

THE BUSHRAT INVENTORY¹

RICHARD MACKIE

THE *BC STUDIES* FIELD TRIP came ten years after one of my more unconventional archaeological and archival ventures. In 1991, I crawled under my family's cabin at Sugar Lake, on the Shuswap River in the Monashee Mountains north of Cherryville, and dismantled a den occupied by successive generations of bushrats who had shared the cabin with my family since its construction in 1922 (Photo 1). I brought out eight cardboard boxes of material, mostly kindling and twigs, and compiled an inventory before burning most of the contents. The nest yielded fragments of the twentieth century, ranging from a silver coin to part of a children's book to scraps of newspaper. It contained an odd selection of textual remnants, a curious archive preserved by the bushrats themselves, and a parody and satire of orthodox collections preserved in the usual institutional files and fonds.

The Sugar Lake cabin has changed little since its construction. It contains a spacious central living room with a large open fireplace, a compact kitchen with a wood stove, and an ample sleeping verandah, which stretches around



Jean Barman and Richard Mackie.

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Photo 1: The cabin at Sugar Lake.

three sides of the house, separated from the forest by mosquito screen. The rough floorboards were sawn on the site by the cabin's builders, Bill Fraser and Bill Hollingsworth. Beneath the house is the large and dusty crawlspace inhabited by bushrats and frequented by other small mammals, including chipmunks, squirrels, skunks, and fishers.

This simple cabin conceals important elements of the twentieth century, ranging from the terrible local effects of the world wars, to the overseas extension of British imperial values, to the destruction of rural communities by hydro-electric projects. Between the wars the lake, like everywhere in British Columbia, was full of First World War veterans, including Bill Hollingsworth, Geoffrey Montfort, Major Montague Curwen, and Tommy Atkins, who had once been a butler in England. In 1926, my grandfather, Colonel F.P. Mackie of the Indian Medical Service, visited the lake and hunted on Sugar Mountain. Later he boasted that he had hunted big game on every continent. In July 1940, his sons Richard Ernest Mackie and George Owen Mackie (my father), aged thirteen and ten, crossed the Atlantic in a convoy led by HMS *Revenge* and reached Vernon as war evacuees.

Between 1942 and 1944, the Shuswap River was dammed by the West Canadian Hydro Electric Corporation, Sugar Lake was raised by forty feet, and the power was diverted to Cominco's smelter, zinc refinery, and wartime munitions factory at Trail. Most farms and cabins on the lake were flooded, but the Mackie cabin was just high enough to escape the flood. The flood inundated the rich meadows at the head of the lake, where several families farmed, and destroyed the interwar Sugar Lake community. Almost everyone was bought out by the West Canadian Hydro Electric Corporation and moved away. Only the Mackies, and the bushrats, stayed.

Bushrats, known also as packrats and woodrats, are of the species *Neotoma cinerea*. They resemble squirrels more than rats. They even have a squirrel-like bushy tail. They are found in much of North America, though not on Vancouver Island. In nineteenth-century British Columbia they were known as trader rats for their habit of pilfering goods, typically shiny objects, from travellers at night and exchanging them for natural objects. Abstaining from outright theft, they often leave something behind in the place of the coveted item. One winter at Sugar Lake, for example, they took every piece of cutlery down to their den and thoughtfully traded it for kindling, twigs, and pine cones – a process which, if unchecked, would eventually have turned the cabin back into forest. The bushrats specialize in the art of transforming the alien into the familiar.

Among the cultural artefacts confiscated by the Sugar Lake bushrats were cigarette packs, beer bottle labels, and a cardboard disk from “Beaver Brand” fishing line (Photo 2) and, in a display of rat-like sarcasm, they even cached the label from a bottle of “Raticate, the New Rat Killer.” In the 1980s, they preserved what amounts to a “list within a list” – a shopping list kept by my brother Quentin (Photo 3). The age of many objects can be estimated, or is known, and this has enabled me to divide the artefacts from this eccentric archive into a chronological inventory:



Photo 2: King George Beaver Brand fishing line disk from bushrat nest, August 1991.

INVENTORY OF SUGAR LAKE
BUSHRAT NEST, AUGUST 1991

A. Objects from Circa 1922 to 1945:

1. A Canadian silver dime dated 1919, very good condition
2. The Table of Contents of a children's book, with stories entitled "The Dog and the Shadow," "The Mischievous Dog," "The Ox and the Frog," "The Frog and the Lion," and "The Geese and the Cranes"
3. The *Vancouver Sun*, 25 July 1940, "Vancouver's Home Examiner"
4. Scraps of newspapers, several fragments
5. A cigarette pack, *Sweet Caporal Cigarettes, Kinney Brothers, Imperial Tobacco, Montreal*
6. A beer bottle label (quart size), reading: *Westminster Brewery Ltd*
7. An empty box of tinned canvas staples, three-eighths of an inch, two ounces, net: *Dominion Tack and Nail Co., Galt, Ontario*
8. Pieces of red wicker chair from the living room.
9. A circular label from fly fishing line: KING GEORGE. *Pure Hard Braided Silk Waterproof Enamelled Line. BEAVER BRAND. 25 yds. No ... Test ... lbs ... The Allcock Laight & Westwood Co., Ltd., Toronto* (see Photo 2)

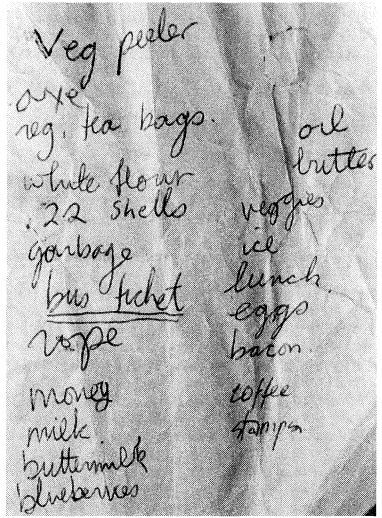


Photo 3: A list within a list; a shopping list kept by Quentin Mackie, late 1980s, from bushrat nest.

B. Objects from Circa 1945-1970:

10. Scraps of Victoria and Vancouver newspapers, several fragments and dates
11. A plastic strip sterilized Band-Aid (patented 1957-1960)
12. *Minit Deli Frozen Ravioli with Meat, Burnaby, B.C.* (plastic bag)
13. *1965 National Wildlife Federation House Sparrow Card from Red Rose Tea*
14. A child's plastic boat hull (for bathtub use)
15. An empty six-pack box of *Coleman Silk-Light Mantles, Toronto, Canada*
16. A *Fuller* dish brush

C. Objects from Circa 1970-1991:

17. A soup label reading *Lipton's Casserole*
18. *Oberlander Schnitter Medium Rye Bread* (plastic bag), Venice Bakery, North Vancouver
19. A plastic lid from an olive oil bottle
20. Cap from *Camp 100% Maple Syrup*
21. Mustard label: *Keen's Hot Mustard, Reckitt and Coleman, England*
22. An empty box: *Quick Relief Tums, 36 tablets for 29 cents. Carminative Antacid For the Tummy Acid Indigestion. Heartburn. Gas. Not Laxative.* (bilingual)
23. A toothpaste cap
24. Two plastic "baggies"
25. Seven scraps of tin foil
26. A piece of black electrician's tape
27. A plastic label reading *Raticate. New Rat Killer. Tarolek Laboratories, Don Mills, Ont. Le Nouveau Raticide au Shoxin**
28. A shopping list in Quentin Mackie's handwriting (Photo 3)

D. Objects of Uncertain Date:

29. A child's sock
30. An adult's sock
31. Wire brush for pots
32. Two pieces of wire mesh (from workshop)
33. Piece of unmarked cardboard from fishing tackle
34. A three-inch nail
35. Two dried commercial mushrooms and numerous wild ones
36. Two apricot pips
37. A tea bag

Examine your skin.

The least irritation needs Zam-buck... your guard against that... of eczema, which if un... may lead to nights and days of... irritation! Watch for the fire... rash that may spell ugly... ent! Don't let that simple... or burn take 'bad ways.'
For eczema, pimples, boils, abscesses, ringworm, poisoned wounds, badlegs, cuts, burns, scalds, Zam-buk provides the unrivalled remedy.

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A reputation for unvarying Quality that is the greatest mark of distinction. "Salada" Tea has given Matchless Quality for 31 years. So Delicious! Just try it!

It puzzles many, also pleases many!
Family Herald and Weekly Star. Sir; - We like your paper immensely. How do you and your staff keep on, week in week out, finding so much of interest to fill its many pages?

-Yours very truly, (Mrs) E. McKane, Keslo [sic] BC.

From a fragment of The Family Herald and Weekly Star (Montreal, circa 1922).

38. Two dried corn cobs
39. Five animal bones (one chicken, two sheep, two pig)
40. Two coprolites (dried dog feces)

Bushrats are part of life at Sugar Lake. They like nothing more than an empty and accessible log cabin, and most winters they nest in the crawlspace and turn the upstairs into a noisy playground and diurnal high-speed maze. Their happy circuit through the rafters

resembles a pinball game. We used to shoot them with a twenty-two, or tried to; but the antique rifle is now at the Vernon Museum, and now we live-trap them and release them down the road. Bushrat stories abound: family friend Joan Heriot told the story of old Bill Hollingsworth, who lived further down the lake and, at night, left his false teeth in a mug beside his bed. One morning they were gone, their place taken by an old potato. Bill went down to the nest and there were his teeth, right on top, the jewel in the crown of pilfered household objects. Hollingsworth took the nest apart and retrieved a collection of buckles, buttons, and other shiny treasures.

My great uncles and aunts, school-teachers in the Coldstream Valley, built the Sugar Lake cabin as a refuge from the blistering summer heat of the Okanagan. The lake offered excellent fishing, mountain climbing, hiking, and packhorse trips. Reverend Augustine (Austin, or Gus) Mackie (1879-1965), was founder and headmaster of the Vernon Preparatory School, a boarding school on English lines that emphasized God, King, and Country. Austin was

A highland fragment.

... land was owned... the clan. The majority... grouped in village c... township or farm consis... and hill pasture. Every... redivided among the... getting an equal share... lived as cottars... on th... men who were kinsmen... cottar in return for his lo... and a little land and perm... couple of cows.

The highland clans were constantly clashing with each other. But within the clan there was a strong union. Each clansman looked on his chief as the head of his family, not as his landlord. The clansmen were their chief's fighting men and it would have been unnatural to deal with them harshly.

Great pride was taken by these Highland village communities in the great deeds of their ancestors as they were told over their peat fires in the winter time... In summer there was a pleasant break in a Highland peasant's life. While the harvest ripened in the valley, the people went to live with their cattle on the hills for several weeks.

In some parts of the Outer Hebrides this ancient system of land division has persisted to our present times. Every year meadow and...

From a fragment of *The Family Herald and Weekly Star* (Montreal, circa 1922).

an Anglican priest and celibate, Cambridge rower, sportsman, naturalist, and rattlesnake hunter. He and his lawyer brother Hugh de Fylton Mackie (1882-1971) had rented, at some expense, the fishing rights to a short stretch of a river in Wales for a day or two a year. Brought up as gentlemen, and aware of the limited sporting opportunities of middle-class England, they appreciated the vast potential of the Canadian outdoors. Indeed, according to family lore, Austin and Hugh emigrated in 1913 because of the abundance of game in British Columbia. Hugh and his wife Grace Elizabeth Mackie (née Marle, 1884-1978) worked at the school too. Grace took her name from the doctor who delivered her, the famous cricketer W.G. Grace. Trained as a nurse, she became the school's overworked matron. She was also overworked at Sugar Lake: my mother Gillian remembers her scrubbing the wooden kitchen floor once a day in the 1950s.

Austin and Hugh were the youngest of eight sons of Reverend John Mackie (1825-1902), rector of Fylton (now Filton), Gloucestershire, near Bristol. John was the son of a saddler and the grandson of a Highland soldier who became an outrider to

Chapter 6 Jasper Leigh...

"Dear fool!" he said, and shook him. "What ails you? You are pale and gaunt, and not yourself at all. I have a notion. I'll furnish me a ship and you shall sail with me to my old hunting grounds. There is life out yonder – life that will restore your vigour and your zest, and perhaps mine as well. How say you, now?"

... Sir Oliver stared long at him when he had done, then his lips tightened and he smote his brow.

"So!" he cried. "Would that be why she refused to see me? Did she conceive that I went perhaps to plead? Could she think that? Could she?"

He crossed to the fire-place and stirred the logs with his boot angrily. "Oh, it were too unworthy. Yet of a certainty it is her doing, this."

"What shall you do?" insisted Lionel, unable to repress the question that was uppermost in his mind; and his voice shook.

"Do?" Sir Oliver looked at him over his shoulder. "Prick this bubble, by heaven! Make an end of it for them, confound them and cover them with shame."

From a fragment of *The Family Herald and Weekly Star* (Montreal, circa 1922).

George the Third. His second wife, Annis Bennett (1841-1927), was the daughter of a Gloucestershire farmer who owned the advowson to the parish of Fylton; that is, he had the right to choose the incumbent, and he chose his son-in-law John Mackie. In addition to Austin and Hugh, John and Annis's sons included four Anglican clerics, among them a poet and an amateur naturalist, and my grandfather, Frederick Percival Mackie

(1875-1944) who, as a young doctor, took part in the Younghusband Expedition to Tibet of 1903. In three generations the Mackies, like the Pontifex family in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), had made their way from the world of trade to late Victorian professional respectability.

In Canada, Hugh and Grace had a family of five sons, all of whom died tragically and without marrying or leaving children. Michael died as an infant. Peter (1912-8) was killed when he and a friend entered a wartime firing range near Vernon and detonated an explosive by throwing it against a rock. Peter crawled part way home before bleeding to death. His brothers John and Geoff Mackie were killed in the air force in the spring of 1941. Patrick (Paddy, 1922-99) (Photo 4), the youngest, spent most of the war on the north Atlantic as an officer in the Royal Canadian Navy. Afterwards he returned to Lake House, the family home in the Coldstream, and taught French for many years in Vernon public schools after forsaking the family's boarding school.

Paddy, who was my cousin, godfather, mentor, and friend, committed suicide in July 1999 at the age of seventy-six, partly because he faced a lawsuit from a motorcyclist with whom he had collided. He was exactly the same age as the Sugar Lake cabin, which he left to me. He was an invisible presence on the central portion of the



Photo 4: Paddy Mackie (1922-1999) at St. Peters, Quamichan, 1986.

THE SCAVENGER: A POEM FOR PADDY

Richard Mackie

Hubcaps and beer cans flicker in the moonlight
and bushrats forage on the forest floor.
The borders of the gravel road meet the Monashee
and the corners of the night sky merge
with the edges of the earth.

Not a fence interrupts the distance
between this place and the silent peaks.
Debris from granite hillsides
washes silently into Sugar Lake.
These mountainsides provide
thin soil for love's thirsty roots.

The scavenger returns to his cabin in solitude,
a bag of beer cans over his shoulder.
Neither light nor sound disturbs his footsteps
as above him the stars survey his desperate strategy.

The scavenger contemplates an immigrant's fate:
his father was a solicitor, his mother a matron
in the deep lush soil of England;
their passion was sanctioned and their courtship sanctified;
their banns were posted on the parish church door.

But he finds himself here.
The example of their love does not apply.
He cannot trade his life for theirs.
The forces that bound them together
are not available in this voiceless place.
They would not understand his search among these rocks
for clues of human fellowship and fragments of desire.

2001 field trip. He had a detailed knowledge of the Sugar Lake cabin, Lake House, the Vernon Preparatory School (now Coldstream Meadows Retirement Community), and the Coldstream cemetery and war memorial. Over the years he took me to these places and shared his stories and memories.

Paddy had never been willing or able to abandon the Coldstream's cozy and anachronistic Englishness. His manners, accent, and tastes originated and remained rooted in Edwardian England. For Paddy, British Columbia was full of people who spoke and thought in strange and unacceptable ways, and a visit to England was an opportunity to perfect his pronunciation. He never married, and he never adapted to this new world. Unlike the bushrats, he could not transform the alien into the familiar. He may be gone, but the bushrats have built a new nest under his old cabin.