, always originates from “a lack of harmony” and represents “an effort to restore that harmony,” be it through evasion, persuasion, or unadulterated disclosure (75). Confession, therefore, comes not just from initial sin, but from the feeling of crisis and alienation from oneself and others that sin creates.

The relationship to the self figures prominently in the avowal of sins. On one hand, the individual is experiencing a sort of fractured identity, a schism between the self that he/she is now and the self that committed these acts. Paul Ricoeur describes it as a “strangeness,” and explains that this “experience of being oneself but alienated from oneself gets transcribed” into language and narrative as a means of reorientation (8). As what Mikhail Bakhtin labels “self-accounting,” the confession thus represents an attempt by the individual to regain a sort of wholeness through a verbal exorcism of sins: “the only principle that organizes the utterance here is the pure relationship of the *I* to itself” (Bakhtin 141). The problem is, however, that there can be no finality, no closed totality, because self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-revelation are derived “from consciousness itself, which is ongoing” (Les Smith 34). In other words, confession can never be complete or finished. “The more you confess,” Brooks contends, “the more guilt is produced. The more guilt produced, the more the confessional machine functions” (22).

The other key relationship in confession is that between the confessant (the one speaking) and the community in which the confessant hopes to realize him or herself, the community that “he needs to exist in and to confirm him” (Doody 4). This community, in other words, is typically the audience or reader of the confession; the community is the confessor (the one who listens). The community is, of course, not a given, but rather a creation of the confession itself (Doody 14). In terms of Steffler’s novel, Cynthia Sugars identifies the audience/community as an “imagined, and therefore reductive, national constituency . . . a constituency of Canadian citizens who have inherited the historical legacy of the colonial state and its accompanying sociocultural effects” (699). Of course, if we read the novel as operating within a confessional structure, this community becomes a bit more complex. The confessor from whom Cartwright is seeking forgiveness appears to be Canada itself, the land and its original inhabitants (the Aboriginal peoples), while also, almost by default, the reader of the confession, this “constituency” that Sugars identifies. On the level of plot, it would seem that Cartwright is confessing to a sort of pre-contact Canada, a Canada that accepts Cartwright by the end of novel. On another level, however, it would seem that Steffler is imagining his own reader as a contemporary Canadian who is, as Sugars puts it, an inheritor of colonialism. It is this contemporary Canadian readership to whom the mythologizing of Cartwright and the colonial past is directed. It is on this other level that the confessional relationship becomes both intriguing and somewhat troublesome. The confessant appeals to the receptive audience that he has imagined in his mind, and the confessor, in becoming this audience, forms a community with the confessant. A funny thing happens, then, because the confessor becomes almost ensnared by the confession and community comes to imply a “mutual, personal responsibility” for the acts being confessed (Doody 6). As Bok explains, one seeks out a confessor partly in order to “share one’s

burdens” (76). The confessor, once he or she begins listening, can no longer stand outside of the confession, but rather “is himself involved in the need to understand” (Foster 17).

This need to understand often leads to what Bakhtin identifies as the reader’s impulse to aestheticize confession (147). As the reader or confessor aestheticizes the confession, he or she moves towards a position of authorship, while the subject of self-accounting develops into a hero for the confessor (148). We believe the confessant because we have, in becoming a sort of author of the confession, created the confessant – this tendency to create the confessant is connected to the possibility that both the reader and Steffler are trying to make Cartwright a particular sort of national ancestor. In the case of *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, this work has already been done for the reader. Steffler has listened to Cartwright’s journals as though they were a confession and has acted as our representative in interpreting them, becoming the author of Cartwright, the hero. Stephen Scobie perceives this process in documentary literature as an instance of what Jacques Derrida labeled the “forged signature.” The persona of the writer, Scobie explains, adopts “the persona, speaking voice, or signature of this central character,” the character or historical figure whose documents/writing is being re-framed by the new text (121). In some ways, then, the contemporary writer takes the place of the original writer, signing the text “in *the name of the other*, in the false name of the historical persona. The signature is true, but the signature is forged” (123).

Steffler has responded to Cartwright’s journals with his own concealed confession – the guilt he feels both as a non-Native Canadian and on the part of non-Native Canadians is clear in his creation of Cartwright as a man who is atoning for his colonial sins. The desire to somehow go back in time, to undo what has been done and achieve an almost prelapsarian condition, is a major motivator for the confessional act. Confession is, therefore, undeniably

linked to history – or, more properly, to the re-vision, even expulsion, of history. As Les Smith explains, “confession reflects a basic dissatisfaction with history and a consequent need for periodic regeneration” (32). It makes sense, therefore, that a novel dealing with the past of a colonial nation would adopt the confessional model. In fact, the aspects of confession discussed above are easily aligned with many post-colonial concerns. For instance, the notion of the confessional subject as struggling with a sense of self-alienation can be linked to the settler’s fractured experience and identity as being neither of the Old World nor the New World.

Because many texts premised on post-colonial theories of settler/invaser experience try to examine and interpret the process of colonization from inside a divisive experience and identity, they can perform a similar function as the confession. That is, both settler/invaser narratives of this type and confessional writing reenact the moment of rupture and the results of this rupture in an attempt to recuperate a wholeness or understanding of the current identity of an individual, community, or nation. As Foster explains, confession “is a mode by which people enter into the discourse of their culture. . . . It represents an attempt to understand the terms and the limits by which a people are defined, both as they listen to the confession of others and as they recount their own transgressions” (7). This is where the second key aspect of confession comes into play, that of the audience who is hearing the confessant and its inevitable entanglement with and shared responsibility for the sins being avowed. For Canadian settler fictions that are informed by post-colonial concerns, the confessional version of history can work to make its readers aware of the nation’s sins of settlement and their own participation in colonial ideology and practice. Of course, often the corollary to this awareness is the search for and attainment of absolution. With the confessant (in this case an early colonizer), the confessor(s) (the Canadian reader(s) of Cartwright’s

imagined and real journals) not only recognize and re-experience the wrongs committed in the name of imperialism, they obtain absolution for this shameful history. Further, this confessional narrative dilutes the material realities not only of who Cartwright was but of who the imperial explorer/settler was. And here, I would argue, is where post-colonial interests and Steffler's motives diverge. The suggestion in the novel that Cartwright, the confessant, and the Canadian reading community, the confessor, can be forgiven for the sins committed in the name of colonizing the New World and return to some "state of innocence" is problematic. Also the emptying out of history that is required to effect such a confession and the mythology that takes the place of any material realities seems in direct opposition to the politics of redress that are central to post-colonialism in Canada. The way in which Steffler re-frames the excerpts from Cartwright's real journals not only revises history, it eventually serves to wipe history clean in the final scene of Cartwright's consumption by the white bear.

Historical Hindsight in the Journals of a Ghost

Cartwright, Steffler's third-person narrator informs us, spends much of his time in the afterlife rereading and, more importantly, rewriting his journals. Within the entries created in suspended time, the dead Cartwright is able to revisit and reconsider his official record of his life and times. The afterlife journal writes against or even over the excerpts from Cartwright's real journals that Steffler includes. This relationship between Cartwright's writings and Steffler writing/speaking for Cartwright results in a sort of palimpsest, wherein the excerpts from Cartwright's *A Journal of Transactions and Events* cannot be read as distinct from the developing confession occurring within the invented entries that surround them. The ghostly Cartwright rewrites the historical Cartwright, rendering him a repentant,

sympathetic sinner whose growing realization and eventual redemption occurs within and as a result of the pages of his journal. The afterlife entries fill in the lack of emotion, awareness, and humanity that haunts the original excerpts, making Cartwright the ancestor that we need him to be. In effect, the afterlife entries become like that picture of the Algerian French soldier, effacing the particularities and specifics of the original journals in order to fill them in with a particular post-colonial ideology.

At the end of the first chapter, the third-person narrator connects Cartwright's journal writing with feelings of "loneliness" and the sense that "he's about to implode, metamorphose into some horrible thing" (25). The suggestion, of course, is that Cartwright is already a "horrible thing" or has, at least, done horrible things, and "the crisis of torment" he is facing can only be relieved through "examining . . . his memories" (25-26). While his previous journals, his real journals, are concerned with the ritual and patterns of hunting, these new entries have "less order and purpose" (26). Instead of "pulling things together, making sense of his life," the afterlife writings question this enterprise by exposing discrepancies, challenging the values of the historical Cartwright, and pointing out and filling the absences in the real excerpts. If Cartwright's edited, published records functioned as a chronological and teleological narrative, the invented entries "pull things" apart, making sense not of his life, but of his current purgatorial position. By moving away from the censoring and repression that Steffler sees in the historical Cartwright, the ghostly Cartwright gradually gains not only an awareness of himself as a sinner, but forgiveness from those against whom he sinned for the actions and ideologies of the historical Cartwright.

The confessional work begins almost immediately with an afterlife entry at the start of the second chapter. Typical of the confessional genre,⁶⁷ the first entry we have deals with Cartwright as a boy, with the now presumably older and wiser Cartwright looking back on his younger self. Dealing with his experience in India, Cartwright reflects on the misconceptions that he harboured, such as his belief that it would “transform” him, mature him (27). There is a distance established, then, between the Cartwright (the subject) who is confessing and the Cartwright (the object) that is being confessed, again a signal of the type of de-contextualizing that Steffler is enacting here. This distance is underlined by Cartwright’s comment that India now seems to him alternately immediate and “foreign” (28). From the outset Steffler positions the afterlife Cartwright as withdrawing from the Cartwright of history, although not without conflict. By moving away from the colonialist that he was in his life, Cartwright becomes a more acceptable figure for the post-colonial reader. Simultaneously, by still feeling a connection to that past self, Cartwright is able to stand for the more shameful aspects of the nation’s past. There is a kind of doubleness, then, implicit in the figure of Cartwright, a doubleness that can be seen as connected to the sort of nation narration that Homi Bhabha elucidates. Cartwright stands for the perspective that is simultaneously divorced from and contained within the present, but he also stands for the anachronistic treatment of the past by the present-day nation. Placing Cartwright on this past/present fissure allows Steffler to expose the tension implicit in any interpretation of history. The end of this first invented entry nicely demonstrates this double position. The reflective Cartwright wonders if he was not, in fact, lucky to “enter and exit” India relatively

⁶⁷ We can see this trend in Augustine’s and Rousseau’s *Confessions*, as well as in many contemporary Canadian fictions, such as Robertson Davies’ *Fifth Business* and Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, both of which David Williams discusses in his 1991 study of the confessional genre in Canadian literature.

unchanged. However, this hint of insight is quickly counteracted by the final lines – “Killed a partridge today. . . . A fine day.” – which are reminiscent of his real journal entries, entries that are largely taken up with a record of animals killed and weather conditions.

This comparison between imagined and real entries is not apparent until later in the book when Cartwright, the character, goes to Labrador and excerpts from his official account appear alongside the framing text(s). Nonetheless, by ending the first entry in this manner, Steffler is setting up the palimpsestic effect by including within a reflective entry phrasing and subject matter typical of the historical Cartwright. The historical Cartwright’s voice is in this way appropriated and subsumed by the voice of a more self-aware, self-questioning, even self-loathing Cartwright; as Scobie puts it, the true signature is also a forgery. This elision of the real and the imagined changes the Cartwright of *A Journal of Transactions and Events* into a re-mythologized Cartwright of Steffler’s making.

The journal entries that deal with Cartwright’s life before Labrador help to set up this new, improved, repentant version of him. The first portion of the novel contains only entries set in the afterlife. While this absence of the historical Cartwright’s records is largely practical (his *A Journal of Transactions and Events* does not begin until he departs for Labrador), I would also suggest that this initial predominance of Steffler’s Cartwright helps ensure that we come to read the real excerpts, when they do appear, through a certain lens. These afterlife entries, which largely detail his time in the military, establish Cartwright as a conflicted man whose sense of self is coming apart, a man who is seeking some sort of wholeness or harmony. As the third-person narrative informs us, the “past clamours” in the pages of this journal, and Cartwright keeps feeling that “some insight, some as yet unthought thought or unremembered memory is needed to complete his life and allow him to get on with his death” (61). What we are reading, then, is Cartwright’s struggle to uncover and

articulate those things that he repressed in his life or those things that he simply did not see or understand, those things that are absent from the pages of his original journal. Steffler, then, is pointing to the incompleteness of the historical record, but he is also creating these omissions in order to then fill them with his own representation of Cartwright.

The search for wholeness or self-integration, as explained above, is a key factor in the desire to confess. What we see in these initial entries is a man who is fighting to regain a sense of identity and a sense of his place in the world. Many of these early afterlife entries show Cartwright contradicting himself or unable to form a firm opinion about the events of his life. For example, Cartwright seems conflicted about his father's contribution (or lack thereof) to his military career. Cartwright seems to be carrying a great deal of resentment towards his father, who, as he sees it, both misled him about a career in the army and was far more financially supportive of his brothers' careers (31). However, Cartwright also mentions the help his father gave him in securing a lieutenancy and recognizes that his father did what he could, given the limited means within which he was operating (61).

Cartwright is also at war with himself over his feelings towards his brother, John. Discussing John's politics, Cartwright initially connects John's more liberal and outspoken attitudes with his economic position, but then disrupts this more practical account with a reflection that is less definite and less stable: "John felt secure, perhaps, in attacking people in power because our family's lands had been promised to him. . . . I am ungenerous. John was braver than I. And yet, was he wiser?. . . . I am ungenerous again." (63-64). This vacillation shows Cartwright's growing doubts about himself and his consequent self-questioning and self-criticism. It mimics the early stages of a confessional narrative, wherein the confessant's subject-position is coming apart despite the confessant's best efforts to retain old identities and opinions.

Such a disintegration is more marked in the proceeding entry. Here Cartwright reflects on marriage, how he always expected to marry, but could never see “the purpose” (71). At the beginning of the entry he speaks of marriage disparagingly: “I pitied the married officers who dragged their wives behind the army. . . . Their marriage seemed merely contracts. . . . To be married to one [woman] was an unnecessary disadvantage” (70-71). However, by the end of the entry, Cartwright is questioning his choices, even expressing regret for the narrowness of his own thinking and his own life:

What about love?

I was afraid. Or it was impossible.

If I'd forgotten Marnham and married Caubvick, my estate would have been all of Labrador. My family would have been everything alive there. Even now those unclaimed kin clamour in my chest. (71)

Here the ghostly Cartwright juxtaposes himself with “everything alive” in Labrador. The suggestion seems to be that long before his real death, Cartwright was dead due to an inability to love - “it was impossible” because he “was afraid.” In other words, Cartwright begins to acknowledge his responsibility for the deficiency of his existence. His awareness of this responsibility – his memories of what was and his thoughts of what could have been – “clamour” inside of him. The haunter is, in effect, haunted by the lost chance of kinship. This chance was lost largely because the historical Cartwright was a man who, judging from his journals, did not share or express his emotions. This past repression leads now to Cartwright's feeling that these “kin” remain “unclaimed” and held within his “chest.” By the end of the novel, through his gradual recognition and admission of culpability, there is a reversal and even a healing of the internal conflict presented in this passage when Cartwright's “kin” and, indeed, Labrador itself, claim him. This earlier entry, then, looks

forward to the moment of forgiveness and reintegration that a confession is meant to produce. It also sets up the re-mythologizing of Cartwright that the novel enacts by effacing the facts of Cartwright's time in Labrador, including his exploitation of the Inuit encountered and of the land itself, in this portrait of a conflicted man who repressed his emotions and was, thus, burdened by them.

The afterlife entries, as I have already argued, suggest and attempt to fill a perceived absence in the real journals, an absence that is largely conveyed by Steffler's removal of an historical context or materiality from Cartwright's writings. This operation becomes particularly apparent once the novel's focus switches to Cartwright's time in Canada. In fact, the first imagined entry that deals with this period of his life contains an admission of holes in the historical records. Discussing his and John's explorations of Newfoundland, Cartwright details their trip down the Exploits River into First Nations' territory: "What I did not mention – and what John refused to believe [or mention in his own pamphlet] – was that later that same day those of us who had turned back discovered a recently abandoned Indian settlement" (95). Cartwright goes on to describe the Beothuk's "secret refuge" and his excitement at being the first European to witness it. Cartwright also describes his frustration at John's unwillingness to believe that Cartwright (and other members of the party who had split off from John and the rest of the expedition) had uncovered evidence of the Beothuk's presence in the area and at John's insistence on naming the body of water "Lieutenant's Lake – after himself" (96).

This entry contains several implications. On one level, this untold story serves as a reminder that Cartwright's real journals, and indeed any account of history, is rife with omissions, and that sometimes it is the omissions that are the most interesting part of a record. That said, however, the mention in Cartwright's afterlife journal of omissions in both

his and John's original records, also suggests the possibility of omission or manipulation in this ghostly confession. If Cartwright was manipulating the facts, then who is to say he is being honest now? While on one hand Steffler seems to need us to believe and forgive Cartwright, he complicates this process by highlighting Cartwright's evasions in his historical journal, thereby leading us to question the veracity and dependability of this afterlife account. What were the historical Cartwright's motives for evading? What are his motives for confessing now? These very questions, however, assume that the historical Cartwright had regrets, that he felt guilt, that he was, in fact, evading something; ultimately, these questions assume that the historical Cartwright had some burden to confess. Therefore, the play of the afterlife entry against the original document de-contextualizes the contents of the excerpt.

The omission imagined in the afterlife entry would seem to suggest an alignment of Cartwright and Canada's First Nations – or at least a surprisingly modern recognition on Cartwright's part of their prior claim to the land. However, Cartwright is also seeking to establish himself as the European "discoverer" of the settlement and the lakes. His seeming respect for Native priority is, in fact, only an unintended side effect in his competition with his brother over imperial recognition. Further, that Cartwright elected to omit this information from his journals would seem to suggest a complicity with European conquest and settlement of a land and its peoples due to a presumption of mastery. Also, Cartwright's portrayal of the Beothuk, whose annihilation by White settlers has come to represent a major crime of Canadian/ Newfoundland colonial history, as though they are quaint curios betrays a problematic detachment and dehumanizing of Native peoples. The combination of these two imperialist acts – the omission or marginalization of the First Nations and the detached

and ruthless nature of the European need to conquer and possess – informs the rest of Cartwright’s confession.

The dialogue Steffler creates between the imagined entries and the real journals makes the historical Cartwright’s writings an integral part of this confessional process. The first series of excerpts, which run from August 24 to September 30, 1770, are framed by two afterlife entries focused on Cartwright’s attachment to his brother John and to his childhood. In the entry preceding the excerpts, Cartwright recounts the short boating expeditions that he and John took along the north coast of Labrador. The naming of islands, bays, etc., after family members is connected to the simple joy and exuberance of children’s games of exploring (111). This description gives the entry a nostalgic air – “It was like being children again” – so the imperial act of naming becomes couched in a sentiment that seems harmless and innocent, that of trying to recapture youth. Subsequently, the act of colonization becomes linked to boyhood excitement and seems to come more from a general thoughtlessness than from a deliberate plan of exploitation and appropriation.

When we come to read the real excerpts, then, we not only see them as a record of acts that need to be confessed but also as more understandable and forgivable. Cartwright’s detailed accounts of various animals killed, his presumptuous reference to certain territories by the names that he has given them, and his struggles to settle the land are re-contextualized by the afterlife journal which makes us read barely repressed emotions and misgivings into the historical Cartwright. Taken on their own, these excerpts, or indeed *A Journal of Transactions and Events* as a whole, are merely a combination of hunting log, weather records, and a charting of the physical development of Cartwright’s settlement, with some detached observations about First Nations people and customs. However, surrounded by the afterlife journals, these excerpts seem to swell with what is not said; they, in fact, become the

recounting of the acts for which the ghostly Cartwright is seeking purification. As such, the excerpts are reread as rife with both misdeeds and conflicted emotions and the wrongheaded thoughts that led to and arose from them. For example, in the original journal, Cartwright's brief references to John and the coldness with which he notes his brother's departure – "My brother left me this evening to return to St. John's" (116) – become the records of Cartwright's fear of intimacy and fear of expressing his feelings when read against the nostalgia of the afterlife entries. "I always thought of John's visit with me in Labrador as the happiest time we ever passed together" (116), Steffler's Cartwright reflects in the entry directly following the excerpts from *A Journal of Transactions and Events*. Expressing regret over the financial disputes that "clouded" their relationship in later years, Cartwright remembers his excitement over showing John Labrador and his belief that John was "proud" of him during their visit.

These idealized memories are also coloured by Cartwright's admission that "now that I think of it, John was unwell during his whole stay" (116), his charting of John's various complaints about the expedition's ships, and his recalling that John was never "light-hearted" during the visit, not even "over glasses of rum" (116). This afterlife realization makes us perceive the real excerpts as containing a hint of sadness and disappointed expectations. Is this why the historical Cartwright was so brief in his recounting of John's visit? John's encounter with Labrador also provides an alternative perspective for the reader wherein Cartwright's authority over the narrative slips a bit and allows us to see behind the prosaic and straightforward account of Cartwright's success in Labrador. Steffler, then, is here complicating the reliability of the very historical document that is acting as the source for these imagined entries.

The other excerpts from *A Journal of Transactions and Events* that are scattered throughout the novel are not so overtly framed by the imagined entries. Nonetheless, the afterlife journal, which becomes more and more confessional as the text nears the end, forces a reconsideration of the actions of the historical Cartwright and a subsequent re-mythologizing of him. There seem to be two main, interrelated themes that recur within the excerpts, themes that are then taken up and injected with a degree of post-colonial guilt in the afterlife entries. First, there is Cartwright's fascination with and assumed superiority to the Inuit people he encounters. This belief in his own and Britain's superiority leads to the exploitation of the Inuit. This exploitation can be linked to the second theme that runs through Cartwright's real journals – that of hunting and trapping animals. The manner in which Steffler frames these excerpts makes plain the connection between Cartwright's position towards the Inuit of Labrador and his systematic and thoughtless killing of the country's animals. Cartwright's (and Britain's) presumed ownership of the land and its resources seems to have also implied an ownership over its peoples. Just as Cartwright compulsively slaughters many of the animals he encounters, so too does he bring death to a whole community of Inuit people.

The ghostly Cartwright recognizes and regrets the damage that he caused, and so the afterlife entries almost answer each occurrence of these themes within the excerpts. For example, on October 12, 1770, Cartwright recorded his disgust at the Inuit's lack of cleanliness. Describing their tent, which was filled with "part of the carcass of a seal recently killed, fat, guts, fish . . . all lying in a glorious confusion," he explains that he had "quit the place" due to its being "nauseous in the highest degree" (121). Such observations are made ironic or even counteracted by an afterlife entry that reflects on the smallpox that Caubvik brought back from England, a disease that killed her entire community. Smallpox, as the

third-person narrative describes it, is horrifying, causing bleeding from the mouth and anus, an unpleasant stench, blisters, and high fever; smallpox is a “plague” (215). This European “influence” (212) is far more “nauseous” and certainly more filled with danger than the lifestyle for which Cartwright faults the Inuit. By imagining Caubvik surrounded by the members of her community dying from an English disease, Steffler undercuts the historical Cartwright’s characterization of the Inuit as the “most uncleanly” people with his afterlife perception of the terror afflicted upon them because of his own country’s uncleanness (266).

The dialogue between the excerpts and the afterlife entries does not just record and challenge Cartwright’s assumption of superiority over the Inuit; it also brings to light the exploitation of these people and the realization of the detrimental effect of such exploitation. The excerpts that best showcase this exploitation are taken from Cartwright’s July 9th and 10th, 1771, entries. Here Cartwright charts his first experience trading with the Inuit. There is again a sort of retrospective irony when, because “these people have hitherto plundered and murdered Europeans whenever they had opportunity,” Cartwright worries that is to be his “fate now” (165). Read with the post-colonial confession of Steffler’s Cartwright in mind, it becomes clear just how wrongheaded the historical Cartwright’s thinking is; the reverse of his concerns, in fact, ends up being true since it is the Europeans (and Cartwright specifically) who plunder and bring death to the Inuit. Perhaps, more accurately, it is the Europeans, *through* their plundering or exploitation, who murder or attempt to murder so much of Inuit culture. While the reality of this exploitation is not ignored by Steffler, his presentation of Cartwright in the framing narrative as coping with this sort of post-colonial guilt leads to a fundamental alteration in the manner we read the historical Cartwright and his journal entries. Because the historical Cartwright cannot be read separately from the

imagined Cartwright, the materiality of his writings and the experiences and attitudes they record are obscured by the voice of this morally superior Cartwright considering these events in retrospect. In the original entries, Cartwright does “a brisk trade” with the Inuit, and, by the next day, he has “purchased the greatest part of their goods” in exchange for trinkets that are relatively useless to them (166). Moreover, Cartwright seems to be bragging about the small amount of money he has to spend in order to accumulate these “goods.” When Shuglawina, a member of the Inuit community, offers to sell Cartwright a silver fox’s tail, Cartwright takes the opportunity to highlight within his journals the low amount he is getting away with paying: “as he only demanded a small ivory comb which cost me no more than twopence halfpenny, and the skin and tail were worth four guineas, I made no scruple in completing the purchase” (167).

According to the afterlife entries, the historical Cartwright does come to realize the potentially negative impact such an unscrupulous invasion and appropriation might have on the Inuit. Instead of worrying about European concerns, then, Steffler’s Cartwright suggests that on some level the historical Cartwright eventually began to worry about the concerns of Labrador and its inhabitants: “I looked in [Caubvik’s] mouth and found red spots, and was terrified. It occurred to me then that my influence, my country’s influence on her, and on all of them, was likely to be much greater than I had imagined, and more terrible” (212). In the afterlife the realization of the “terrible” results his presence had on Labrador and its original inhabitants becomes even more palpable to Cartwright. Now outside of time, Cartwright begins to see his actions within history and time as damaging, even sinful. Alluding to what he perceives as Adam and Eve’s recent separation from the animals, Cartwright suggests that in the process of human maturation he has “barely learned to toddle and talk. I am still at the stage of trying to break whatever I pick up, or putting it in my mouth” (245).

This impulse to destroy and/or consume can be witnessed throughout *A Journal of Transactions and Events* in Cartwright's compulsive records of animals slaughtered. Steffler deliberately picks excerpts that showcase this slaughtering. For example, on March 19, 1770, Cartwright describes his encounter with an otter. After observing it for an hour, being amused by its boldness and impressed by its prowess at fishing, Cartwright "sent a ball through him, and killed him on the spot" (134). A similar detachment accompanies Cartwright's relation of each hunting experience. On July 9, 1771, for instance, Cartwright discovers "a whabby swimming in a small pond" and immediately "sent for his rifle, and broke both its thighs at the first shot" (166). Similarly, on Friday 30, 1770, Cartwright shoots a young hind that his brother John missed (deliberately?), three curlews, three grouse, and an auntsary (113). Cartwright's constant killing of animals is meant to echo his treatment of the Inuit he encounters. While this killing is less intentional and more subtle, Cartwright does observe these people with the same detachment that he observes the otter, for example, and is quick to trap, manipulate, and exploit them as well.

Steffler's imagined afterlife entries ensure that we associate these two things. Much of Cartwright's regret centres on how his arrogance renders him cruel, even monstrous (244). Cartwright highlights this imperialist excess by comparing himself with his hawk, Kaumalak, who "in the wild would kill only enough for herself and her young," and who, even though Cartwright has "made her specialize in the business of slaughter," still "tires of killing before" he does (245). That Cartwright has begun to see his voraciousness as a sin is clear when he perceives himself as having "broken God's restraints" (245). This constant slaughter, in other words, is unnatural; Cartwright is a man who is out of balance, all appetite. By his last afterlife entries he has come to recognize himself as wholly consuming,

only taking and never giving back. “Sometimes,” Steffler’s Cartwright writes, looking in the mirror “I would admit that my life has been all selfishness and vanity” (258).

While looking at his reflection, Cartwright sees his face only as “a mask” – despite all the consuming, he is empty. Further, this lack of unified identity is tied in this entry to his recognition of himself as “a piece of human regalia, a mascot, a ceremonial mace” (258). These descriptors suggest a connection between Cartwright’s faulty, even wasted life and his self-perceived role as a representative of British imperial ideology. Cartwright, like these one-dimensional symbols of the Crown, is a purveyor of order. Certainly Steffler wants us to consider Cartwright in this way, but the final term implies the darker side of this imposition of empirical order. While a mace can mean a ceremonial staff of office, it also refers to the medieval weapon with a spiked metal head. On one hand, even Cartwright’s trivial actions in Labrador are made sinister by their connection to violence – whether the source of such destruction was simply Cartwright’s unthinking character matters little. On the other hand, Steffler seems to be implying that Cartwright was merely a tool for the empire. Perhaps he was also a victim of imperialism, and his injury is this sense of shame and guilt that has trapped him here in the afterlife. We are meant, then, to both condemn Cartwright and have sympathy for him.

Attempts to atone for his mistakes were impossible during Cartwright’s life as his motivation would have been partially rooted in “a complex private vanity” (259). It is only outside of his life that this private vanity begins to be recognized for what it is and, through this recognition, begins to disintegrate. By the final afterlife entries, Cartwright is able not only to confess his core flaw, but also to transmute his confession into a lesson for the reader: “I think now that I should have learned to worship instead of slaughter. The things we most love to kill we ought to worship most passionately” (259). These final entries suggest

the growth in Cartwright of an almost religious sensibility. Through avowing his sins, Cartwright has found his way back to a more righteous path, to a harmony both within himself and with the world.

For Cartwright, this harmony and the forgiveness that produces it are clearly linked to a sort of assimilation by Labrador. The consequences of worshipping, an action that represents the road not taken, are described by Cartwright as “less limited” and “less predictable” than those of his own misdirected choice to kill. In the final afterlife entry, Labrador, the place which has come to stand for Cartwright’s errors and regrets, is depicted using similar terms: “Labrador is limitless and never the same” (260). Throughout the novel, Cartwright has longed to see Labrador, but has been stuck in the English countryside; he can only ever see “as far as the mid-Atlantic. . . . But not yet as far as Newfoundland and the Labrador coast” (11). When this final afterlife entry is followed not only by a vision of Labrador, but by Cartwright’s integration into the land – in the form of the white bear – it becomes clear that, through his afterlife confessional, Cartwright has learned to worship and, by doing so, has been forgiven by the place and the people to whom he once was only capable of causing devastation.

Steffler cannot redeem the historical Cartwright but only a Cartwright who is so far removed from history as to be mythic. Of course, this mythologized Cartwright is grounded in the historical one. While the historical Cartwright may be depicted as contemptuous and dishonest, leading us to question both the original journals and those from his afterlife, his journals also achieve a certain validity for this very fact; they have a validity for the very things that they omit. The historical journal gives Cartwright something concrete to apologize for. On the other hand, the historical Cartwright and his journals become

mythologized in a manner that renders them a kind of window onto a past that both does and does not exist.

Forgive and Forget?: The Problem with Atonement

Steffler's novel, therefore, does not produce a straightforward trajectory of recognition, admission, forgiveness and absolution. *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* is more clearly self-reflexive than the work of Wiebe or other more mimetic Canadian writers. The key instance of this self-reflexivity occurs midway through the novel, when the voice of Mrs. Selby, Cartwright's housekeeper cum friend and lover, intrudes upon the text of his journal. Following a particularly self-congratulatory entry from Cartwright's historical journal about his role in delivering Nan's (one of his servants') baby, Steffler imagines an exchange in the pages of the historical journal between Cartwright and Mrs. Selby. Mrs. Selby adds a correction to Cartwright's real entry, reminding him of his "faintness" and relating how she was actually the one who received the baby. "These matters," she writes, "by some strange omission, do not appear in your journal" (145). The imagined exchange continues with Cartwright's reply in which he "abjure[s]" her "to remember [her] place" (146). Cartwright also describes Mrs. Selby's entry as an "affront" and argues that, as a log of his "commercial affairs," these records should not be "altered or treated frivolously" (145-46). There is a final invented entry by Mrs. Selby (she gets the last word) that mocks Cartwright's "interminable sermonizing . . . facial expressions and tone of voice" (146). More importantly, Mrs. Selby makes the claim that she is only trying "to bring greater balance and truth" to Cartwright's account (146).

These imagined entries serve both an explicit and implicit purpose. On an obvious level, Mrs. Selby's interruption of the historical journal alerts us to the possibility that not

only the real excerpts, but potentially also the afterlife entries contain certain “omissions.” “I only make this intrusion,” Mrs. Selby writes, “in case your journal comes to serve as a substitute for your memory” (145). Do the historical Cartwright’s supposedly factual records indeed serve as the prompt for his afterlife entries? Certainly it would seem that the ghostly Cartwright does reread and reflect on earlier writings (25, 259). Cartwright’s confession, then, may contain a more sincere version of events, or it may only contain an elaboration on his earlier project of self-narration, which would mean that the later version, too, is inherently flawed. As Mrs. Selby’s entries remind us, any story, ultimately, is a version of what happened. This reminder forces us to question Cartwright’s version of his life story and to evaluate his need to confess.

On another level, of course, Mrs. Selby’s contribution to Cartwright’s journal “reveals that the romantic version of colonization as the single-handed venture of men is a product of omission and falsification” (Renger 72). In other words, Mrs. Selby’s imagined entries point not only to the editing that the historical Cartwright’s account of events would have undergone, but also to the editing to which colonial history in general was and is subjected. “Steffler employs Mrs. Selby,” Wyile argues, “to open up Cartwright’s journal (literally and figuratively) to dialogic scrutiny, emphasizing what lies outside . . . and by extension what lies within and destabilizing the rigidity of Cartwright’s colonial presence” (183). Mrs. Selby can, in fact, be seen as a stand-in for Steffler himself; “Selby’s fictional revision of this documentary text mirrors the novel’s treatment of the historical journal” (Renger 69). The dialogue that occurs between the real excerpt and the imagined entries serves as a microcosm of the overarching process of the novel and the clear engagement between Steffler’s invented Cartwright and the historical Cartwright. Like Mrs. Selby, Steffler is simultaneously engaged with and challenging Cartwright’s journals. He suggests

there are omissions therein and the rest of his narrative works to fill in those holes. In so doing, like Mrs. Selby, Steffler simultaneously disrupts and validates the original entries. Cartwright's horrified and offended response to Mrs. Selby's intrusion into his narrative suggests the historical Cartwright's likely response to Steffler's project of re-framing, editing, and contributing to his original journals.⁶⁸ Cartwright, Steffler seems to be suggesting, would see this rewriting as meddling and would likely not align himself with the man presented through this alternative perspective. This suggested rejection by Cartwright of Steffler's vision of him leads us to question the truth status of the revised journals, making us question the confession as "true" to the historical Cartwright.

However, even this questioning of Cartwright's confession is an elision since the blustering Cartwright defending his journal against meddlers is an invention of Steffler. In other words, even Cartwright's response to Steffler's project is part of Steffler's narrative. Further, because Mrs. Selby is an obvious stand-in for Steffler, her voice lets us know how to interpret or read Cartwright. One aspect of this interpretation is, as Joan Strong contends, grounded in contempt for Cartwright and imperialism in general. Selby's/Steffler's "representation of Cartwright is one [of] our century" (Strong 113). The post-colonial "condemnation" of Cartwright and his culture, Strong goes on to argue, leads to a distancing effect. The modern reader feels him or herself at a remove from the contents of Cartwright's confession: "Mrs. Selby . . . tells us how easy it is to locate and confront the Cartwrights behind and around us. In this identification Cartwright and others like him are hermetically sealed off from us: we are wiser now, more socially aware than the primitive Cartwright

⁶⁸ Of course, Cartwright himself can be seen as a representative of the white, male, European explorer and his tenacious hold on history. His unwillingness to permit any other versions suggests a similar refusal, denial, even violent rejection of supplementary or alternative histories on the part of imperial or colonial historiography.

before us" (119). While certainly this detachment allows for the reader's abdication of responsibility for the sins of colonization, Mrs. Selby's/Steffler's interpretation of Cartwright is less liberating for the present-day reader than Strong suggests. One thing that counters Strong's argument is the presence of Cartwright's afterlife, which "proclaims the continued, haunting presence of colonialism in Canadian culture and the need to examine Canada's present as well as its history" (Renger 82).⁶⁹ This presence is shown through Cartwright's encounters with the present and the sadness these encounters arouse in him: "he's spied enough of the present to know how small, how mechanical people there have become" (Steffler 10). Despite Cartwright's feeling of disconnection with this century, these people of the present, their inventions and their destructions, are clearly tied to Cartwright and the colonial past: "he admits to himself some blame for this state of affairs" (10). As Sugars explains, "the novel situates its readers as 'inheritors' of Canada's settler-invader culture" (699).

Positioned thus, as "inheritors" or descendants of Cartwright, the modern audience can never entirely dissociate themselves from the contents of Cartwright's real or imagined journal, nor can Mrs. Selby/Steffler. The impossibility of dissociation is also hinted at by the character of Mrs. Selby within the novel, who, as Peter Jaeger comments, is "also an oppressor and member of the soon-to-be dominant cultural group in the New World," a fact that is highlighted by her own stockpiling of furs and mercantile aspirations (46). Further, we cannot take this exchange between Mrs. Selby and Cartwright out of the larger context of a narrative in which Mrs. Selby seems to have not only affection but hope for Cartwright. While in the imagined entries Mrs. Selby conveys a mocking indifference to Cartwright, the

⁶⁹ Although in the novel Cartwright technically haunts England, emotionally, Cartwright's ghost haunts and is haunted by Canada.

fight following this written dialogue conveys Mrs. Selby's investment in Cartwright and her frustration at his detachment. With Mrs. Selby, Steffler seems to be suggesting that there is something more to know here, that Cartwright is holding back some integral part of himself. It is this absence, after all, that leads to Steffler's supplementation of the original journals with more emotionally wrought afterlife ones. And so we find ourselves back to the issue of omission, but this time with a twist; it is not only the negative things that are being omitted, Steffler seems to be arguing, but also Cartwright's humanity, his guilt, and the possibility of his redemption. As Tony Tremblay explains, "Steffler amplifies the subtext in Cartwright's *Journal* to recreate the explorer as a fully realized *ahistorical* presence, seemingly more vivid in the fancy of fiction than in the record of history" (162). Through the afterlife journals, Steffler is able to take over for Mrs. Selby – creating a dialogue with the historical Cartwright that draws out the sentiments that the modern-day reader might wish the figures of its colonial past had possessed.

Several critics have taken issue with this recasting of Cartwright as a "guilt-ridden wanderer in limbo" (Wyile 184). First, Steffler's Cartwright is a character far more sympathetic and complex than the Cartwright of *A Journal of Transactions and Events*, an alteration that paves the way for Cartwright's redemption. As Wyile argues, Steffler's novel seems to suggest that "although Cartwright went to Labrador and behaved, to a great degree, like the typical imperial invader, at least he felt bad about it afterward" (184). Further, by taking Cartwright out of history, Steffler creates a space wherein Cartwright can feel "bad" and then do something about it. *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, as Robert Stacey observes, acts as a "*second chance*" for both Cartwright and the colonial history he represents (718-19): "the ghost of George Cartwright would seem . . . to rescue a true history of violence and failed ambition *from* tragedy through a confessional narrative of atonement

and redemption” (718). Like Stacey, I am troubled not merely by the reinvention of Cartwright as a romantic, suffering hero, but by the message this novel seems to be sending about the possibilities of history. “The power of the past,” Stacey explains, “lies in its pastness; the value of life lies in death. Both are reminders of the need for responsible action in the here and now precisely because there are no ‘do-overs,’ no second chances” (720). By bringing Cartwright back from the dead and by re-framing his original journals in a confessional structure, Steffler’s novel seems to be trying to get past the past, yet it can only do so by resuscitating the past and setting its protagonist up to scrutiny. The novel thus highlights the inevitable continuity between the historical Cartwright and the fictionalized one (since the latter is built upon some version of the former), thereby establishing the inescapable discursivity of history alongside the need for an “actual” reprehensible colonizing figure upon which to ground the re-visionary take on the past. The juxtapositioning of actual and fictionalized journal entries accomplishes this task through the re-mythologizing of George Cartwright that emerges expressly from the historical documents. Through this mythologized post-colonial colonist, the contemporary confessor is confronted with history but also cleansed of it.

It is with this notion of redemption through narrative that Tremblay takes issue, arguing that *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* is an example of a text that privileges fiction over history, even suggesting that all history is merely story, told and re-told. The problem with this assertion, Tremblay contends, is that if history is merely story, it can be “neither correct nor incorrect at any one time – *it just is*” (164). If history “just is,” then the truth of the past can be simply created at whim and is seen as somehow exempt from the ideologies plaguing official histories. Of course, as Tremblay goes on to argue, no narrative, regardless of whether it is re-visionary, is exempt from politically laden meaning-making (168). Steffler

attempts to solve the problem of shame and guilt within national history by imagining a confessional narrative for Cartwright and thereby conceiving not simply remorse and redress for Canadians past and present, but redemption too. In order to do so, however, Steffler does not simply present the complexities of historiography. He moves past history, effacing its materiality and its difficulties, in order to mythologize the character of Cartwright, rendering him neither an entirely historic figure nor an entirely imaginary character, but rather the ancestor that we need him to be, “an ancestor of ours” (interview with Val Ross C2).

Cartwright’s redemption occurs in the final chapter of the novel wherein the afterlife Cartwright returns to Labrador and is consumed by a white bear. While some critics have read this ending positively,⁷⁰ others are more troubled by its implications. The many references in this last scene make it difficult to unpack in any definitive manner. While being eaten by a bear may be read as a particularly gruesome punishment for the historical Cartwright’s penchant for slaughter and cruelty, the fact that this second death ends his purgatorial existence and the fact that it is occasioned by a return to the one place he has been wanting to return to (Labrador) seem to suggest otherwise. Cartwright’s reintegration into Labrador and his exaltation at being eaten by the bear suggests not punishment for his imperialist greed but rather forgiveness and even indigenization. Cartwright “feels no pain, feels instead the satisfaction of feeding a fierce hunger. He has been starving for so long” (267). Whose hunger is Cartwright feeding? His own or the bear’s? Ours? I agree with Wylie’s claim that the bear’s devouring of Cartwright partially acts as a compensation for the earlier scene in which Cartwright demonstrates “his penchant for unrestrained slaughter” (185) by unnecessarily killing several white bears. Cartwright’s feeling of “satisfaction,” I

⁷⁰ Peter Jaeger, for instance, sees “Steffler’s erasure of Cartwright’s ghostly presence” as “legitimat[ing] the notion that the awareness of previous wrongdoings will cause the ‘body of dominance’ to vanish, thereby making way for the beauty of a renewed nature” (51).

would argue, comes from both repaying a debt to the natural world and also from receiving both his punishment and his atonement.

Wyile also connects the bear to Attouick's description of becoming a shaman, a process that involved being eaten by a bear-spirit (185).⁷¹ There are two interrelated results of this consumption by the bear-spirit. First, there is the intimation that Cartwright is actually erased from the landscape, allowing it to return to its pre-colonial state: "And with each new bite, as more of him vanishes, a feast of new beauty appears" (267).⁷² As Donna Bennett elucidates, what Steffler is suggesting here is a diffusion of Cartwright's individual identity as he is integrated into a larger whole, Canada. The bear's head, Steffler tells us, is like a paint brush, "painting [Cartwright] out, painting the river, the glittering trees in" (267). Cartwright rejects the past and "old identities" in favour of a "unity with the landscape" (Bennett 210). His reward for confessing his misdeeds is, as Sugars argues, the fulfillment of "his death wish, a desire for primal engulfment by the land" (695). Just as Cartwright got what Stacey calls a "do-over" in terms of his legacy, so too does Cartwright get a "second chance" at death. This time he gets "an authentic death" (Sugars 695) in which he is taken in by the land and the people that he misused in life. In effect, Cartwright's death finally makes him indigenous (695).

Second, by being consumed by this representative of Inuit spirituality, Cartwright seems to become not just an empty ghost who is just as haunted as he is haunting but a man of substance and spirit. Cartwright ultimately gains a soul. So, while he may be erased from

⁷¹ There is an irony in the suggestion that Cartwright is, in the end, consumed by an Inuit, since, as I've argued throughout, much of the novel is about Cartwright's and imperialism's consumption of Aboriginal peoples.

⁷² Note the use of the word "feast" here; again Cartwright's end is connected with consumption, but this time instead of exploiting and using so much that nothing is left, Cartwright actually creates and leaves behind something consumable.

the scene, he is also “delivered from a guilt-ridden purgatory in a mystical, penitent apotheosis that mirrors Inuit shamanistic initiation” (Wyile 185). The confession we are reading, in other words, not only leads to Cartwright’s forgiveness and integration into the world he could never be part of in life, it also leads to a glorification of Cartwright in which he almost assumes the exalted spiritual role of angagok. This final apotheosis is symptomatic of what Bakhtin explained as the aestheticizing of the confessant by the confessor. This aestheticizing or hero-making can be seen on two levels here; Steffler, in reading Cartwright’s original journals, has found in them a historical figure worthy of narration. As readers of Steffler’s reading of Cartwright, we are a sort of second-level witness to this creation of Cartwright. We are reading here not just Cartwright’s confession (as imagined by Steffler) but Steffler’s imagined construction of a post-colonial ancestry. The apotheosis that Steffler provides for Cartwright does not merely efface the explorer from history; Cartwright’s invented afterlife entries and experiences also firmly implant him in a post-colonial national mythology.

As I have argued, Steffler imagines a community⁷³ of listeners/confessors for Cartwright. These confessors are those Canadians who, because they “have inherited the historical legacy of the colonial state” (Sugars 699), are related and relate to Cartwright through a sort of national ancestry.⁷⁴ If Cartwright is forgiven and finally finds a home in the land, then the reader who has been privy to the confession can undergo a similar process of assimilation. Alternatively, the fact that the reader is, in some ways, positioned as the source

⁷³ Here I am intentionally referencing Benedict Anderson.

⁷⁴ As Sugars puts it, this novel is “about legacy, with Cartwright standing in for contemporary Canadians who have ‘inherited’ the unhomeliness of the Canadian nation-state” (713).

of forgiveness suggests that we are already assimilated; we do not need forgiveness because, as is suggested in Newlove's poem, now *we* are Canada.

Foster explains that in confession "the history" the confessor/reader "strives to comprehend becomes increasingly his own"; the confession being heard/read "becomes the field on which the reader attempts to realize himself" (13). This confessional transference is particularly true in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, a novel that revises Canada's past for a present that is invested in, even an inheritor of, national history. It is, therefore, not only the suggestion that Cartwright can be rewritten and his misdeeds erased from history with which I take issue. I am also troubled by the implicit suggestion that if Cartwright can be erased, so too can our responsibility for the fallout from our colonial history. Steffler seems to be helping Canadians exorcise the ghost of Cartwright and their imperialist inheritance in order to give Canadians a "second chance" at getting history right. We should be wary of seeking forgiveness for (and forgetting) national ancestors such as Cartwright, for it is the haunting by the ghosts of history that impels us to action and political responsibility in the present.

Conclusion – Reading Past the Writing: Afterwords and Afterward

The constitutive tension whose effects I have been exploring in these various literary works – between a fidelity to the past and a self-reflexive awareness of the contingencies implicit in any narrative about that past – is doubled by a second-order narrative that circles around the same problem. In the paratextual apparatus that many of these authors include at the end of their novels, they dwell upon the archival materials that have formed the basis of their stories. These framing narratives tend to remove the authors from the scene of writing by reversing their own fictionalizing impulse in the body of the texts, emphasizing instead the persuasive force of the historical documents themselves. Steffler's acknowledgement that his version of Cartwright's story is "fiction, not history" is mitigated, for instance, by his insistence in the appended "Author's Notes" that the novel "springs from Cartwright's own account of his life," and is, in places, a "verbatim" reproduction of the original journal (268). This contradictory gesture to the sovereign force of the archive is reinforced by his related suggestion that the narrative had a mind of its own: "his [Cartwright's] story grew as I handled it, following its own inherent tendencies as well as mine" (268). While, on one hand, Steffler is here acknowledging the influence his own "tendencies" had on this version of Cartwright's story, he is also disavowing responsibility for the final product by claiming that it unfolded according to its own internal logic. The narrative, Steffler would have his reader believe, developed organically from the source material, from Cartwright's original words; in some ways, then, the narrative, in these "Author's Notes," is depicted as having developed from Cartwright himself. A final point of interest is the manner in which Steffler closes his "Notes." Steffler marks the page as an explorer might mark the landscape. He leaves his name, locale, and date of writing, "December 1991." Intentionally or not, Steffler's final

words on the blank page remind the reader of Cartwright's constant naming and claiming of what he perceived as a blank territory.

In *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe's "Acknowledgements" section, which follows the novel proper, also echoes the exploration tradition of naming and marking the land. Here Wiebe thanks "the intrepid members of the Land, Air and Water Expedition of 1988, Edmonton, Alberta to Obstruction Rapids, Northwest Territories" (n.p.). Wiebe then recreates for the reader the note that he and his fellow travelers left in a cairn "on the highest point of Dogrib Rock" (n.p.). The note lists the expedition members' names and links their trip to Franklin's 1821 journey that is the basis for the novel. After a moment, Wiebe tells the reader, the phrase "A Land Beyond Words" was added to the note (n.p.).

This section of Wiebe's "Acknowledgements" is emblematic of the paradox with which the entire novel struggles. On one hand, Wiebe is trying to pin down the experience of exploration by actually following the same route as Franklin's expedition; this desire to pin down is suggested by Wiebe's own attempt to leave his mark on the land. Of course, this leaving of a note is also reflective of the imperial activities of exploration and charting that his novel troubles. In some ways, then, Wiebe's journey is an attempt to move past the documents and archives of history into a personal encounter with the past. That said, the appendix that appears at the bottom of the note left on Dogrib Rock complicates this idea of pinning down anything – the land, the experience of exploration, history. This idea of the North and its history as somehow "Beyond Words" signals the central concern with representation that Wiebe explores in *A Discovery of Strangers* through the character of Robert Hood. In his "Afterword" Wiebe reminds the reader of the impossibility of ever representing this space and time, the impossibility of ever recreating in narrative what really happened and the people, both First Nations and explorers, who experienced these events.

History, and the land that it demarcates, develops and exists, for all intents and purposes, outside of language.

We can see this reluctance to claim his novel as authoritative in Wiebe's desire to detach himself from the narrative he has written. As with Steffler, Wiebe attributes the story he has penned to another – he labels this “Greenstocking's story.” The narrative, then, becomes almost detached from the author, signaling the importance of the silenced Dene voices in the original historical records. Wiebe does not want to participate in the type of narrative that Keskarrah describes as English: “they had heard only their own telling, as told to themselves” (15); he wants to avoid being yet another White man writing about and to more White men. Nonetheless, Wiebe wants to claim some sort of authority, if only to point to the historical veracity and materiality of his narrative. In both Steffler's and Wiebe's closing notes, there is a list of various source texts. These writers want the reader to know that they have done their research, that, despite their claims that these novels are “fiction, not history,” they are, in fact, firmly grounded in documented history.

Bowering's novel has no Afterword of any kind, but features instead a “Prologue.” Aside from a brief note on the inside cover of the book, which lists some of the novel's sources but gives no names or dates for any of the historical documents, Bowering never lets the reader know where he acquired his information or even whether any of the information or quotes are original source material. Neither does Bowering provide the reader with any sentimental explanation of his connection to this particular period in Canadian history. The connections he refers to are random ones, such as shared names and cities. Although Bowering does take a journey in order to help him create his novel, unlike Wiebe, Bowering's journey is away from the land that he is writing about: “It was my idea to move my body a long way from the putative setting of the story, from the western edge of

European America to the eastern tail of Western Europe” (n.p.). As he does throughout *Burning Water*, in his Prologue, Bowering refuses the reader access to any direct historical or fictional truth; his Prologue thus mimics the parody of historiography that he undertakes in the novel. On the other hand, Wiebe and Steffler, notwithstanding their conscious engagements with the paradox of historical representation, seem to be claiming some sort of transparency for both their processes and their products.

Rudy Wiebe’s well-known short story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” takes as its focus this dilemma of historical representation. If the narrator’s suggestion that “the problem is to make the story” gestures to complexities involved in any act of writing, it is especially relevant to texts that are struggling to represent real people and events. “Where is the Voice Coming From?” foregrounds this difficulty by highlighting the impossibility of any all-encompassing or objective account through its use of photographs: a resource which can be too easily assumed to satisfy this desire for “real” or “truthful” historical phenomena. What these photographs offer is not just a set of vivid impressions which intensify our sympathy for the historical fate of particular individuals and communities, but, on a deeper level, the inevitably partial nature of any form of representation. The images are full of things that cannot be seen: the “hooded” eyes of Sergeant Colebrook, the long rifle of Sounding Sky cut off by the edge of the photograph, the turned away face of Spotted Calf. As with all texts, there is always something just outside the frame. In other words, the nature of the frame – the processes of selection and organization which make any account coherent – becomes a story in itself, and one which, on a certain level, becomes inseparable from the lives contained within it. Or it must always be both of these: the manifest content of historical narratives based on real people and events, and the “problem” of the contingencies

introduced by the force of interpretation. There is always the frame, though this structural constraint is not always explicit.

How, then, do we simultaneously acknowledge the selective, biased, even suppressive capabilities of History, while still recognizing that beneath the narratives of history there do exist some facts, some material realities? How, in other words, does a creative writer narrate history responsibly? Or does the fiction writer even have a duty to history at all? In the Canadian Literature course that I am teaching at the University of Ottawa, my students read this Wiebe story and various other fictional and poetic texts that engage with the theme of historical representation.⁷⁵ The course readings engendered a great deal of classroom discussion about how to write historical literature that is both creative and responsible. The discussions kept coming back to that core struggle between representation and truth, and my students, through trying to unpack what is happening in these historically based stories and poems, kept circling back to this “problem” of making a story. In one student’s opinion, the writer has an obligation to foreground the fact that his/her narrative is only ever a representation of reality, one of many. However, another student suggested that an artist’s job is to reveal or express a core truth – or at least to try to get at the truth, all the while knowing that the task is, ultimately, impossible. Still another student suggested that a creative writer should not be bound by any of these expectations; art, she suggested, stands outside of political and social concerns and should be judged solely on its aesthetic merit.

Our discussion, unsurprisingly, remained unresolved. There are no easy solutions to this problem of narrating history. Nonetheless, setting aside the conundrum of representation is, in my opinion, unethical, particularly when a text is re-envisioning the often exploitative

⁷⁵ Such texts included Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic*, Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, and Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*.

history of a colonial nation. Ignoring or effacing the materiality of history in favour of textual play is just as problematic as a straightforward, uncomplicated narrative of the past that claims for itself a kind of enduring and deep truth. The novelists that I consider in this thesis approach this problem in different ways, but each makes use of the textual documents as a way of articulating his engagement with this question. The document, because of its status as a material textual artifact, enables an investigation of historical truth-making in process. While seeking to uncover the limited nature of these documents, these authors are also dependent on them as a window onto the past. If the need to remember history is to have any validity, there must be a history that can be “got at,” or at least that can be *believed to be* accessible. Bowering, Wiebe, and Steffler each grapple with the dilemma of representation in a unique and compelling manner. Their work highlights the pull that this endeavour continues to have, not just on writers of historical fiction, but on contemporary readers who share these authors’ investment in inquiring into the process of national history making.

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