

A Piece of the Continent, A Part of the Main: Some Comments on B.C. Literature

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My essay concerns B.C. Literature, and my title comes from the religious writings of John Donne, facts which are both troublesome.¹ For I'm not sure what "B.C. Literature" is: history, subregion, and waves of visitors and settlers confound all but the most banal generalizations about province-wide cultural homogeneity — leaving me not with a coherent body of provincial works to discuss (however one understands this term), but with a set of problematic perspectives. Is B.C. Literature something happening in B.C.? or something B.C. people understand about themselves and their relation with the rest of Canada, the rest of the world? or something others perceive about people and life in B.C.? or all three — with the added difficulty of trying to "locate" B.C. in an attitudinal atlas as well as in a geography textbook. There is, for example, the archetypal story of the American who identifies British Columbia as the British Embassy sector of Washington D.C. . . . B.C. has also taken imaginative form as Brobdingnag, the Gateway to the Orient, the end of the earth, Canada's answer to the Riviera, and California's California. And there may be some truth to all these identities. Yet for the people who live *in* B.C., there sometimes appear to be only two directions: IN and OUT. Notions like "East" and "West," "North" and "South" aren't directions at all; they're places, like "up," "down," and "back." "West" and "North" are both in B.C.; "South" is anyplace warmer; and "Back East" occupies the rest of Canada. "You have to remember," someone once wrote to the Vancouver *Sun*, "that for people who live on the Coast, there's absolutely no difference between Alberta and Newfoundland." In some sense, perspective is all.

¹ In a slightly different form, this essay was delivered at Simon Fraser University (15 July 1981) as a lecture in the *coast is only a line* series.

What I'm saying is that, for a lot of people looking in from the outside, B.C. is a setting which confirms expectations in their own minds, expectations born elsewhere, while for writers who write in B.C., the place constitutes not just a setting but also a way of seeing. The obvious complication follows: that a lot of writers who write in B.C. were born elsewhere. Does it follow that coming to B.C. gives their writing a B.C. perspective? Or does their pre-B.C. expectation, if indeed they had one they were conscious of, come with them and find its way into their books? And does it matter? Perhaps "B.C. Literature" is a phenomenon which is still in the process of interconnecting the two, shaping not a singular but a plural way of seeing — which we identify as an ethnic or geographic or regional variation, but which may just be the flux of a history-still-in-the-making.

Which returns me to John Donne. My title comes from his Meditation XVII, which, among other writers, Ethel Wilson cites; it avers that No man is an island, he is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. I find it an unusually apt introduction to the subject and nature of B.C. Literature not because it is so direct but because it is so cheerfully inconsistent, even self-contradictory. The contradiction doesn't, of course, exist in Donne; he was using the twin images of earth and ocean to celebrate a kind of unity. To be a particle of earth was to be part of earth, he argued, just as to be a drop in the ocean, a part of the main, was to *be* part of the ocean. What I want to suggest is that in B.C. the phrase takes on another resonance. To be a piece of the continent is to assert a connection with other territories and other attitudes in North America; to be a part of the main is to separate oneself from them: to *be an island*, to focus on one's differences rather than on one's connections. Now it would be convenient to employ a little critical geographical determinism here and locate all the continentally minded writers on the mainland and all the insularly minded writers on Galiano, Saltspring, Lulu and Vancouver Island. But it doesn't work that neatly. It's all in attitude of mind, in metaphor, in the way of seeing: asking, do we look at the mountains and see the mountain *top* and the mountain *wall*, or do we fasten on the mountain *pass* instead? do we think of the valley as a secluded *hideaway* or as the river *route*? do we imagine the ocean as the *edge of land* or as the *prelude* to Asia? In fact these need not be mutually exclusive attitudes; but holding them in suspense is not easy. Political allegiances tear people two ways. Hence to explore B.C. Literature is to find much variety, but repeatedly to find the tension between continental and isolat-

ing impulses. It comes in different guises, to which I give the five following names, which happen also to structure the rest of this paper:

1. Canada's Future, Canada's Edge;
2. Where Can I Find Miss Emily Carr;
3. America's Past, America's Perfect;
4. Where Is the Prophet that Lives in the House;
5. The Tricksters Among Us, The Tricksters at Home.

1 *Canada's Future, Canada's Edge*

Merely to mention "Canada" in this context is to assert a continental link — one that current political wrangling has questioned but that the people who live in B.C. nevertheless do accept as a heritage and a fact. About what *kind* of heritage it is they are often less certain; about whether the link is stronger with California or Calgary than with Ottawa or Halifax there will be partisan bias and holiday rhetoric. But the "Canada" I want initially to allude to is the Canada to which the early colony of British Columbia attached itself, giving itself another allegiance and giving Canada in the process (though Canada, least of all, understood what was happening) another horizon from the one it had had before, and a different future. It is the Canada of Alexander Mackenzie's "from Canada, by land, 1793" — or the Canada of the 1860s goldrush folksong:

I'm a young man from Canada, / Some six feet in my shoes,
I left my home for Cariboo / On the first exciting news.
In New York City I met a gent, / Introduced himself to me;
Said I, "I come from Canada, / So you can't come over me. . . ."

With seventy-five upon my back / I came the Douglas way,
And at an easy-going pace / Made thirty miles a day.
I landed here without a dime / In eighteen sixty-three,
But I'd been raised in Canada — / 'Twas nothin' new to me.

"On Williams Creek," he adds, "they called me green / And 'Johnny-come-late-lee' — / Said I, I come from Canada; / I ain't from the old country!" And later still he tells a local girl he comes from Canada and wants to wed her, to which (in Philip Thomas' twentieth-century version of the song) she replies, "You may come from Canada, / But you can't come over me!"² The song is, in its way, a counter to the annexationist

² "Young Man from Canada," in Philip J. Thomas, *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* (Saanichton: Hancock House, 1979), pp. 39-40.

impulses of earlier decades, as was the 1846 ballad that opened: "Yankee Doodle wants a state, / Oregon or Texas, / Sends some squatters in it straight / And quietly annexes. . . / Canada's a pleasant place, / So is California; / Yankee Doodle wants them all, / But first he cribs a corner. . . ." ³ But clearly there are some other things going on in the gold-rush song as well. One of them reveals the degree to which B.C. was ceasing to be a colony of England and was becoming the new territory — or "colony," if you will — of other parts of North America. Staying an English colony, in order to maintain the isolation of B.C., may have been what the earliest and established settlers wanted; but becoming part of Canada seemed at least attitudinally to emerge as the only alternative they had to joining the United States. That's rather like winning on a preferential ballot. It doesn't stop the isolationists from maintaining their separateness; hence Thomas' conclusion to the folksong has a certain rightness about it: along his way west, the cocky six-foot Centralist with shantyman's skills can put down the Yankee in New York, but he will nonetheless get his comeuppance from the fair maid of 100-Mile House. It's a feminist statement, of course; but it's also a broadly political one, with B.C. assertively requiring the old part of the society to adapt to the new, and refusing to be merely a new edge of the old map.

This contrast between the East's sense of West and the West's sense of itself repeats through Canadian literature. B.C. for Ralph Connor, for example, is territory to be claimed for the Presbyterian God of Glegarry; for the English-born Island writer Martin Allerdale Grainger, by contrast, B.C. was a separate frontier of logging communities and small towns, the loggers with a language all their own and the towns (like Victoria) with a cultivated set of English gardens. For Eastern historians like Donald Creighton, B.C. figures as a periphery to the Laurentian centre; while for local writers like Dorothy Livesay, George Bowering and Frank Davey, B.C. history — in the form of Susan Allison, Captain George Vancouver, and Captain Roberts of the *Clallam* — becomes a living repository of personal myth. E. J. Pratt, in *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), his account of the shaping of the nation and the forging of the CPR, casts B.C.'s entry into Confederation as Sir John A. Macdonald's "courtship" of "The Lady of British Columbia." His suitor's language is shaped out of poetry, out of metaphor, out of the idea of a nation "from sea to sea," with B.C. as a Western limit to the world of the future. The only language he fears is other poetry: the "sinuous . . . Spanish arias" of his persuasive rival California, or the accidental image of his political

³ "Annexation — 1846," *ibid.*, p. 17.

opponent Mackenzie, who transforms B.C. into a “sea of mountains,” isolating it from the continent, making it part of the main. The lady B.C. is made to be more poker player than coquette; “No Road, No Union,” she utters in “rough” and “rasping” notes⁴ — to which Sir John, frowning “at the Rocky skyline” in a rather telling silence, agrees. But the story Pratt tells is the conventional public national myth. For the B.C. perspective on the poker game, one has to go back to the reminiscences of John Sebastian Helmcken, Sir James Douglas’s son-in-law and the B.C. negotiator.

After declaring himself “against Confederation” because it was “premature” — “Canada was looked down on as a poor mean slow people,” he writes — he changes after he considers the other options. The Americans were interested in Vancouver Island, and they promised an influx of money, “free government” and Americans, who would by their presence stop the locals from being “an isolated people.” Helmcken opposes that solution and proposes another: a waggon road as a term of Confederation with Canada. Trutch, to sounds of laughter, goes so far as to propose a railway link. “At all events,” Helmcken recalls, “the public looked on the Railway as a smart trick — how not to do it.” When Helmcken then goes East and tells stories of the riches of the B.C. fisheries, no one believes him; they treat his claims as an exaggeration, but they agree to his terms anyway, considering the political advantage worth the cost. Helmcken writes:

How did they receive the news in Victoria? As soon as the Terms were made known, very many ridiculed — dust had been thrown in our eyes — no one would ever see the railway built — when built it would not pay axle-grease — the smart ones at Ottawa had been too much for us — why wasn’t the terminus placed at Victoria — quite easy to build bridges at Seymour Narrows and elsewhere — the Canadians were too poor and too mean to build the road — they would get out of it somehow or other — as to trade with China, this was a sort of Utopia. . . . Of course many Canadians took the opposite ground, but generally speaking there existed an unbelief. . . . As for ourselves we had to insist on the Terms being Carried out and fight (politically) for them. This had some effect, but still the general feeling was one of mistrust and ridicule. Of course . . . in time . . . people soon began to think that it would be better to accept than keep the country in a state of turmoil, and backwardness, for business was bad and people pessimistic. It has ever been thus. There was now not so much a feeling about the Terms, only they were too good to be true. . . .⁵

⁴ *Collected Poems*, ed. Northrop Frye, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1962), p. 351.

⁵ *The Reminiscences of Doctor John Sebastian Helmcken*, ed. Dorothy Blakey Smith (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1975), pp. 247, 252-53, 257, 265-66.

Motives were mixed, in other words; and when the terms were to B.C.'s surprise agreed to, there emerged less of a sense of a common purpose than of a common need, with dependence sharpening the rivalry between regions of the country, and the difference in population between Ontario and B.C. lessening Ontario's need to acknowledge that an *interdependence* existed.

But the people of B.C. came to grow into their stable domestic place in the world; Mrs. Robert Burns McMicking's *The King's Daughters Cookbook* gives ample evidence of the culinary range enjoyed in and available to Victoria by 1904 (there is everything from curries and soy and oranges to endless recipes for Plum Pudding, and one called a "Nice Way to Cook Real Tough Beef").⁶ Yet while all this was happening, B.C. came to be regarded outside the province as a wilderness of the possible, where the irrational and the unsafe were close to the surface of the unfamiliar and the untried.

In recent years, for writers like Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro, the province has literarily proved a way station on an itinerary of the imagination; for Wilson MacDonald in the 1920s, by contrast, B.C. was merely part of a literal itinerary, a place for performing as Poet on a Western Tour, in the days before the Canada Council and at a time when all the West, to a man like MacDonald, was considered merely provincial. His was an eventful trip, as letters from the time, gathered in 1975 by Stan Dragland, now document. The Edmonton audience and the Edmonton *Journal* rather liked MacDonald. "The general impression," ran their review, "... is that of a poet possessed of a keen sense of humor, an imagination, a patriotism which expresses itself in a broad humanitarianism and a great hatred of wrong." But two weeks after the Vancouver reading, Ernest Fewster (MacDonald's Vancouver host) was writing to Lorne Pierce of Ryerson Press:

In Vancouver [MacDonald] has aroused so much antagonism that it would be very unwise to attempt more public appearances in the near future. . . . This is principally on account of his unfortunate method of approaching people, along with his insistence, both in public & private, on the idea that his poetry cannot be equalled.⁷

⁶ 1st ed., Victoria, 1904; 2nd ed. 1911; 3rd ed. Vancouver: Unusual House, 1979. The King's Daughters and Sons is a Presbyterian organization, founded in 1886. Margaret Leighton McMicking was the Scots-born daughter of a foundry owner and his wife, who emigrated to Victoria via Cape Horn and California; Ontario-born Robert Burns McMicking, her husband, arrived in B.C. in the Overlanders Expedition of 1862, led by his elder brother. R.B.M. later established the Victoria & Esquimalt Telephone Company.

Obviously this contretemps was due more to personality than to national politics; but the capacity to bristle at being taken for granted is symptomatic nonetheless of larger tensions, and the B.C. willingness to bristle is perhaps what leads other observers to expect B.C. to be more radically different from the rest of the country than it is.

Here, for example, is Margaret Atwood, in "Migration: C.P.R.":

Escaping from allegories
in the misty east, where inherited events
barnacle on the mind . . .

and language is the law

we ran west

wanting
a place of absolute
unformed beginning. . . .

But neither place nor personality permits such a quest to come to its imagined conclusion:

There are more secondhand
stores here than we expected:
though we brought nothing with us
(we thought)
we have begun to unpack.

But what we have to remember, reading this, is that we're still dealing with perspective, and that what the visitor finds is not necessarily what is there. Atwood's persona knows this, for she knows that despite what she unpacks from the East she has carried with her, there exists in the West a forest she cannot understand and, insistently, green things onto which she still imposes her Eastern meanings:

There is also a sea
that refuses to stay in the harbour:
becomes opaque
air or throws
brown seaweeds like small drowned hands
up on these shores

(the fishermen
are casting their nets here
as well)

⁷ *Wilson MacDonald's Western Tour, 1923-24*, ed. Stan Dragland (Toronto: Coach House, 1975), n.p.

and blunted mountains
 rolling
 (the first whales maybe?)
 in the
 inescapable mists.⁸

But to make this step is to reach another understanding, one that we find again in Robert Kroetsch's *The "Crow" Journals*, when the writer leaves the prairies for the Coast, muses on the shore at Lantzville, and makes a distinction into a metaphor about two kinds of perceiving:

The sea-sound of the sea. Wind on water on beach. But around the house, here on the cliff among the huge trees, always, a stillness. The leaves never move on the trees. The effect:

Yes, that's a difference from the prairies. On the prairies the leaves move, even when there seems to be no wind at all, the trees and bushes and grass are alive. The fields of grain shift. The ditches stir.

The spiders thrive in this stillness, the beautiful spiders, over and over, they trap me. They smack their cobwebs onto my glasses. So far, each time, I've escaped, but I know, I know . . .

Bought a copy of Doris Shadbolt's book/catalogue on Emily Carr. Found, in Ron's library, a copy of Lowry's *Dark as the Grave* . . . Those two artists, framing our experience. Lowry, from far away, finding. Carr, from this place, exploring.⁹

2 *But Where Can I Find Miss Emily Carr?*

I ask this as a question in order to stress an ambiguity of personal enquiry: there are two Emily Carrs — the person and the symbol — and as a culture we have tried to place both. The interrogative form emphasizes for me the fact that Carr herself was always asking questions of the world around her, extending her own range of apprehension, refusing to accept the *given* as a necessary explanation of meaning, living her way into an original relation with the energy of wilderness, which she saw herself and attempted to share. It's not the sort of quest that comes to a neat conclusion; each discovery, each season, opens and closes into another, like the folds of foliage on her painted trees. It makes her an exotic in the world of Mrs. Robert Burns McMicking; for Emily Carr was very much an individual. And yet as Victoria held them both, they both strove to shape a style suitable for Victoria. Mrs. McMicking's was

⁸ *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford, 1976), pp. 25, 29. From *The Circle Game* (1966).

⁹ (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1980), p. 74.

given the *social* precedence at the time; Emily Carr, with her caravan home, her pet monkey, her baby buggy full of art materials, her bristling defensiveness against conventional standards, her quick temper, her sharp tongue, and her empathy for the *natural*, was at the very least thought of as idiosyncratic. Probably for this reason it was she who in time became a cultural symbol: of a force within the culture, creative, independent, personal, essentially female, which delights more in the combative processes of living than in the status and stasis of achievement. "In later years," she writes, "my work had some praise and some successes, but the outstanding event to me was the *doing* which I am still at. Don't pickle me away as a 'done'."¹⁰ The doing, moreover, involved her not only in looking at the world around her but also in looking at her way of looking at the world. And doing *that* made her question the validity of "universal standards." Importing an aesthetics from elsewhere did not necessarily make one elegant. Or tasteful. Or one with the *demi-monde*. Presumably ignoring standards from elsewhere did not necessarily make one elegant either, and could be dangerously isolationist, but how else did one declare an originality of vision, a difference of place? Not to challenge an imported and imposed aesthetics would be like unpacking the secondhand furniture you didn't know you'd brought with you. To challenge, however, set you adrift.

Carr's clearest statement on such matters comes in a talk she gave to the Victoria Women's Canadian Club in 1930, called "Fresh Seeing"; after distinguishing between the imaginative vision and the practical and curious, and after praising the Group of Seven movement for freeing Canadian painting into an awareness of the rhythms of the North, she goes on to ask:

What about our side of Canada — the Great West, standing before us big and strong and beautiful? What art do we want for her art? Ancient or modern? She's young but she's very big. If we dressed her in the art dresses of the older countries she would burst them. So we will have to make her a dress of her own. Not that the art of the Old World is not great and glorious and beautiful, but what they have to express over there is not the same as we have to express over here. It is different. The spirit is different. Everyone knows that the moment we go from the Old Country to the New, or from the New to the Old, we feel the difference at once. European painters have sought to express Europe. Canadian painters must strive to express Canada. Misty landscapes and gentle cows do not express Western Canada, even the cows know that. I said to a farmer in Scotland once: "That fence wouldn't

¹⁰ Quoted by Ira Dilworth in his "Foreword" to *Klee Wyck* (Toronto & Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin, 1965), n.p.

keep out a Canadian cow." "You are right," he replied, "it would not. Your cows are accustomed to fighting their way through the bush. When they are shipped here, it takes twice as many men and twice as high a fence to make them stay put." So, if the country produces different cow-spirit, isn't it reasonable that it should produce different artist-spirit?

There are two addenda to this passage, one about Indians and one about the nature of the artist. The first reads this way, and has its own interest:

Some say the West is unpaintable and our forests monotonous. Oh, just let them open their eyes and look! It isn't pretty. It's only just magnificent, tremendous. The oldest art of our West, the art of the Indians, is in spirit very modern, full of liveness and vitality. They went for and got so many of the very things that we modern artists are striving for today.

The second carries another message, which I take to be an aesthetic credo only on the surface, and in a more fundamental way to be deeply feminist:

People need not like creative art. It is not a sin if they don't, but they lose an awful lot of joy out of life by not trying to understand it. It opens up a new world for those who seek to understand it. Lots of artists sort of hanker for the adventure of it but are afraid of the public. They couldn't stand up against the sometimes just and sometimes unjust ridicule of the people or the press. They squeeze and little themselves, hoping to please or sell. I tell you it is better to be a street-sweeper or a char or a boarding-house keeper than to lower your standard. These may spoil your temper, but they need not dwarf your soul.¹¹

I have said already that Carr became a symbol, a talisman of some sort. To say that Indians and women are the reasons why this is so is to distort the matter, but it is also to locate a generating tension of Canadian experience: what Carr represents is the creativity of the wilderness — the native energy of the place, which an imposed, imported, and other-centred sense of culture will always find foreign.

One can find Carr's influence emerging in many ways in Canadian writing. Dorothy Livesay, for example, in a personal, political testament called "The Three Emily's" (meaning Brontë, Dickinson, and Carr) notes how

These women crying in my head
Walk alone, uncomforted:
The Emily's, these three
Cry to be set free —

She notes also how she, herself, mother and wife, can be

¹¹ *Fresh Seeing* (Toronto & Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin, 1972), pp. 18-19.

only for brief span . . .
an Emily on mountain snows
And one of these.¹²

Later in the same section of *The Two Seasons*, Livesay pursues the question of personal identity further, and in an "island" poem aboard a ferry, she talks of different kinds of personality, celebrating the kind that can assert its own certainty:

The one who, boy-legged
scaled the mountain yonder
caught salmon in the Capilano
cuddled his sister, quizzed his nurse,
made off with the family purse;
the one who holds in his shy hand
modelled in memory, a new land
shaped like a woman, with cool contour
but solid as rock and the rock's future

He is the one who, here
between two lives
can let both disappear;
who drifts to the inner island. . . .¹³

Florence McNeil, by contrast, in a poem sequence called *Emily*, tries to evoke the changing perspective of the painter herself; the result is personal in its way, too, but more particularly evocative as a testament of point of view:

It is not the surface I want [her Emily writes]
not the ocean with the sunday sailors

the harbour where ladies
boldly (in summer)
consider their ankles

or the straw hats
that float
in the placid inner harbour

I want like Alice to go through
the glass
come out on the other side
of respectability

¹² *Collected Poems: The Two Seasons* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), p. 202.

¹³ "Ferry Trip," *ibid.*, p. 208.

display barnacles kicking
 on the schooners' bottoms

show the insolent energy of seaweed

tell the languishing ladies and gentlemen
 of Victoria in their sacred departures
 there is violence
 florid and beautiful

beneath their holy excursions.¹⁴

What she moves toward is a way of perceiving the wilderness from within, of transforming it from alien territory against which one guarded oneself, into something natural, making a garrison mentality unnecessary, and untenable.

I have learned to be at home
 only in mysteries
 to take something as complicated as a mountain
 with its landslide of creatures eating rocks and brush
 with its trees mouthing snow their feet in the teeth of worms
 and rush it into colour
 say Look this moving smudge of paint has life
 is a western mountain. . . .¹⁵

But there were others for whom the wilderness was not to be seen in this light; inevitably it was to be seen in connection with another set of expectations, and for them the wilderness became a freedom to *inhabit*, making it

3 *America's Past, America's Perfect*

By this phrase I mean to suggest the way that the American mind seizes upon any frontier and turns it into utopia, presuming then that the frontier can subsequently be inhabited and remain clean. Disneyland is the prototype. That it conflicts with the actuality of wilderness and experience is something which the conscious mind knows, only to defer to the dream anyway. Consider this fragment from a Lewis Thomas essay in *The Medusa and the Snail* called "A Trip Abroad":

What I would like to know is: how should I feel about the earth, these days? Where has all the old nature gone? What became of the wild, writhing, unapproachable mass of the life of the world, and what happened to our old, panicky excitement about it? Just in fifty years, since I was a small

¹⁴ "Sundays," *Emily* (Toronto & Vancouver, 1975), p. 39.

¹⁵ "Home," *ibid.*, p. 36.

boy in a suburban town, the world has become a structure of steel and plastic, intelligible and diminished. . . .

Now I live in another, more distant town, on a street with trees and lawns, and at night I can hear the soft sound of cement, moving like incoming tide, down the Sunrise Highway from New York.

If you fly around the earth and keep looking down, you will see that we have inserted ourselves everywhere. All fields are tilled. . . .

We have dominated and overruled nature, and from now on the earth is ours, a kitchen garden until we learn to make our own chlorophyll and float it out in the sun inside plastic membranes. We will build Scarsdale on Mount Everest.

We will have everything under control, managed. Then what do we do? On long Sunday afternoons, what do we do, when there is nobody to talk to but ourselves? . . .

Perhaps we should try to get away, for a while anyway. A change of scene might do us a world of good.¹⁶

There is something quintessentially American about all this, which seems to have very little to do with what I've been talking about until we realize that from this vantage point, B.C. turns into one of the many last frontiers, presumably to inhabit. In a 1980 science fiction story by Philip Dick — an anti-abortion polemic called "The Pre-persons" — a father tells his son:

" . . . you and I could get onto an Amtrak coach and head north and just keep on going until we reached Vancouver, British Columbia, and we could take a ferry to Vancouver Island and never be seen by anybody down here again. . . .

"We could live on a little island off Vancouver Island and raise our own food. You can plant stuff up there and it grows. And the truck won't come there; you'll never see it again. They have different laws. The women up there are different. There was this one girl I knew when I was up there for a while, a long time ago; she had long black hair and smoked Players cigarettes all the time and never ate anything or ever stopped talking."

To his wife, he adds:

"You could come along, . . . and catch fish by leaping into English Bay and grinding them to death with your sharp teeth. You could rid British Columbia of its fish population overnight. All those ground-up fish, wondering vaguely what happened . . . swimming along one minute and then this — ogre, this fish-destroying monster with a single luminous eye in the center of

¹⁶ (New York: Viking, 1979), pp. 107-09.

its forehead, falls on them and grinds them into grit. There would soon be a legend. News like that spreads."¹⁷

It's a bitter story.

I want to get at this American frontier notion a little more indirectly at this point, and go back to the kind of defensive *Canadian* attitude towards B.C. This, for example, is what Hugh MacLennan says about the Fraser in his book *Seven Rivers of Canada*:

No easterner, least of all one from the Maritime Provinces, is ever likely to feel *at home* beside the Fraser River. It is *alien* to everything he knows, and so is its land.¹⁸

The metaphors pile on; consider this sequence:

Though the ultimate destination lies hundreds of miles to the south-west, the Fraser begins its career by *charging* north-west in a wide, wavering curve along the Rocky Mountain Trench. After about two hundred miles the *rushing* waters encounter the northern spur of the Cariboo Mountains, they *sweep* in a *fierce* arc around them, then they *plunge* directly south. *Twisting furiously*, with only a few brief interludes of relative calm, the Fraser *roars* for four hundred miles down to the little town of Hope, which began its existence as a Hudson's Bay Company post and was well named, . . . when one considers what awaited a traveller going north before the roads were built. At Hope the Fraser at last *breaks out* of its *mountain trap*.

To the geographer what happens here is one of the most exciting natural spectacles in Canada. Within a distance of a mile the entire character of the river changes and this *tyrannosaurus* of a stream turns sweet and gentle. In a broad valley shining in the sun, with a width the same as the St. John's below Fredericton, the Fraser winds calmly through the loveliest farming valley in the land. The air is balmy, the cattle as sleek as in a Cambridgeshire meadow, the snow peaks Olympian in the *safe distance*. During these last eighty miles the river traverses most of human British Columbia, for it is in this beautiful corner, and in the twin cities at the estuary, that the bulk of British Columbians live. At the end of its course the Fraser is old King Lear with the rage gone. But before the ocean *swallows* it, receiving its water through a surprisingly small delta, the river makes one final assertion of its true character. For miles it *stains* the clean brine of Georgia Strait with the *dirty yellow silt* it has *torn out* of the mountains all the way from the top of the Cariboo to the Canyon's end. . . .¹⁹

And perhaps most extraordinary about the passage is that MacLennan bases much of his commentary on his reading of Bruce Hutchison's *The Fraser*, which in its opening section talks about the river this way:

¹⁷ *The Golden Man*, ed. Mark Hurst (New York: Berkley, 1980), pp. 318-20.

¹⁸ (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961), p. 139; my italics.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-41; my italics.

No man stands beside the Fraser River without sensing the precarious hold of his species upon the earth. . . . In this grisly trench, bored out of solid rock through unimaginable time by the scour of brown water, the long history of lifeless matter, the pitifully brief record of life, the mere moment of man's existence, are suddenly legible. And here, in this prodigal waste of energy, nature's war on all living creatures is naked, brutal and ceaseless. . . . The fish it tolerates and breeds in countless swarm. The vegetable growth it burrows out and sweeps away wherever its tides can reach. The animal touches these waters at its peril. Among the animals, the river has seen man for a fragment of time hardly worth recording in the ages of its experience and it holds him in contempt. It crushes his vessels. It tugs and chews forever at his bridges. It heaves its avalanches against his fragile railways. It gnaws his little plots of habitable land, overwhelms his dikes, silts up his harbors, and awaits the day of his going.

In this lash and spill of water, in the slow grinding of rock and cliff, in the perpetual slide of mountain and forest, in the erosion of mountain and gumbo rangeland, in the impact of whirlpool and winter ice, the river is forever mad, ravenous and lonely.²⁰

This passage, with its alienating adjectives and animal verbs, seems to me to aggrandize, to romanticize the river, and to view it with oddly Eastern eyes. To provide some perspective, one must go to the poetry of Daryl Hine, or to the work of Ethel Wilson, and the Fraser Canyon passages in *Swamp Angel*. I am not trying to suggest that Wilson sees the river as sweetness and light; on the contrary, her character Maggie Lloyd, having just left her husband and now heading into unknown territory in *the Interior*, finds the Fraser "strong," "powerful," "swollen," "dangerous," "sullen," and — because it is "silent" — "sinister." Yet somehow it is a part of the wilderness vitality — possibly a sublimated sensuality — which she has to allow herself to rediscover. What is most important about the river is that *it flows*. The mountains are not a *labyrinth* or a *cage*, but a *fluid medium*. The entire landscape is a "Flowing, melting, rising, obliterating" that actively "projected [Maggie's] vision where her feet could not follow."²¹ One is reminded clearly of Emily Carr.

But the *American* vision claims wilderness not as a set of mind but as a utopian *place*. Edward Hoagland names it most directly when he calls his 1969 B.C. travel journal *Notes from the Century Before*. This is a work which discovers the Spatsizi and makes of it an America-as-it-used-to-be, a territory of virtuous possibility and the naturally pure wild.

²⁰ Ed. Harvey Allen and Carl Carmer (New York: Rinehart, 1950), p. 5.

²¹ (1954; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962), pp. 53, 57, 59.

Hoagland talks of being in New York, wanting to walk the Telegraph Trail because

it had been cut to go around the world. Cutting a trail to go around the world is a beguiling idea, an idea that skitters off into space. I got interested in the Stikine also, left as it was in the nineteenth century by a fluke of geography and by the low-keyed Canadian temper.²²

"Known" and "left," the place remains, it seems, for the American to "find."

Two decades earlier, in 1951, another American, named Richmond P. Hobson, Jr., had published *Grass Beyond the Mountains*, an account of his opening up of the headwaters of the Blackwater River. The language again is telling, for it is laden with romantic stereotypes; Hobson and his friend decide to "tackle the unknown country"; and they "rattled across the Canadian border" with "plans for breaking into the wild unexplored country beyond the Chilcotin."²³ When they get there to find it "locked away in the solitary regions of this continent's last great cattle front," this is the description they provide:

The Anahim Lake country, its sullen forests recently echoing the shots of explorers who had fought and died there, is a dark and forbidding land, jealously guarding its immense boundaries from men creeping north and west from the rim of civilization.²⁴

This is the language of Tarzan in Africa.

If one turns to the B.C. journals of English settlers, the terms are equally romantic, but different; instead of Tarzan we find Robinson Crusoe, educated to adventure by his sound British schooling, which prepares him for the worst, which he confidently expects to find. Hence Eric Collier, in *Three Against the Wilderness*, observes of his experience of the Chilcotin:

We hadn't seen another human being for over two months or received or sent off mail in the same length of time. We were Crusoes on this island, around us a sea of snow. But these were trivial matters, inconvenient but not serious.²⁵

And R. M. Patterson, writing in *The Buffalo Head* of the Rocky Mountains, tells of emigrating to Canada to find fellowship instead of autho-

²² (1969; rpt. New York: Ballantine, 1972), p. 12.

²³ (1951; rpt. London: May Fair, 1961), p. 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁵ (1959; rpt. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1962), p. 130.

city, to find adventure instead of the expectable routines of Oxford and the Banks of England; he identifies a grizzly bear as the first British Columbian he encounters, and exults in an eagerness

to get out of settled country — to the outskirts, and then beyond the outskirts to some place where boundaries were still unknown and where the horizon was the limit. There the only barriers would be natural things — mountains and fast rivers, swamp and forest, ice and snow. These could be overcome: persistence and endurance would be the keys to that far-off kingdom. . . . Those who could go far from their fellow men, and those who could go alone, were so few that they could be sure of their reward.²⁶

In fact the image came indirectly, from his readings of Jack London, just as Frederick Niven's notion of the wilderness derived from the romantic Westerns featuring Deadwood Dick. Niven, however, went on to write about the need for the immigrant to learn the *language* of the New World; Patterson gives the impression of never abandoning his Englishness. He is better able to sleep in the snow than Canadians are, he says, because sleeping in the cold in his English school has prepared him for it. Unfortunately in context such statements have little irony about them. One gets the sense with Hobson that he thinks he can tame the wilderness because he has American know-how, and with Patterson that he can endure the wilderness because he is British. The connection between people and wilderness in Carr and Wilson or in the tales of George Clutesi is neither so confrontational nor so suffering. The wilderness is not a foe, but merely the environment in which one finds oneself, with which one connects. Still, it is more than just a physical presence; it becomes either a metaphor of spiritual discovery as well, or something stronger: an embodiment of spirit that awaits its oracle. "[D]own the valley," writes Wilfred Watson of the painter, in his poem "Emily Carr," "you looked and saw / All wilderness become transparent vapour, / A ghostly underneath a fleshly stroke, / And every bush an apocalypse of leaf. . . ." ²⁷ Yet this metaphysical direction will seem as dissatisfyingly romantic to many readers as the Robinson-Tarzan stereotypes do. To ask, then,

4 *Where is the prophet that lives in the house?*

is to ask a punning question — with "prophet" spelled with an "f-i-t" as well as a "p-h-e-t" — in order to try to suggest a different

²⁶ (1961; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), p. 57.

²⁷ *Friday's Child* (London: Faber & Faber, 1955), p. 55.

dimension of B.C. Literature and another direction in which it has moved. I have referred indirectly to class in the examples I have already looked at; class was something Patterson wanted to leave behind, but in his way brought with him, like the CPR luggage on Atwood's train; class was something affecting Emily Carr in Victoria, and all the characters of Ethel Wilson. A notion of class is something that develops any time a human community develops, in fact, and is probably compounded by the politics of city life. Hence as cities grew in the province, and the economy became a collective enterprise rather than a demonstration of self-reliance, the romantic ideal of the individual became somehow linked up with the image of the tycoon. Mazo de la Roche's *Growth of a Man*, for example, is loosely based on the life of her cousin, H. R. MacMillan. And autobiographies of Those-Who-Made-It-to-the-Top abound. But the notion of the private empire is not one-sided; it, too, has its rootedness in continental connections.

"Profit" is easily appreciable in this context; we're dealing with the exploitation of the wilderness and the economic hierarchy that develops as it happens. Hence we're also dealing with the social reactions to these developments, the issues of poverty and a high standard of living, of municipal bureaucracy and social planning, of urban crowding and labour unrest, of the pressures of mechanization, the advantages of technology, and the problems of conservation: all of which become the subjects of literature. But these are not, of course, bound by the B.C. border. Earle Birney's novels are critiques of the processes of bureaucracy at large. Dorothy Livesay's socially critical poems espouse a general socialist cause, not one specifically affiliated with a local party. Irene Baird's documentary 1939 novel *Waste Heritage*, about the Depression in Vancouver, is about all human suffering during the Depression. It opens with a clear account of the Vancouver waterfront:

The freight steamed clanging into the yards. The engine bell swung backwards and forwards, the heavy tolling kept up even after the long line of cars had clashed to a shuddering standstill. The sun glared down onto the burnished maze of storage tracks, and off in the distance the grain elevators and the awkward span of the old bridge stood out against a hard blue sky. Closer in, on the far side of the tracks, the pier roofs, splashed white with dried gull droppings, cut between the smokestacks and masts of the waterfront. From uptown came the screeching of a fire truck. It sounded hysterical, as though it had picked up the feel of what was going on around it.²⁸

Setting, however, is less important here than psychological effect. Though

²⁸ (1939; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 3.

the passage is somewhat overwritten, it gathers its force from its piling on of adjectives and verbs: we hear that the *freight steamed*, of the *heavy tolling*, of cars that *clashed to a shuddering standstill*, a sun that *glared onto a maze*. The author uses words like *awkward*, *hard*, *cut*, *hysterical*. Collectively they describe a geographical setting but they also establish inferentially the pressures of the time — twinned economic and psychological pressures with which the book's entire community is going to have to contend.

These community pressures have in fact been racial as well as economic, primarily involving tensions between Europeans and native Indians (as, for example, in the writings of Hubert Evans and Margaret Laurence). The tensions have been most virulently expressed in the *Komagata Maru* incident and in a 1922 novel by Hilda Glynn-Ward called *The Writing on the Wall*; and perhaps most eloquently expressed in Joy Kogawa's poems — and her novel, *Obasan* — about the evacuation of Japanese-Canadians from the Coast during World War II, and in Sing Lim's memoir of his Chinatown boyhood, *West Coast Chinese Boy*. Changes in economic structure, social mobility, and immigration patterns led inevitably to more cultural islands and other kinds of barrier to communication in B.C. When Dorothy Livesay closes her 1966 poem "And Give Us Our Trespasses," she chooses a phrasing which is continental in sweep and personal in message; "Between the impulse to speak / and the speaking / storms crackle.

Forgive us our
distances."²⁹

This shift in emphasis from place to person is typical of twentieth-century literature, not just of literature in B.C.; it also goes far to removing B.C. literature from its fascination with landscape as setting. Landscape does not, of course, disappear; the wilderness remains as metaphor, but the wilderness that stays becomes one of personal relationship. For every Peter Trower poem that celebrates the landscape, like "Along green tunnels," where "slugs move like severed yellow fingers / shrinking mud-pools remember the last rain / sunshafts stab through the leaves,"³⁰ there is one like "Overhead Crane," in which the machine operator fantasizes about his power over the circuitry, the plexiglass, and the people below him until he realizes his distance:

²⁹ Livesay, p. 301.

³⁰ *Ragged Horizons* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978), p. 15.

I'm trapped in an isolation booth
 amuse myself with mad thoughts
 like revving this beast up fullbore,
 thundering down the monotonous tracks
 smashing clean through the wall to freedom.³¹

And for Pat Lane, in "Bunkhouse North," the pressures are more indirect still, more debilitating, and more personally isolating:

each of us remembered
 deaths we had delivered:
 the gutshot deer
 the stumbling bear
 snapping at his leg to eat his pain
 the falling men pitching on the plain

Each of us wishing he was blooded
 or was wise in the loneliness
 that comes across the eyes
 in that cold quick moment
 just after making love. . . .³²

As another example, one might think of Malcolm Lowry, the Englishman in North America who considered bush life paradisaical and urban Vancouver as hellish as the city of the son of Cain must be, who found wilderness a resource to value not a region to conquer, but who was finally conquered by his own private frailties, apparently powerless to fight them, bedevilled by disorder though his mind sought pattern among chance events and struggled to shape them all into some form of universal order. He tried to adapt classical cosmogonies, the magical system of the Tarot, the symbolic mysticism of Middle Eastern philosophies, and plain superstition to his own life — which he transformed into *Under the Volcano* and the rest of his fiction. But always life grew beyond the system, and he found himself evicted from the paradise that for a moment he thought he held at his hand.

It is not, of course, an unusual occurrence, though Lowry transformed it into an extraordinary literary texture. But scores of people who have sought order in their lives — perhaps as a result of a changing world and changing pressures in it — have found in systems a support that they cannot create for themselves. Often these are systems that come complete with prophets (though "profit" with an "f" is sometimes involved, too). These have established themselves in many places, including Burnaby;

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³² *Poems New & Selected* (Toronto: Oxford, 1978), p. 43.

but the most famous local example is that of Edward Arthur Wilson, the self-styled “Brother Twelve” — confidant of the “Eleven Brothers in the Void” — who in 1927 attracted large numbers of people, with funds, to follow him to a small island off Valdez Island, which he bought, and on which he established his “Aquarian Foundation” of faith and ritual practice. Charges of forced isolation and the sadism of his cohort, Madame Zee, subsequently led to the dissolution of the sect and to the sale of the property. But my point here is to emphasize once again the tensions between insularity and community. B.C. may have come to represent both the end of the world and the beginning of a new world; but by and large for the residents of the place, it is not the prophet who governs their lives. It is the trickster — with implications I shall try to make clear. For many recent B.C. writers, that is, the challenge of portraying life has been to find

5 *The Tricksters Among Us, the Tricksters at Home*

There are, of course, trickster figures in many cultures, some of whom we have inherited, like Prometheus (who stole fire from the gods and gave it to people, and who fascinated Malcolm Lowry), and some of whom are native to the area. Each culture adapts the figure to itself, as when the Caribbean slaves adapted Annancy, the trickster spider, from its West African forebear, and in the stories *they* told — transparent survival stories created under slave conditions — made the black spider always triumph over his adversary, the white cockroach. The trickster figure in North American mythologies appears variously as the hare and the raven, but most particularly in Salishan cultures and through the West as Old Man Coyote. One of the anthologists of coyote stories, William Bright, observes that the range of tales illustrates Coyote’s many-sided personality: he is, altogether, “divinity, creator, lawgiver, trickster, buffoon, and victim.”³³ In the Thompson stories, he trained people to hunt, transformed mosquitoes from large creatures into small pests, made salmon swim in the rivers, and caused the seasons to happen. He has, moreover, the intelligence to foresee change; but he is also the example of how not to behave, a demonstration of how breaking the taboos brings about destruction. Despite which, he always comes back to life, irrepressible and entertaining for all his moral weakness — all of which makes him an extraordinarily human character. Flecked with divinity and

³³ “Introduction” to *Coyote Stories*, ed. William Bright, IJAL-NATS Monograph No. 1 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 1.

imperilled by his imagination, his capacity to reason and create, he represents the possibilities of human experience, including the potential for balance, for equilibrium.

Sheila Watson's Cariboo novel *The Double Hook* makes the clearest direct use of the Coyote myth. It opens with the characters living "In the folds of the hills under Coyote's eye,"³⁴ and it closes with the imperfect, suffering, wilful, imaginative, human protagonist James Potter picking up a baby, while another character is hearing "the voice of Coyote crying down through the boulders: I have set his feet on soft ground; I have set his feet on the sloping shoulders of the world."³⁵ This is no Eden the characters live in. The epigraph makes the tension clear: "He doesn't know you can't catch the glory on a hook and hold on to it. That when you fish for the glory you catch the darkness too. That if you hook twice the glory you hook twice the fear."³⁶ But even the tension itself contains the promise of balance, which is another way of saying that human beings must suffer and enjoy the mixed measures of chaos and order that we call the Human Condition.

Earle Birney, too, rejects the EITHER/OR exclusivities that he associates with "American" culture, as in the sardonic close of "Billboards Build Freedom of Choice":

yegotta choose fella yegotta
 choose between
 AMERICA and UN-
 between KEE-RISPIES and KEE-RUMPIES
 between KEE-RYEST and KEE ROOST-SHOVE
 and brother if you doan pick
 RIGHT
 you better
 git this heap
 tahelloffn
 our

 TRUWAY.³⁷

But clearly rejecting the securities that are sanctified by conformity and bureaucracy is to embark on treacherous terrain, like the sloping shoulders of the world that, in Birney's "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth," lead down to the Gulf of Georgia:

³⁴ (1959; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁷ *Selected Poems 1940-1966* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), p. 32.

on the highest shelf of ever
washed by the curve of timeless returnings
lies the unreached unreachable nothing
whose winds wash down to the human shores
and slip shoving
into each thought nudging my footsteps now
as I turn to my brief night's ledge
*in the last of warmth
and the fading of brightness
on the sliding edge of the beating sea. . . .*³⁸

Such a tenuous balance, fraught with danger, large with possibility, provides an evocative symbol for the predicaments and promises of contemporary experience. It would be wrong to restrict it by its geography, or to make it conform to the Coyote myths, just as it would be wrong to claim implicit Coyote allusions for the tenuous balances of Phyllis Webb's world, or the natural cycles of Roderick Haig-Brown's. And it would be a monumental act of self-centredness to claim that Birney's November Walk or Watson's Coyote myth demonstrate that balance is *ONLY* possible in British Columbia. To do that would be to create an island out of B.C. all over again, to set it afloat on a sea of ego and confirm all the popular prejudices against the place that irony only partly dispels. I am reminded of W. O. Mitchell's essay in *Maclean's* some years ago, which asserted first of all that "All Westerners Are Snobs"³⁹ and then went on to classify them by their own kind of provinciality. Alberta people are horse snobs and oil snobs, and wear cowboy clothes to prove it; Manitoba people are weather snobs (it gets colder in a Manitoba winter than in any place on earth); in Saskatchewan, Mitchell goes on, where they have precious little to be snobbish about, they declare they have more rust on their wheat than anyone else does; and then you can hear the essay pause: in B.C. . . . well, in B.C., people are snob snobs, and it's the only place in the country where Prairie People feel somehow inferior. And *that's* because every time a plague of yaws breaks out in Vancouver, the *Sun* reports that Prairie People have been known to be in town. We can identify with such a diagnosis because it exaggerates for us the foibles of our society and the stereotypical processes of identification by which we divide societies into *us* and *them*, and turn community into a fixed pattern of behaviour when in reality it is a fluid form in time and space, whose attitudes change.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁹ 77, no. 10 (16 May 1964), 76.

I have left to the end any allusion to Jack Hodgins' work because it seems to me to embody much of what I have been saying. Hodgins is an Island writer who grew up in an oral culture in the Comox Valley; he is the son of a logging family; a mathematics major at university; the inheritor of a literary tradition that includes Chaucer, Swift, Fielding, Laurence, Birney, and nabs Faulkner and García Márquez for good measure. He's a celebrator of natural passion, a satirist of social pretension, an exaggerator of human foible, an observer in search of meaning, a moralist in touch with legend, a stylist of the imagination, and a teller of tales. Is this B.C. Literature? Well, yes — but that does not constitute a limitation on its reach. If Hodgins is fascinated by the mad miracles of daily life on the West Coast, and if he records with evocative fidelity the details of his Island settings, that does not transform him dismissively into a regional realist. Setting is not his subject in *Spit Delaney's Island* or *The Invention of the World* or *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*. People are. And the setting becomes metaphor for something in their experience that helps to mark and shape how they see. Being on an island is part of this experience. But it isn't just Vancouver Island, or even just B.C. that is being referred to; it's a cast of mind. The Irish giant in *Invention of the World*, who comes, like Brother Twelve, to the West Coast to colonize *his* idea of Eden, is a false prophet, unable to contend with the extraordinary, creative — and nonparadisal — realities of local daily life. Such realities demand "fresh seeing" — which is precisely what Mayor Wiens, in *Joseph Bourne*, cannot provide. All of the mayor's extravagant attempts to grow the largest cactus in the wettest town of the Island enact imported notions of how to demonstrate municipal uniqueness; they imitate the outside world, just as other characters imitate the outside world's proprieties, without relying first on their own capacity to recognize human worth. This is Joseph Bourne's gift to the town, of course: the ability to create. He is the trickster in residence — balancing "bourne" with "born" and "burn," uniting the river and the fire with the sense of living at an edge — offering at once a glimpse of human potential and a fairly explicit challenge to people to make the future their own responsibility.

Hodgins, with the ironies born of living (for a time) in Nanaimo, keeps referring to the Straits of Georgia as "the Trench." It's among other things an allusion to the kind of separateness that does divide the Island from the mainland — and perhaps the province from the rest of the country. But again we must respond to the engaging tone. "I'm fascinated," he observed in a 1979 interview, "with the space that separates

people, that keeps them from overlapping. But while I'm interested in other places, I'm much more concerned with finding out what makes people the same anywhere."⁴⁰ Despite the Island Perspective, in other words, the impulse is always there to explore the degree of attachment to a larger community than the immediate self. B.C. would not be what it is if it were not a piece of the continent as well as a sea of mountains; and literature in B.C. declares its twin allegiances, too. Hodgins speaks of a west coast Indian myth called "The Place of Transformation," in which "Some mythical beast came roaring up out of the water and changed people into fish and fish into people. It made me aware," he says, "of the line between water and land as a kind of separation between one kind of reality and another."⁴¹ This motif runs throughout *Spit Delaney's Island*. But when Spit dreams of the "long curving line of sand that separates island from sea and man from whale," he also realizes that it "is alive with the quick flashing movements of people."⁴² The point of separation, that is, is also the point of connection. At once (to adapt Phyllis Webb's titles), it witnesses *breaking* and promises *making*, and evokes those moments when people begin to see things anew, to find ways — sometimes literary ways — to declare their private discoveries and their sense of the life they collectively live.

Which brings me, through several digressions, back to my subject: the nature of literature in British Columbia. I have left a lot of writers out of this survey. And I have made generalizations out of the works of the writers I have mentioned, trying to avoid imposing a fixed order on what they have to say. Neither the geography nor the political economy of B.C. will determine its literature, though both will have their impact upon it; and any generalizations about the literature of the region must contend with the internal variety of regions, the historical impact of separate waves of immigration and settlement, and the range of local idiom and local dialectal sound. What is thought of as "B.C." changes as one changes vantage point through place and over time; and with such changes, the literature — like the landscape it often depicts — becomes fluid. I have referred to the function of B.C. in others' eyes as periphery, as playground, and as paradise; I have mentioned the tense relation between local aspirations for social propriety and an equally strong impulse to celebrate the wilderness; I have alluded to the mythological

⁴⁰ Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Jack Hodgins," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, no. 32/33 (1979/80), p. 35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴² "Separating," *Spit Delaney's Island* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), p. 4.

underpinnings of cultural attitude and to real socioeconomic inequalities, and I have implied a contrast between the prophet's promise of absolute order and the trickster's offer of a temporary balance. These constitute at least some of the elements that go into the making of B.C. Literature, but they do not provide a definition of either its accomplishment or its potential. What governs these are the talents of the individual writer, who will take of his or her experience, intelligence, imagination and simple skill with words, who will fabricate from them a separate world, and who will invite us then to enter into that extraordinary conspiracy we call reading.