"It's like herding cats!" exclaimed our troop leader with fond exasperation. An apt image for the motley dozen of us, as usual meandering in different directions and various groupings, not quite together enough just then to listen to the story of the abandoned mine. But of course eventually we regrouped and got caught up in another marvellous moment of recreated history.

By then we were near New Denver and were in Day 3 of the BC Studies board's next great adventure. (Some of us participated in a shorter excursion up the Fraser as far as Lillooet a couple of years ago.) Also by then, I had realized that even I, Alberta-born Canadian wanderer that I am, could legitimately claim roots and even dead ancestors in this place, British Columbia. At some level I've resisted considering myself a British Columbian, though I've lived here since 1984 and had two earlier forays as a resident of Fort Langley in the summer of 1966 and as a freelance editor on Galiano Island from 1977 to 1980.

This bemusing realization came to me early on in our adventure because, as we drove into Merritt on Day 1, my first reading of Al Purdy's great poem, "The Cariboo Horses," came back to me in a flash. In 1967 I wrote a paper for Eli Mandel at the University of Alberta on that poem and others in the book of the same title. I've driven Highway 5 often since then, but "The Cariboo Horses" has never come to me before.

It came that May day partly because I was doing live historical geography. My U of A experience had led me to the University of

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THE CARIBOO HORSES

Al Purdy

At 100 Mile House the cowboys ride in rolling stagey cigarettes with one hand reining half-tame bronco rebels on a morning grey as stone – so much like riding dangerous women with whiskey coloured eyes – such women as once fell dead with their lovers with fire in their heads and slippery froth on thighs – Beaver or Carrier women maybe or Blackfoot squaws far past the edge of this valley on the other side of those two toy mountain ranges from the sunfierce plains beyond

But only horses waiting in stables hitched at taverns standing at dawn pastured outside the town with jeeps and fords and chevys and busy muttering stake trucks rushing importantly over roads of man's devising over the safe known roads of the ranchers families and merchants of the town

On the high prairie are only horse and rider wind in dry grass clopping in silence under the toy mountains dropping sometimes and lost in the dry grass golden oranges of dung

Only horses no stopwatch memories or palace ancestors not Kiangs hauling undressed stone in the Nile Valley and having stubborn Egyptian tantrums or Onagers racing thru Hither Asia and the last Quagga screaming in African highlands lost relatives of these whose hooves were thunder the ghosts of horses battering thru the wind whose names were the wind's comman usage whose life was the sun's arriving here at chilly noon in the gasoline smell of the dust and waiting 15 minutes at the grocer's
Saskatchewan in 1967 to do an MA in English. My topic: “The Sense of Place and History in the Poetry of A.W. Purdy.” Obviously I’m a historical geographer manqué, so the chance to explore more of my most recently adopted province had subconsciously reactivated an earlier self.

I’m also now of a certain age, and much of what went round once in some form has come round again in another. It amuses me, for example, to see how trendy my thesis title is, trendy in 2001 that is. In 1968, when I finished the thesis, it was quite novel. (And in 1968 A.W. Purdy was not “Al,” though that changed with publication of The Cariboo Horses.)

At this certain age I have come, unexpectedly and still somewhat ambivalently, to realize that I am rooted in this farthest west of Canada. It doesn’t mean I’ll be here forever, of course – impossible to change the conditioning of a lifetime. But re-examining Purdy’s sense of place and history, recalling how in his best poems he eloquently and evocatively conjures places such as the Cariboo, the “Country North of Belleville,” and “North of Summer,” makes me re-examine my own roots, and rootedness.2

Those roots are all Canadian, and likely to remain so, so I’ll probably never know first-hand what real uprooting from one’s own country is, an experience many fellow Canadians have. But even for a born-here Canadian, I have moved around a bit. I used to envy people who could say definitively that they were from Crooked Creek or Auburn, Ontario, or Truro, Nova Scotia, or Montreal, Quebec, and mean by that that they had continuous histories associated with those places. I don’t have such connections. As a child I moved five times when my Mountie father was transferred (though each time to a different place in Alberta). As an adult, I have continued to be peripatetic, so “home” is the country, not a single place.

The field trip emphasized how a “national soul” like me (as opposed to Pico Iyer’s brilliant evocation of “the global soul”) has roots, and how dramatically different people’s experience often is in this twenty-first century from what even my own experience has been.3 The trip revolved to some extent around Richard Mackie’s and Cole Harris’s family encounters with, respectively, the Coldstream and Slocan

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Valleys. But starting with my Purdy moment, and because, after all, the trip was set up to make us think about “place” (and, not least, because the journal editors required a written piece at the end of it), I came to see how deep my own roots in British Columbia are.

My father came to Vancouver as a young man in 1935, a genuine mounted policeman, being part of the Musical Ride. He was a British Columbian for only three years and then was moved to southern Alberta. Even before he arrived in British Columbia though, an aunt and uncle of his moved here. When the field trip reached Vernon we visited an old friend of the Mackie family, Peter Tassie. He had known Great-Aunt Lucy and Great-Uncle Herb Northcott, who moved to a fruit farm in Vernon in 1918, leaving most of the huge Bracewell-East-Northcott-Wilson clan back in Manitoba. Near New Denver, at the Harris family farm above Slocan Lake, I looked fondly at mountains that resemble those in the Crowsnest Pass, which isn’t so far away from there, and where my Macdonald grandparents lived for fifty years. My brother and his family live in Prince George; cousins live in Vancouver; more distant relatives are scattered from Victoria to Invermere. And for about fifty years I have driven, with family or by myself, to and from Alberta and beyond more times than I can remember, visiting these various relatives and linking myself to the west coast.

The field trip was another link. Eventually, well fed, well walked, sung out, and talked out as we were, the motley crew headed west again. We packed up Pat’s blue raincoat-cum-bathrobe-cum-blanket; Wendy’s accordion; my RCMP blanket roll; everyone’s collections of paper, rocks, plants to be identified, books bought, water bottles not yet emptied, trail mix, and the other random paraphernalia collected by twelve travelling souls, and went on down the road. Another field trip savoured, more roots revealed.