

Pickard, Richard

Reluctance, protest, and hybridity : environmental engagement in memoirs from British Columbia

Brno studies in English. 2010, vol. 36, iss. 2, pp. [123]-138

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/105064>

Access Date: 06. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



Brno Studies in English
Volume 36, No. 2, 2010
ISSN 0524-6881

RICHARD PICKARD

RELUCTANCE, PROTEST, AND HYBRIDITY: ENVIRONMENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN MEMOIRS FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA

Abstract

While practitioners and readers of nature writing have long recognized the genre's affiliation with memoir, the recognition has not gone the other way. In British Columbia, a hybrid subgenre has developed that deliberately blends the two existing genres, starting from the province's dual self-definition as wilderness and resource base and emphasizing the perilous condition of nature in BC. Texts that can be assigned to this subgenre participate to different degrees in the parent genres, with differing allegiances to the memoir form in particular, but they each exploit the potentials of formal hybridity with a particular focus on protest, on social or cultural change, and on connecting the human and the natural. Works discussed in this essay include Tim Bowling's *The Lost Coast*, Brian Fawcett's *Virtual Clearcut*, and Harold Rhenisch's *Tom Thomson's Shack*.

Key words

Environment; memoir; nature writing; ecocriticism; labour

[T]he writing about ... places and landscape may become an autobiographical act.
(Allister 2001: 32)

As writers and scientists, we are heirs to the achievements of our civilization – its long, halting, bloody trek toward understanding and toward human freedom. But now our carelessness raises the possibility that those struggles may have meant little, that instead, our most important legacy will be clouds of carbon dioxide, ranks of felled trees, catalogs of extinct animals.
(Scott Slovic 2000: 85)

Nature writing is an inescapably hybrid genre, evading even its titular focus on nature. Scott Slovic has remarked, for example, that the readers of nature writing might be best served by looking at it as a vehicle for a writer's examination of his or her own psychology, as memoir or auto/biography. As Slovic suggested in *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, much nature writing can be seen as "a kind of private murmuring in pursuit of the intensification and verification of experience" (1992: 172). Nature writing is not, Slovic argues, about nature: it's about the experience of nature, and for some writers, such as Annie Dillard, the real subject is "the psychology of awareness" (1992: 9). Slovic's great insight into the writing of his representative authors – Dillard along with Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, and Wendell Berry – has to do with the extent to which they examine not just the external world, though that is part of their concern, but the memoirist's terrain of the human condition, particularly a person's interior life. Further, Mark Allister has identified a previously unnamed subgenre of nature writing – including some of the genre's great contemporary texts – that is concerned primarily with the author's recovery from personal grief, albeit in the presence of or engagement with nature (Allister 2001). Within ecocriticism, and among readers passionate about nature writing, the claims of Slovic and Allister have been taken as radical, in the sense that both men argue that humans should be seen as more central to nature writing than its readers have been comfortable with. Instead, their claims should be seen as foundational: nature writing has indeed always been about the writer's perception of nature, which means it has always been inflected with psychology.

From a certain angle, the opposite would also appear to be true: throughout its history, memoir has often been inflected with place, with a person's mode of being in the world. But even with the long affiliation between memoir and nature writing – an affiliation recognized from the side of nature writing, at least – nature is largely absent from many texts on autobiography. Mary Evans, for example, in her fascinating *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography*, sees nature with great simplicity as having been largely – though incompletely – overcome: "Nature, in the sense of the hitherto 'uncontrolled' order of the natural world, is [...] no longer the apparently cruel and arbitrary power it was in early nineteenth-century life" (1999: 131), though she does admit that the North Sea does constantly threaten to flood the Netherlands. Evans focuses primarily on European texts and writers, so one could perhaps argue that the Canadian and North American contexts are different enough from the European that Evans may simply be working from a local understanding of nature. Or rather, one could argue this idea if Julie Rak's detailed and very useful introduction to her recent edited collection *Auto/biography in Canada* wasn't similarly silent on nature (Rak 2005). In Rak's collection, only Albert Braz's essay on Grey Owl (Archibald Delaney) addresses questions of nature, and actually Braz focuses on the determinative role that Grey Owl's Anglo/Aboriginal identity has been given in readings of his work, rather than studying his self-construction through and in relation to nature and the natural. Even more broadly, Paul John Eakin's promisingly titled

Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography refuses to touch on the natural world, since in Eakin's view "the various dimensions of the world of fact to which autobiographies characteristically refer [are] biographical [...], social and cultural [...], and historical" (1992: 181). In sum, while a great deal of valuable and fascinating work has been done on autobiographical texts that line up nicely with poststructuralist theory, emphasizing consciousness and self-construction and the fragmentariness of language, and while the civilized world may well seem, early in the twenty-first century, to have been divorced from the natural world, these approaches fail to account for a significant stream of memoir-based nature writing, or perhaps nature-based memoir.

In British Columbia, for example, a sub-genre of nonfiction has emerged that deliberately blends nature writing with memoir, refusing to participate fully in either of the existing genres. One key element of nature writing is a concept often referred to as "sense of place." Without an attentive awareness to what makes a specific place unique, a text fails to fulfill nature writing's potentials. Particular places tend to accumulate characteristic descriptions or reputations, such that Alaska is by default the final American wilderness (with all that this designation entails) and Arizona is by default an under-the-radar zone of austere beauty and pitiless weather. In the case of British Columbia, that characteristic reputation has to do with how its existence as wilderness or hinterland links up with its provision to the world of natural resources, such as salmon and lumber. This tension in BC's characteristics, I will argue, can be seen in the internal tensions of place-based reluctant memoir, including Tim Bowling's *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory, and the Death of Wild Culture*; Brian Fawcett's *Virtual Clearcut: The Way Things Are in My Hometown*; and Harold Rhenisch's *Tom Thomson's Shack*. These three writers would be unlikely to consent to being linked in this way, and there are some generic challenges to be overcome before these works can be rightly assimilated to a conversation about memoir, but with those challenges overcome, these works combine to offer a portrait of a place-based memoir culture unique to Canada's west coast but nevertheless representative of how memoir can be profitably interwoven with nature writing.

Reluctance: Brian Fawcett, *Virtual Clearcut*

Siding with environmentalists doesn't fool me into trusting them or, for that matter, trusting them. It's unwise to trust people who believe in purity.
(Fawcett 2003: 92)

Brian Fawcett returns repeatedly to the painting metaphor of figure and ground both in the 2003 *Virtual Clearcut* and in the essays collected in his 2001 *Local Matters*. In brief, Fawcett argues that the twenty-first century, like the end of the twentieth before it, is a time of relative chaos in which there is no ground by which to make sense of the figures living on and before it, let alone to allow the figures

themselves to make their own sense of it all. At times he sees the ground as damaged, as a mess, while at others he sees it as a void; depending on his interpretation, he sees the more aware humans among us as either suffering or abandoned. He deliberately mixes the real and abstract senses of these terms “figure” and “ground,” too, doubly engaged as he is in the twin tasks of representing Prince George and its region, and of questioning the idea of representation. This double view of the world, this doubled purpose, drives not just Fawcett’s essays in *Local Matters*, but also the whole of *Virtual Clearcut*. Fawcett’s publisher assigned the book two generic designations on its dust jacket, not just memoir but “Current Affairs” as well, and as Rob Budde remarks in his review for *Canadian Literature*, “Fawcett’s project concerns *the problem of memory and return*, not capturing the essence of Prince George from on high” (2005: 132; emphasis in original). This overt “problem of memory” means that Fawcett is distinctly unappreciative of many attempts to perform the kind of reflective work he undertakes in this book, work he disparagingly refers to as “navel-gazing.” Still, in spite of this reluctance, Fawcett works hard at delineating both the figures and the ground with which he interacts in this book. Unless the figures that he’s trying to delineate and understand have a secure ground on which to stand and against which to be revealed, they’re not truly figures at all, and certainly not people worth understanding. Fawcett’s primary mission, in other words, is to establish just such a ground.

A long-time editor, reviewer, and writer in Canada, Fawcett is perhaps best known for his formally experimental 1986 book *Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow*, and for his perpetually cranky demeanour in print (which is, I gather, at times echoed by his private persona as well). *Virtual Clearcut* tells of four separate visits that Fawcett made, with different people at different times, to the Bowron Lake clearcut outside Prince George, the largest clearcut in BC history. Said to have been one of the two human creations visible from space with the naked eye (the other being the Great Wall of China), the Bowron cut resulted from an unholy combination of beetle-killed trees, blowdown, salvage, and what Fawcett’s friend Harvey Chometsky terms “an industrial riot” (Fawcett 2003: 63) in which the normally self-restrictive forces of bureaucracy came unhinged, redirecting bureaucracy from what should be its customary pursuit of sobriety. In the collapse of bureaucracy and the concomitant explosion of industrial rapacity, Fawcett (2003: 64) sees Prince George to have come under a special kind of late-capitalist attack: the city, its citizens, and their linked senses of place and community all face a culture capable of generating “this gigantic nothing that almost defies description.”

On the first trip back to Prince George and the Bowron, what preoccupies Fawcett is a gap between the world he sees around himself and the world he believes himself to in fact occupy:

Because we’re decently fed, clothed, and sheltered, have jobs to go to and families to come home to, and can manage to keep our personal woes hidden, we assume that the people around us are basically happy and fulfilled,

and that we need not worry about them.

Once in a very rare while, this turns out to be true. But much more often, something happens that reveals that our happy, fulfilled friends are drowning in private miseries too deep and opaque for anyone to fathom [...]. At that moment [...] we can see, if we want to, that the vast consumer mall in which we're all condemned to live out our over-provisioned lives hasn't obliterated or even much alleviated the misery of human life. It has merely rendered it temporarily invisible to us – and thus virtually impossible to respond to in wilful and effective ways. (2003: 28–29)

Before entering the clearcut, over a backyard barbeque and a drink with old friends, Fawcett finds himself awakened to and by the themes that characterize all his mature work: material excess, mall culture, and the simultaneous glory and sorrow of individualism. These are issues he addresses both in fiction and in essay form, but they come in for different treatment in *Virtual Clearcut*. Leaving behind the assorted cloaks he has used to address them theoretically in earlier work, in this book he confronts them directly, as the memoir mode permits. On the other hand, his friends and characters have replied that his memoir is, like all memoir, faulty in its details. As John Harris satirically notes, describing himself and Fawcett's other acquaintances as "lab rats" in Fawcett's artistic pursuits, "[w]e have to watch what Brian finds out about our habits, houses, jobs; it might not be good if our students, bosses, loan officers and local politicians knew or thought they knew what our situations really are" (Harris 2004).

With this caveat, then, it seems clear that in *Virtual Clearcut* Fawcett insists on situating his themes carefully in time and place, and with a very specific relation to a landscape subject to the simultaneously empowering and corrosive effects of nostalgia:

I will start by admitting what I did in and to the forests, and I will testify to what I saw other men do. Some of what I did and saw I'm now ashamed of, but there are other things in my reckoning that fill me with pride, and with longing for things and people I didn't appreciate nearly enough while I was among them. (2003: 49–50)

Fawcett grew up in Prince George and worked in the woods with the provincial Forest Service for a few years, so he's working from a detailed sense of involvement with the place: multiple chances at responsibility, a lengthy engagement across time, and a long-evolving ideological relation to nature. As much as he tends to dismiss self-examination as "navel-gazing," in *Virtual Clearcut* Fawcett engages in more than enough self-reflection for the book to qualify as memoir. Fawcett's approach depends on his insistent use of himself as narrator: arrogant, grating, self-important, and yet regularly punctured by himself and by others. The book recurs often to these three emotions noted in the block quotation above, of shame, pride, and longing. His first visit is short on pride, so ashamed is he of

what his fellow humans have done in the Bowron, and so intense is his longing for the pre-clearcut version of the Bowron River valley, but Fawcett retains a clear focus on his own place in the experience and in the events being recounted.

During the third of his four visits to the Bowron, Fawcett is compelled by his traveling partner, Don White, to articulate his current view of how humans relate (or ought to relate) to nature. The two middle-aged men are camping together in a Volkswagen van, trying to take some decent photos of the visually overwhelming clearcut while coming to terms with their always-shifting lifelong friendship, and Fawcett realizes that much of their conversation in the Bowron comes down to a coded disagreement about nature. Whereas White sees humans as part of nature (there being little difference between “human overpopulation and a budding jar of yeast,” for example [Fawcett 2003: 181]), Fawcett argues that humans can no longer afford to see themselves this way:

I’ve stopped believing that the human species can safely use nature as a model, and [I now believe] that we’ve overpopulated the planet, for good or bad, with our own species to such a degree that we have to create alternative systems – most of them technological – that improve on nature. (2003: 179)

It’s at this point in the book that Fawcett’s relation to the nature-writing tradition becomes most complicated. Many nature writers have questioned some of the tradition’s tenets, such as Oregon writer John Daniel’s reconsideration of place in his essay “A Word in Favour of Rootlessness,” but Fawcett is not simply patrolling the boundaries: he is proposing that humans need to leave nature behind in favour of technology. While this seems like a rejection of the nature-writing ethos, instead a figure as important to the tradition as Barry Lopez (1997) would disagree: “The real topic of nature writing, I think, is not nature but the evolving structure of communities from which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development.” This is as precise a definition of Fawcett’s project as one could look for, so the question remaining is whether Fawcett’s solution is consonant with nature writing. While Fawcett’s comments about technology are quite declarative, on the other hand his journey has been sparked by the use and misuse of precisely the kinds of technology that Fawcett here suggests represent humanity’s best chance for long-term survival. Fawcett is aware of the ironies and complexities of his position, but it’s for this reason that his book takes the form it does, of these four visits that allow multiple levels of reflection on the book’s assorted subjects. As Lopez (1997) remarks, in nature writing “the fate of nature and humanity are inseparable.” Just as Fawcett in his crisis makes use of both memoir and nature writing, even while he denigrates and challenges both genres, so too does he reach for technology, once nature has been (in Lopez’ terms) “removed” from the community.

By book’s end, in his 2001 final visit to the Bowron, the confidence of Fawcett’s sense of what the clearcut means to Prince George has faded. Or rather, although his characteristic pose of self-confidence (even arrogance) hasn’t particularly

faded, his perspective has shifted both on the Bowron clearcut and on his fellows: “For the first time, I realize that I’m feeling reasonably normal while I’m inside the clearcut, and I can’t quite decide why [...]. Either by sight or scent, the clearcut I came to see has ceased to exist. In its place is a young forest” (Fawcett 2003: 282–83). He goes on immediately to acknowledge that this “young forest” is by no means ecologically equivalent to what had been there before the industrial riot of the clearcut – no biodiversity, thinner topsoil, more silt in the river, fewer salmon – but “[t]he Bowron River valley is going to survive this assault” (Fawcett 2003: 285). Fawcett’s friends and fellow travelers on this final visit to the Bowron, Kent Sedgwick and Barry Mckinnon, aren’t given the chance to express themselves here, but Fawcett permits them a moment of animal good humour in the clearcut: “They break open the coolers and each wolfs down mountains of food, while the dogs run around merrily despite the spitting rain and the clouds of hovering bugs” (2003: 282). The transformations here are interesting, not just that the rain spits and the bugs become clouds, but that the men are linked with wolves and their food with mountains, suggesting an improving relationship between humans and nature. In town, however, thinking about a society that can produce something like the Bowron clearcut, Fawcett is even more anxious than usual:

Life is easier if all you want is to sit at home and watch television, and it is better if your idea of fun is driving a four-by-four deep into the bush so you can shoot up anything that moves. But people don’t seem to like each other as much as they once did, and the certainty of mutual help that was once among the deepest securities of living close to the wilderness is no longer something to count on. Life on the frontier is becoming life on the stagnant edge of nothingness. (2003: 245)

In *Virtual Clearcut*, Fawcett pushes up against the boundaries of memoir as well as of nature writing, transgressively exploiting the potentials as well as the loopholes of both genres. The story of a natural site that has been violated by humanity – a formerly idyllic river valley where Fawcett had canoed in his youth – has shifted toward a story about people: not humanity in the abstract, and not nature in the abstract, but real people living in relation to a real place. Once he makes this transition, *Virtual Clearcut* makes a transition as well, away from the “Current Affairs” half of the designation that Fawcett’s publisher assigned to the book, and toward the “Memoir” half. Nature, in the end, becomes less important to Fawcett than are people, so the defense of nature with which the book opens becomes subsumed into a defense of a peopled place inseparable from its natural surroundings, recalling the subtitle to his essay collection *Local Matters: A Defense of Dooney’s Café and Other Non-Globalized Places, People, and Ideas*.

Protest: Tim Bowling, *The Lost Coast*

This isn't a literary work you're holding. It's a school of wild words.
When the last wild salmon dies, these pages will be dust.
(Bowling 2007: 70)

Hybridity, Scott Slovic (2008) argues in his moving essay “‘Be Prepared for the Worst’: Love, Anticipated Loss, and Environmental Valuation,” can for the environmental writer either unlock otherwise inaccessible questions of values and ethics, or make the text virtually unreadable. Slovic suggests that Rick Bass’ *Book of Yaak* “both explores the artist-activist dilemma and functions as a hybrid, fragilely balanced combination of art and plea,” making it a tremendously successful example of this hybrid mode. At its worst, though, this introduction of environmental concern into literature risks the reader’s alienation: “The very artfulness of literature becomes endangered when the writer presses the outer boundary of nostalgia, screeching along the border of language where the story of potential loss becomes a plea” (Slovic 2008: 59). What Brian Fawcett and Tim Bowling are up against is how their readership will understand their attempts at hybridity, and whether the books are able to express their protests in ways that can be heard – and acted upon.

Whereas Fawcett in *Virtual Clearcut* starts from nature and finds himself drawn into writing about the people whose lives are connected to it through logging, thus moving toward memoir from something akin to nature writing, Tim Bowling in *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory and the Death of Wild Culture* appears to take a much more traditional memoir-based approach to his subject. Like Fawcett, though, whose publisher assigned *Virtual Clearcut* two competing generic designations, Bowling too finds his book divided on the book’s own dust-jacket, though not between formal genres: “Part memoir, part environmental plea.” In contrast to Fawcett’s evolving need to move between genres in pursuit of the changing story he feels it necessary to tell, Bowling’s approach appears to be self-consciously transgressive of the memoir genre, declaring its simultaneous allegiance and transgression not just on the book’s jacket but in the body of the text as well:

[I]s literature ... a dead end if it does not constantly cry out against the crimes perpetrated on the wild of the planet? No. ... But we could certainly use more literary concentration on the plight of the earth and its wild creatures. Too much of our intellectual and artistic life can be categorized as Nero fiddling while Rome burns. (2007: 69)

This book is thus a deliberate attempt to evade what Bowling sees as the ideological limitations of the traditional genre he’s working in, namely the memoir. Instead of engaging in straightforward nature writing, though, which might be the logical generic move away from memoir when environmental engagement is

at issue, his decision is to skew the functioning and referentiality of memoir. Not just telling his own story, Bowling also recounts the history of Ladner, the village where he was born and grew up (“a Russian village without Russians” [Bowling 2007: 130]); summarizes the history of BC’s commercial salmon fishery; and imagines scenes from the province’s racially exploitive labour history.

The deliberateness of Bowling’s transgressive approach has not, however, smoothed the critical reception of his book, a reception which has seen Bowling’s approach called both unnecessary and unsuccessful: “While *The Lost Coast* is an excellent memoir, it may not be an entirely effective environmental polemic, chiefly due to Bowling’s use on occasion of easy-to-refute arguments that preach to the converted, and a brand of rhetoric that is overmastered by his anger” (Noyes 2007). Or as Cherie Thiessen (2007) comments in *Quill & Quire*, “Bowling is a skilled poet who knows the value of images and the magic of mood, and where the story relaxes into memoir, it’s enjoyable. Where it tenses and blames, it is less successful.” Noyes and Thiessen, along with several other reviewers, quite simply find the book’s use of nature writing’s discourse of environmental engagement to detract from its success as a memoir.

Ironically, reviewers more familiar with nature writing and environmental history have criticized Bowling for an over-reliance on the techniques of the memoir. One of BC’s leading writers on environmental matters, Terry Glavin, praises the book as “a fine piece of work,” going on to say that “it deals with a phenomenon few writers have adequately explored – the global phenomenon of ecological collapse and the vanishing of distinct communities from landscape and memory, with all the deracination and disorientation that results” (2007a). But while complimenting Bowling for his perceptiveness and ecological awareness, Glavin takes him to task for his use of devices familiar to readers of memoir (and to creative nonfiction more broadly): “As a memoir, it follows a fashionable style of reconstructing events in the most minute detail – including events that occurred when Bowling was perhaps 6 – which puts it squarely within the definition of what used to be called a novel” (2007b). One example of this novelization is Bowling’s recounting of a childhood encounter with the imagined ghost of Edney Booth Ladner, who passed away in 1883; he reaches back to this woman several times in the book, both for her children lost in their infancy and for her entrepreneurial husband’s rapacity, but on the occasion of her initial appearance he is motivated primarily by her connection to his view of history:

When I see her, I see the history the world does not care about, but which art contains, as the egg of the gull contains the piercing cry and as the school globe pulses with menstrual blood. Life, in its bountiful offerings to the artist, sometimes puts a face to human experience from which our eyes cannot be lowered. (55)

The scene occurs in a home owned by the Ladner family before Edney Booth Ladner’s death, a deserted house that Bowling entered many times as a child, but

otherwise the scene is fictional. Ladner had been dead for 85 years at this point, and there is no way to know whether she spent much time in a hard-backed rocking chair in this particular room, unconsciously chafing one wrist with her other hand. The scene may to some readers offer a poignant connection between the wife's personal losses and the husband's financial gains, a connection that finds its echo in the collapsing Fraser River salmon fisheries at the end of the twentieth century, but to others – including Glavin – it represents a betrayal both of memoir and of environmental engagement.

This is not to say, however, that *The Lost Coast* has failed to find at least some critical favour: after all, it won the provincial non-fiction book prize for Alberta, where Bowling was living when it was published, and it was nominated for a number of awards (notably the Writer's Trust of Canada non-fiction prize, for which Bowling was a jurist the following year, and the provincial non-fiction book prize for British Columbia), as well as being named a "Notable Book" by the Kirayama Prize committee. As Glavin (2007b) remarked at the outset of his review of the book for the *Globe and Mail*, "Tim Bowling is one of Canada's greatest living poets," and the readers on prize committees tend to read with different eyes than do book reviewers.

And what is it that readers find in *The Lost Coast*? Compared to the two other texts under discussion here, they find a relatively traditional memoir, except that it's deeply influenced by the discourse and strategies of nature writing. For all its description of Bowling's childhood hometown of Ladner, the focus is kept tightly on Bowling's experience of the place, and not the place itself. Bowling offers a detailed commentary on the history of British Columbia's salmon fisheries, but the purpose of this commentary is to contextualize the story of Bowling's own family history; Terry Glavin and other commentators have called attention to errors of fact and emphasis in Bowling's version of history, but in the generic context of memoir, these "errors," again, mark the ostensibly public history as instead private. Compared to Brian Fawcett's portrait of his evolving understanding of how humans and nature might sustainably come together in a particular place, and to Harold Rhenisch's rethinking of place in *Tom Thomson's Shack*, in fact *The Lost Coast* comparatively seamlessly links together nature writing and memoir. Readers expecting a memoir can find one here, especially if they're prepared to accept the integral presence of nature writing: if they're prepared to see Bowling's linking of these genres from the side of nature writing, which has long recognized its affiliation with memoir, rather than from the side of memoir, which regards nature writing as an unhealthy transgression against the form.

Hybridity: Harold Rhenisch, *Tom Thomson's Shack*

The work of a fly-fisherman, fashioning a grasshopper out of deer hair and walking miles along the cutbanks of the Thompson River north of Lytton, among the old, abandoned villages with their graves and dead

fruit trees, and casting out through the blue air so the hopper lies like
a breath on the cool water, is the basis for building a culture.
(Rhenisch 2000: 218)

Harold Rhenisch's generically unstable memoir *Tom Thomson's Shack* received similarly doubting reviews as Fawcett's and Bowling's books: "it's hard to see just what Rhenisch's overall point is," complained Mary Soderstrom (2000) in *Quill & Quire*. Also like Bowling and Fawcett, though, Rhenisch found critical success with the book, earning a nomination for both of BC's nonfiction book prizes (one more than Bowling), as well as a lengthy feature by the province's newspaper of record, the Vancouver *Sun*. Rhenisch has said that his influences in this book include some of the figures behind Scott Slovic's perceptive remarks on the links between memoir and nature writing with which this essay began, Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard and Wendell Berry, along with the less likely suspects V.S. Naipaul, Karen Blixen and David McFadden (Moore 2000). While Fawcett and Bowling both contest the standard modes and conventions of nature writing (though Bowling to a lesser degree), Rhenisch embraces the genre, fully integrating it into his memoir while at the same time retaining his focus on life-writing, on memoir.

Rhenisch's project in *Tom Thomson's Shack* is different from Bowling's or Fawcett's in their books under discussion in this paper. Bowling is seeking to recover a way of life now lost, which was embedded within an ecology and ecosystem that is in his view itself now largely lost as well (though Terry Glavin and others have disputed some of Bowling's more extreme claims); Fawcett, for his part, is memorializing a fading way of life as a provocation toward sustaining it, which he connects both to a sense of hope and to a demonstrably inadequate historical human relationship with nature. Both Bowling and Fawcett are focused, in other words, on the material conditions of local communities and specific places, even if they participate in a global political and economic system. Rhenisch, on quite the other hand, is concerned with imagination. He worries deeply about the material conditions of the Okanagan and Cariboo regions of British Columbia, and about the potential for their virtual enslavement to globalizing forces, but his solution is to imagine a new mode of being, not to offer a different plan of action:

I am tired of false choices; I am tired of tinkering; I am tired of judgement. I want a new civilization. I want it, because everything is alright. Everything that is alive is alright. We don't have to choose; we have to talk to each other about what concerns us deeply. (Rhenisch 2000: 228)

One distinction to draw between Rhenisch and the other writers discussed here is that for Rhenisch, community is not something to be observed, but something in which one must participate meaningfully. Bowling's narrative position is solitary, an outsider in a world where he no longer belongs, and Fawcett's is that

of a long-gone emigrant returning to his hometown. While these other writers are concerned with a particular community, and Rhenisch certainly isn't unconcerned with particular communities, Rhenisch's focus is primarily on the idea of community: on the future of community, rather than its past (as with Bowling) or its present (as with Fawcett).

Rhenisch's idea of community, too, is challenging within the context of Canadian literature, for a few different reasons. First, he deliberately lumps most of southern Ontario together as a totalized "Toronto," which he then sets against his home regions in British Columbia as the local/national version of an imperial or colonizing centre. Michael Holmes (2000) is quite right to object to Rhenisch's "[d]ismissing or erasing the differences and cultural contributions of suburban and rural Ontario communities from Brampton to Belleville, calling them all Toronto, while simultaneously obliterating the uniqueness of the myriad urban Torontos," but Rhenisch is hardly alone in this criticism. Fawcett has taken a similar approach in both his fiction and his nonfiction, but Fawcett's standard rhetorical mode is bellicose enough that at least some of his readers are able to take such comments as posturing. With Rhenisch, no such evasion is available, because his direct tone does not shift in the confrontation toward something that could be dismissed as somehow not genuine. On the other hand, objections to the political and cultural weight of southern Ontario have been a staple of Canadian political discourse since before Canada's founding, so even though Rhenisch's own emphasis on place within BC should imply a concern for the specifics of place in Ontario, his remarks are hardly surprising. Second, and more importantly, even more of a complication comes from Rhenisch's transferring the language of colonization across cultures:

the farms which a hundred years ago colonized Shuswap land are being colonized today by tiled floors, lawns, swimming pools, Jacuzzis, and golf courses – the static cast up by the city, abandoning the dialogue with the earth for images of that dialogue. They are not images of the land. ... They put the lie to the attempt to find in the earth values that can transcend the limitations of our culture and its rush to be free of the earth, the attempt to use beauty to eliminate the need for abstraction and the dual line of thought once and for all. (2000: 202)

The colonization of First Nations peoples in Canada, as well as across North America and around the world, deserves to be described in apocalyptic terms. As Rhenisch is well aware, using the term "colonization" in another context is a risky move, and it's even riskier when (as here) it directly compares the two contexts. In equating the Euro-Canadian occupation of lands traditionally used by First Nations with the succession of Euro-Canadians across the same lands, Rhenisch is – at the very least – asking for trouble.

Rhenisch's point throughout *Tom Thomson's Shack* is that British Columbia can be inhabited positively, even profoundly, by immigrants. Indeed, it may be

his point that there is no option other than local adaptation if a worthwhile human culture, more broadly defined, is to survive. The initial wave of colonization which converted places used, occupied, and known by First Nations peoples can to some extent be read as a blundering, failed attempt at this positive inhabitation, and Rhenisch's book includes a significant amount of nostalgic reflection on the labours and failures of these earlier Euro-Canadian immigrants to British Columbia. Whatever a reader's view on the values arising from the original round of colonization, and clearly Rhenisch's views need to be carefully questioned, what Rhenisch calls a more recent "colonization" cannot be read positively. His critique of urban culture's attempt to occupy the land is phrased aggressively: "The city whose industry is the contemplation, manipulation, and marketing of images, is colonizing the land with images of the land" (Rhenisch 2000: 142). Meaning is being stripped from Canadians' vision of the land in this new colonization. In relation to literary genre, Rhenisch is claiming – in his support of the first-wave occupying colonizers – a special merit for the discourses of nature writing. Work, the kind of work done by Euro-Canadians who move into an area not previously occupied by people like them, the kind of work that is also done by those whose ways of life are threatened by such incoming Euro-Canadians, is the only way to encounter the world responsibly: "Through the work of our hands we keep the earth alive. The earth, that language of wood and snow, is found no other way" (Rhenisch 2000: 128). This is the work honoured by so many nature writers throughout the genre's history, including Thoreau and Muir in the nineteenth century; Mary Austin and Aldo Leopold in the first half of the twentieth century; and Rick Bass and Wendell Berry more recently. While there have always been nature writers passionate about intellectual work, the focus has often been on material engagement with the non-human world, a material engagement deeply informed by intellectual discipline (or at least intellectual excitement). Only from a place of work, Rhenisch argues, can one encounter the land responsibly.

This emphasis on materiality is perhaps one reason that memoir has been less ready to admit nature writing's generic proximity than nature writing has been to admit the proximity of memoir. As noted above, the tremendous expansion and invention seen in the memoir field has derived largely from an intense, sustained focus on identity, identity politics, and problems of linguistic indeterminacy. Nature writing's near-obsessive materiality means that problems of language and identity politics are peripheral to the genre rather than central, making nature writing less useful to practitioners or theorists of life-writing than are other genres or modes. As Rhenisch puts it, human language itself can come to seem alien to a nature-writing consciousness, a sensitivity to non-human nature aroused by exposure to special modes of human self-expression:

Literature, which had brought me to this awareness of the living earth, was being sloughed off, replaced by the world, cell by cell and molecule by molecule and waving tree branch by waving tree branch, until suddenly it wasn't there any longer. Now, after twenty years of living in that new earth,

the world of words seems to me puzzling and strange, as the substance of the earth was before, yet I use words, for they too have spirit. (2000: 60)

As Richard Lane (2001/02: 86) explains, “Rhenisch realizes [...] that the colonial experiment known as ‘farming’ in British Columbia has produced valuable lessons, or, at least, a body of knowledge based upon action, upon being in the world, that is as powerful, if not more powerful, than the knowledge grids produced within the cities.” While Rhenisch has expressed his discomfort with the idea of Being,¹ nevertheless he argues that “there are, spiritually, no distinctions between land and self” (Rhenisch 2010). Writing about nature and writing about the self, finally, can be the same text: and in a time of ecological crisis, perhaps need to be the same text.

Conclusion: Environmental Engagement and the Memoir

This essay began with the idea that although nature writing has long been comfortably aware of its historical connections with memoir, in recent years even theorizing such connections, there has been little acceptance of this idea in the other direction. From the perspective of memoir, nature writing has been a distinct genre (possibly even a remote one) that has needed little consideration, largely because autobiography theory has been so profitably engaged with questions of identity, self-construction, and cultural genealogies. The effect of literature is not always predictable, as Harold Rhenisch declares in *Tom Thomson’s Shack*: “the earth is more vital than the images we make of the earth [...]. [W]ords can just as well be used to lead us away from words to the earth – where no words can follow – as they can lead us away from the earth to a concrete-and-glass world where the earth is a rumour of long ago” (2000: 75). Whatever the genre that any particular arrangement of words belongs to, the authors discussed in this paper separately argue that we need to be led to the earth. There are of course numerous problematic rhetorical constructions associated with environmentalism, such as “saving the earth,” but in the case of British Columbia nature writing that savours so heavily of the memoir, we find, in the end, words whose function is to bring together the concerns of humanity and the concerns of the earth. Fiercely regional, nonetheless these memoirs partake of the long international history of nature writing, building both protest and declaration out of generic reluctance and hybridity.

Note

- 1 As Rhenisch put it on a listserv discussion of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada: “‘Being’ for me is all tied up with Heidegger and the particular problems of that. Hence I never use it. I wind up in Buchenwald again, and I’m really trying to get out” (Rhenisch, “Re: [ALECC]”).

References

- Allister, Mark (2001) *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography*. Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- Bowling, Tim (2007) *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory, and the Death of Wild Culture*. Gibsons Landing, BC: Nightwood Editions.
- Budde, Rob (2005) 'The Cut You Come From'. Rev. of *Virtual Clearcut*, by Brian Fawcett. *Canadian Literature* 187, 132–33.
- Eakin, Paul John (1992) *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Evans, Mary (1999) *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/Biography*. London: Routledge.
- Fawcett, Brian (2001) 'Aesthetics and Environmentalism'. In: Persky, Stan (ed.) *Local Matters: A Defence of Dooney's Café and Other Non-Globalized Places, People, and Ideas*. Vancouver: New Star, 92–95.
- Fawcett, Brian (2003) *Virtual Clearcut: The Way Things Are in My Hometown*. Toronto: Thomas Allen.
- Glavin, Terry (2007a) 'The Lost Coast: A powerful 'environmental plea'; Also what used to be called a novel'. Rev. of *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory, and the Death of Wild Culture*, by Tim Bowling. *Transmontanus*. 29 January 2010. <<http://transmontanus.blogspot.com/2007/12/blog-post.html>>.
- Glavin, Terry (2007b) 'Out of the wild – and into the 'burbs'. Rev. of *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory, and the Death of Wild Culture*, by Tim Bowling. *The Globe and Mail*. 4 February 2010. <www.proquest.com>.
- Harris, John (2004) *Virtual Inquisition*. 29 January 2010. <<http://www.dooneyscafe.com/archives/348>>.
- Holmes, Michael (2000) 'Country mouse comes a-callin' BELLES LETTRES'. Rev. of *Tom Thomson's Shack*, by Harold Rhenisch. *Canadian Newsstand*, ProQuest. 8 February 2010. <www.proquest.com>.
- Lane, Richard J. (2001/02) 'Does This Place Really Exist?: Authenticity and Identity in British Columbian Writing'. Rev. of *Tom Thomson's Shack*, by Harold Rhenisch. *BC Studies* 132, 85–89. 8 February 2010. <www.ebscohost.com>.
- Lopez, Barry (1997) *A Literature of Place*. 6 February 2010. <http://arts.envirolink.org/literary_arts/BarryLopez_LitofPlace.html>.
- Moore, John (2000) 'Out of the woods: A respected but little-known B.C. novelist and poet has written two books with the potential to place him firmly in the limelight'. Rev. of *Carnival and Tom Thomson's Shack*, by Harold Rhenisch. *Canadian Newsstand*, ProQuest. 8 February 2010. <www.proquest.com>.
- Noyes, Steve (2007) 'The loss of 'human wildness' and a way of life'. Rev. of *The Lost Coast: Salmon, Memory, and the Death of Wild Culture*, by Tim Bowling. *Ottawa Citizen* 28 December 2007. 29 January 2010. <<http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/features/bookreviews/story.html?id=721b5475-897e-4538-a014-e5154ba2967a&k=4450>>.
- Rak, Julie (2005) 'Introduction – Widening the Field: Auto/biography Theory and Criticism in Canada'. In: Rak, Julie (ed.) *Auto/biography in Canada: Critical Directions*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1–29.
- Rhenisch, Harold. 'Re: [ALECC] Re: asle-58.11: Bartlett on Rhenisch on Domanski'. *ALECC list-serv*. ALECC, 16 January 2010.
- Rhenisch, Harold (2000) *Tom Thomson's Shack*. Vancouver: New Star Books.
- Slovic, Scott (2008) 'Be Prepared for the Worst': Love, Anticipated Loss, and Environmental Valuation'. *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. Reno and Las Vegas, NV: University of Nevada Press, 36–61.

- Slovic, Scott (2008) 'Mexico City Declaration (21 January 2000): A Story of Nonconsensus'. *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. Reno and Las Vegas, NV: University of Nevada Press, 83–88.
- Slovic, Scott (1992) *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Soderstrom, Mary (2000) Rev. of *Tom Thomson's Shack*, by Harold Rhenisch. *Quill & Quire*. 29 January 2010. <http://www.quillandquiere.com/reviews/review.cfm?review_id=1818>.
- Thiessen, Cherie (2007) Rev. of *The Lost Coast*, by Tim Bowling. *Quill & Quire*. 29 January 2010. <http://www.quillandquiere.com/reviews/review.cfm?review_id=5856>.

RICHARD PICKARD is a senior instructor in the Department of English at the University of Victoria, in British Columbia, Canada, where he specializes in literature and environment, composition, and technical writing. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Alberta, and both his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Victoria. His research interests are in the fields of environment and literature; eighteenth-century studies (especially British poetry); the literature of labour; and writing from and about non-urban British Columbia. He is currently the president of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC). In June 2009 he hosted the biennial conference of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, held at the University of Victoria, and in August 2010 he is co-hosting ALECC's inaugural conference, to be held at Cape Breton University in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Address: Richard Pickard, Department of English, University of Victoria, PO Box 3070, STN CSC, Victoria, BC, V8W 3W1, Canada. [email: rpickard@uvic.ca]