

Or, How Fares the Myth of the North?

Quelques arpents de neige?

Kerry M. Abel

Books

Sherrill E. Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press, First paperback edition, 2007. Originally published 2001, 344 pages

Leslie Dawn, *National Vision, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006, 446 pages

John O’Brian and Peter White (eds), *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2007, 390 pages

“Never trust a group of urban intellectuals ... when then tell you they are getting back to nature and the spirit of their country ... All they find out in the woods are the ideas they brought with them.”

– Richard William Hill

DURING A PARTICULARLY dismal autumn in the midst of the Great Depression, Frank Underhill set his pen to a discussion of the state of the arts in Canada. “There is not much sign,” he keened to readers of the *Canadian Forum*, “that Canadian artists have been moved by the phenomenon of a civilization dissolving before our eyes.” The Depression, as much a spiritual as economic crisis to Underhill, was being ignored in favour of “rustic rumination.” He reserved particular vitriol for the Group of Seven and its promoters in an essay for *Saturday Night*: “We Canadians, so they would tell us, are Men of the North, stark and violent like the nature that surrounds and nourishes us. Our spiritual home is among the rocks and winds of the North ... every Canadian art exhibition nowadays is full of strong, virile, he–men of the North. To use Max Eastman’s phrase about Ernest Hemingway, most of these fellows are going about with false hair on their chests.”

Sculptor Elizabeth Wyn Wood took Underhill fiercely to task in a later issue of the *Forum*. “Politics and economics do not make the fundamental structure of life,” she wrote tartly. “They are the plumbing and heating systems of society, that is all. I admit that the furnace is out, and the pipes have all frozen and burst ..., [but] if we are tired of the mess in our house, let

us camp for a while in our northern pre–Cambrian Shield.”

If recent scholarly publishing is any indication, the Underhill–Wood debate continues undiminished. From art historian Leslie Dawn we have *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s*, in which Dawn proposes that the paintings of the Group of Seven were neither new nor uniquely Canadian, while promoters failed to understand that some other art of the era was indeed both new and Canadian (North West coast Aboriginal and Emily Carr). From English professor Sherrill E. Grace we have a second edition of her 2001 study, *Canada and the Idea of North*, in which the author explores a rich range of source material from the fine arts to politics to popular culture, concluding that North remains both a “force” and “idea” central to Canadian identity, but that the concept is always shifting. There is no “true North,” she writes, but rather, the “magnetic north,” a force that shifts, “an image of constant movement and energy.” From art historian John O’Brian and curator Peter White we have *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art*, an original and beautifully produced assemblage of the visual and verbal, in which some 68 essays of various lengths are interspersed with artists’ renderings of the issues raised.

Contributors from Benedict Anderson to Joyce Zemans try to convince us that landscape art in Canada may be in the process of re–invention, but landscape is still connected in some way to Canadian identity and, indeed, the Group of Seven is still relevant to the debate, if only to clarify for a 21st century audience the “counter–narratives and counter–images of a ‘post–wilderness’ landscape and its social relations.”

Of course, it is not only the scholars who are re–discovering the North. Media coverage of global climate change has latched on to melting ice and marauding polar bears in the Arctic as the “local” angle and drama of the day. And the most anti–scholarly prime minister in recent memory has also gone North. “It is time we begin to hear the call of a new North – a north that is stronger, more prosperous and liberated from the paternalistic policies of the past,” Stephen Harper told a Yellowknife audience recently, positioning himself firmly behind Diefenbaker and his 1958/9 “Northern Vision,” even

as his government announced (in all seriousness) that the ice-breaker *Louis St. Laurent* was to be retired and replaced by the *CCGS John G. Diefenbaker*. North is apparently infinitely elastic and good for careers all round.

The conflation of landscape / wilderness / north / Canada has long provided powerful imagery and symbols for a variety of causes. But it should be remembered that there are two seemingly distinct ideas of North, as well as an argument to be made that for many, the idea of north is utterly irrelevant. The romantics use North as a synonym for nature: a source of spiritual renewal, a haven from the evils of liberal industrial capitalism. One “goes” North, where perhaps even the physical body melts into the rocks and trees (à la Margaret Atwood’s “Death by Landscape”) and becomes one with the spiritual power of nature. North/nature must therefore be preserved, conserved. Canada is a northern nation, they propose, meaning our northern geography makes us strong and clear-thinking – and in some versions male (virile) and white. At the same time (and in keeping with gothic romanticism), the north can also be mysterious, dangerous, malevolent – and in this case more likely female. In either case, the North is an escape from modernity.

The other idea of North in Canada plays on a harder-nosed concept of utility. The north is a box of treasures, natural resources ripe for the taking, which will make us all rich. In the mid-twentieth century it was pulpwood and minerals; today it is diamonds and natural gas. We must “unlock the resource wealth of the North” (Stephen Harper) and “open the Northland” (John Diefenbaker) as a sort of moral imperative. North is a source of material, not spiritual, richness. It is also a useful device for national unity. North is something that we all share (goes the story), transcending our differences of language, culture, and region as it arches clear across the tops of our national maps. “This is Nunavut – ‘Our Land’ – just as Yukon and the Northwest Territories and the entire Arctic Archipelago are ‘Our Land’,” proclaimed Stephen Harper in Iqaluit two years ago (with either incredible insensitivity or unbelievable ignorance). Historian W.L. Morton put the matter rather more delicately in 1960, observing that he believed Canada was a northern country with a northern frontier, a northern economy, a northern history, and therefore a northern destiny to be realized through the extraction of northern natural resources. North is at the heart of modernity; it makes modernity possible.

Curiously, however, these two seemingly distinct ideas of North have some common features. Both see North as “other,” needing to be entered, unlocked, opened so that “we” can extract something we need, whether spiritual or material. Both attach

mythical stories to North, and whether the goal is buried treasure or spiritual solace, an epic journey is required to get there. Both use an infinitely elastic definition of North with changing latitudes, climates, distances (what L.–E. Hamelin called “nordicity”), and imagery. And both ignore completely the fundamental fact that for some people, North is home, while for others, North was and is irrelevant. As Janice Cavell pointed out in the *Canadian Historical Review*, Canadians have only relatively recently adopted the Arctic, and Canadian historians have yet to find a way to incorporate the north into the national narrative. And as Frank Underhill wrote in 1936, “The normal Canadian dreams of living in a big city where he can make his pile quickly and enjoy such urban luxuries as are familiar to him in the advertizing columns of our national newspapers.”

So what has recent scholarship contributed to all this? Invoke the deities of Bhabha and Foucault, sprinkle with incense of Anderson, and voilà – the colony has been deconstructed, history has become genealogy, and community is to be imagined. All three of the books noted here draw heavily on post-modernism as translated through the field of culture studies. Has critical theory provided us with new insights into the idea of North?

In terms of content, Sherrill Grace’s *Canada and the Idea of North* is undoubtedly the richest and most thought-provoking. She has managed to do what very few academics can, by drawing on a wide range of sources and scholarly disciplines for her analysis. Writers, painters, composers, filmmakers, historians, and cartographers provide the raw ores to be mined and refined. She moves beyond the standard frame of the subject in a valuable chapter entitled “The North Writes Back.” She neatly delineates the role of racism, sexism, and class politics in shifting ideas of North. And she provides a useful symbol in her “magnetic North”: a north that is not fixed in time and space but a north that is moveable, powerful, energetic. Ultimately, though, her idea of North is firmly grafted onto the old rootstock that ideas about the north have always been and will continue to be an important part of the Canadian psyche. She takes Elizabeth Wyn Wood’s side in the debate with Frank Underhill.

Leslie Dawn’s *National Visions, National Blindness* takes on the claim that the Group of Seven was creating a “new national image.” He first develops a fairly conventional historical examination to demonstrate the links between the Group’s art and British aesthetic “codes” of the day as embedded in landscape art. Dawn’s Group of Seven thus becomes a part of Empire, not a post-colonial assertion. To reinforce his interpretation, Dawn contrasts the British reception to a mid-1920s Canadian exhibition

(positive and enthusiastic) to the French reception (puzzled and dismissive), suggesting that the Group's aesthetic conventions were readable by the British because they were so closely linked, and unreadable by the French because they were too different. In a chapter on Emily Carr, Dawn proposes that she, unlike the Group of Seven, worked out of French modernist conventions, thus explaining why promoters of the Group of Seven found her work problematic.

Dawn moves beyond this discussion into one of the most intriguing parts of his study, an examination of the role of Aboriginal peoples in the artistic production of the 1920s, both as subjects (in the work of W. Langdon Kihn and A.Y. Jackson) and as producers (west coast contributors to a 1927 National Gallery exhibition). In some ways, the book is a study of how the vision and campaigns of Eric Brown, director of the National Gallery, trumped those of Marius Barbeau of the National Museum. The point, Dawn tells us, is that Canada's national identity was contested and ambiguous, even as it was being shaped in the 1920s, and the idea that the landscape art of that era provided a symbol and measure for national unity is a utopian myth. His position is rather closer to Frank Underhill's in the debate with Wood, although, as I will discuss, Underhill would be most unhappy with the comparison.

John O'Brian and Peter White's collection *Beyond Wilderness* is a visual treat. Produced on thick, tactile paper, splashed with colour, and imaginatively laid out, its physical presence alone kept me from the temptation to think of it as a glorified "course pack" for undergraduate edification. This collection of essays, visual and verbal, is an examination of new ways of seeing landscape in Canadian art – ones that supposedly challenge the "myth of wilderness" in a post-colonial Canada. Within the general parameters, there are a variety of voices and some clear disagreements, so there is much to be dipped into, revisited, and pondered. And with material written from the 1960s to the present, there is an (unexplored) opportunity of a little historiographical analysis as well. Hoary old chestnuts are produced and fresh green ones are tossed into the mix. The Group of Seven is accused of being bourgeois, tied to the apron-strings of empire, a partner of industry and advertising, a pawn in the propaganda campaign of the Canadian elite, modernist anti-moderns, and white supremacists. Emily Carr is either a purveyor of dangerous stereotypes or a champion of Native cultural interests, and possibly a frustrated lesbian. The myth of the North is both myth and truth.

In the end, though, I did not see that the "myth of wilderness" had been much challenged. Instead, it

seemed that the supposed iconography of the Group of Seven was really the iconography of its promoters and analysts, then and now. As Joyce Zemans points out in her essay "What Would the Group of Seven Say?", the artists of the Group did not see themselves and their work as narrowly as others did. Indeed, they even painted industrial landscapes, but, as in the case of Inuit artists who depict airplanes and snowmobiles, we choose to frame what suits our needs and ignore the rest. Perhaps, then, the O'Brian/White collection "revolutionizes" our appreciation of Canadian landscape as symbol in the same way that the art of Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow "revolutionized" the art of landscape, by (in the words of Johanne Sloan) bringing it "up to date, [and] resituating it in relation to a technologically expanded visual culture, a shifting sense of nationhood, and a de-stabilized natural world." Ultimately, although we think we are finding new meanings, we are still looking for them in landscape / wilderness / North.

These three books also lay claim to raising new crops through the fertilization of sterile old fields with life-giving critical theory. None is an attempt to evaluate the validity of any particular theory by testing it against a particular case. Rather, all are part of a very popular scholarly genre in which theory is invoked to provide a language that is supposed to explain, clarify, "deconstruct," or provide an original way of understanding or experiencing something we thought we knew. "Post-modern revisionism" is almost a redundancy. So does the language of critical theory help here? Unfortunately, it all-too-often does not. It serves largely to make the books inaccessible to the general reader.

Terms and theorists are never defined, identified or explained; the reader is assumed to be an initiate. What is one to make of a throw-away phrase such as "the North is a classic Bakhtinian chronotype" (Grace), or that a photograph is "in Piercian term – an *indexical* sign" (Payne in O'Brian/White)? How does one begin to unpack the statement that "this may diverge from prevailing directions within current methodologies, which see the construction of history solely as a textual matter to be deconstructed" (Dawn), or the conclusion that "North is a discursive formation, with articulations, representations ... processes, transformations, and a 'schema of correspondences' [among] ... its temporal sites" (Grace citing Foucault)?

Curiously, most of this theory and all of this jargon is entirely unnecessary for the authors to make their points. Indeed, it is possible to 'translate' the texts into more standard English and still make the same arguments. Sherrill Grace nearly admits as much in her discussion of historian W.L. Morton, whose work in the 1960s she sees as very much in

line with contemporary theorists on narrative, marginality, and the “discursive formation of North.” Amazingly, he worked without the benefit of po–mo!

This is not merely a quibble over whether we should use only the words that appear in the complete *Oxford English Dictionary*. Rather, it is a question fundamental to the pursuit of scholarship and one that Frank Underhill addressed (in a sense) in the 1930s. He roundly condemned Canada’s university professors for hiding in their classrooms and campuses and failing to engage with the public over the issues of the day. In his essay in *Saturday Night* on the subject of Canadian art, he made the same point about painters. “It is high time to call a halt to all this posing among our contemporary artists,” he wrote. It was time for our artists (and intellectuals) to “cease to be mere escapists” and “concentrate their gaze upon the life that is actually lived by our ten million Canadians and tell us what they see there. For where there is no vision among its artists, a people perisheth.”

Of course, the cultural critics of our day believe that they *are* “concentrating their gaze” on the life of the country in an attempt to address its problems. But if they fail to communicate what they see in a language accessible to those being gazed upon, surely they are no more useful to society than Underhill’s ivory–tower denizens or the nineteenth–century colonizer who gazed upon “the Indian” – then went far away home to write about him.

At its best, one might look upon the cultural theory espoused in these books as a sort of fin–de–siècle romanticism, with all the old elements of escape, mystery, magic, and supernatural. And since both romanticism and post–modernism emerged as responses to liberal industrial capitalism, one should not be surprised at the parallels. At worst, though, it might also be seen as a moral failure – the abrogation of the public responsibility of the scholar. Perhaps, too, it is a form of colonialism in which a new language is used to create a community that keeps out the very barbarians / heathens / “other” that it claims to be freeing.

WORKS CITED:

Harper, Stephen. “The Call of the North,” address in Yellowknife, 17 August 2006 and “Securing Canadian Sovereignty in the Arctic,” address in Iqaluit, 12 August 2006. Texts available on–line at www.nunavuteconomicforum.ca or pm.gc.ca

Hill, Richard William. “Graveyard and Giftshop: Fighting over the McMichael Canadian Art Collection,” in O’Brian and White, *Beyond Wilderness*, p 214.

Underhill Frank. “False Hair on Their Chest,” *Saturday Night* 51/48 (3 October 1936): 1, 3.

Underhill, Frank “The Season’s New Books,” *The Canadian Forum* XVI/191 (December 1936): 27–8

Wood, Elizabeth Wyn. “Art and the Pre–Cambrian Shield,” *The Canadian Forum* XVI/193 (February 1937): 13–15.

© The Underhill Review, 2008