JEAN AND AL'S SENSE OF PLACE AND HISTORY

JEAN WILSON

"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.[1] 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

[1] *The Cariboo Horses* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965); included in *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*, selected and edited by Al Purdy and Sam Solecki (Maderia Park, BC: Harbour, 2000): 57-8.

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

[2] "The Country North of Belliville," in *Beyond Remembering*, 79-81; *North of Summer: Poems from Baffin Island* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), included in *Beyond Remembering*, 97-126.

[3] Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (New York: Vintage, 2001).

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.