POSTSCRIPT:
Notes from The Field Trip Before

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18 MAY 1999

All Hallow's School, as remembered in the Yale Museum: the photo of all the White girls in White cowls on parade in a crescent in front of the school; the Native girls more huddled on the verandah, in the background, with purple cowls. They could not wear white: they had largely a different curriculum and waited on tables for the White girls.

Next door, St. John the Divine. This is the first church on the Mainland (well, no, Adele says there *was* one in Langley), but this

First Scientific Expedition into BC Interior, 18-20 May 1999. Left to right, Jean Wilson, Richard Mackie, Pat Shaw, Adele Perry, Bob MacDonald, Jean Barman, Laurie Ricou, Cole Harris.

was/is the oldest enduring church on the Mainland. Built by the Royal Engineers, it is a fine example of Gothic revival on a modest colonial scale. Ruskinian simplicity and very happily re-clad in cedar, the renovation apparently prompted by Clara Clare. Jean points out that Clara Clare was at least partly Aboriginal, but *no* hint of this background and motivation in the plaque that pays her tribute. With that doubly White and transparent name, she immediately becomes for me a spirit of the place, a redundancy of light veiling her ancient divinity.

16 MAY 2001

I'm reading a poem by John Donlan. Maybe because I'm missing this year's field trip, the poem reminds me of the trip before – a journey "surface geology." Geology was such a visible presence: "this packed-up slab of crumbling sea-floor we call Mountain." Donlan titles his poem "Tilt." This landscape is never on the level.

18 MAY 1999

A brooding day to start: clouds hunkering down and often spilling rain. But when we arrive at the mountains, the slips of cloud are slipping down the rock faces just where the spring freshets and streams slip, and then splash. "See," I exclaim, "this is Cascadia!"

Cole took us to Lady Franklin's rock where, in the drizzle and cold wind, we pondered the concatenation of transport geographies. An Aboriginal fishing site, now mostly evacuated, where once hundreds, maybe thousands, of people would gather to fish salmon. And a few decrepit drying racks linger to remind. The narrowing here, at the head of the canyon where steamboats could no longer fight the current. The terminus, and reason why Yale exists. The CNR line hidden in the rock across the river. The CPR line just behind and above us. And still further up and behind, the Trans Canada Highway. From sea to sea again, and again, and again, and not quite again: here compressed into one narrow pass.

Cole remarks on the paradox: the clichéd Canadian vastness against the human importance of this narrow and dwarfed constriction. He'd made a similar point earlier, as we drove east towards Hope. Just a relatively few, precious acres of arable land before

we hit the impasse of mountains (or elsewhere in the country, the Shield). An experience that he feels is commonplace for people leaving Canadian cities, and rare in the United States.

16 MAY 2001

I am puzzled by John Rhenisch's line, "Whole valley a salmon / diving into earth." It's from a poem entitled "The World in a Blade of Grass." I'm sure there's a monstrous, mythic salmon here, transforming and making the landscape. Only a huge salmon could follow the Fraser upstream, fighting the current. We never see a salmon, but she is always everywhere present in that place. The whole valley is an absence, a depression, a trace of the huge river, of the river of ice. Giant salmon has wriggled her redd here, and we were afraid.

18 MAY 1999

There we were coming up to Chilliwack when Cole remarked, "We are now on the bottom of Sumas Lake." Drained (when? 1927 or 1928?) to create agricultural land. A fresh-water lake and great food source for Natives gone *under* and we are where it once was. Geology is our surface.

19 MAY 1999

Cole is visibly moved, I think, when we stand in the cemetery in North Bend and he asks us to explain the geography. This tiny promontory is all that remains of the soil of this reserve, and it is fenced-off and four-cornered as an Anglican cemetery. All of the small valley we see in front of us was once at our level. But all washed away by a long-time Chinese placer-mining operation. All the soil *gone* down river. Miners diving into earth.

17 MAY 2001

I think poetry makes you think small. Or, at least, it doesn't allow you to think big unless you begin small. I like the way, for example, that Samara Brock pays attention to "ladybug wings" or tadpoles that morph into "tiny black whales." In a poem entitled "Vision of God?" Brock remembers, in their mutual five-year-old minds, Laura, a spirit-guide Laura. Among the things she learns from this remembered

spirit guide is "How to get to the biggest ponderosa." Since I am crossing the path of this year's field trip (en route to Kamloops), in a garden of ponderosa, I need to know this. The poem doesn't quite let on. I need to know how to get to the biggest ponderosa. It's a small thing.

19 MAY 1999

Senses of vacancy continue on Wednesday morning. Just after we crossed the Fraser, on a "reaction ferry." Yes, it's the absence of an engine. The ferry does not act, it *re*acts: the ferry lets up and the current forces us down river, but the cable holds us back and drags ferry and two cars in a minute across the river.

19 MAY 1999

Within 200 yards we stopped. All eight of us sitting, as instructed, underneath a huge Ponderosa, on huge boulders. Here is a lesson in colonial land use. To our right, just beyond the fence, a rolling open meadow with a few decaying fruit trees, a lilac, and a white lilac. A pre-emption, much farmed by a group of Chinese shortly after the Brits gave up. And just down the road, an expansive ranch, with signs of faded gentlemanly wealth. At one point in the 1920s, Cole says, they employed seventy Chinese gardeners. And where we sat, in a narrow boulder field, in many senses useless. Certainly useless for agriculture. This narrow constricted space assigned to the Indians as the Nohomin reserve. Where the geology has surfaced.

18 MAY 2001

I read a lot of poems, new and old, every year. A few become immediate favourites. One such is Danielle Lagah's "The Trees in That Country." (YES, it's a parody of Margaret Atwood.) She writes, according to her comment in the anthology *Breaking the Surface* (Sono Nis, 2000), to discover "what it means to live in limbo, with Punjabi in your blood but not in your mouth." I think Lagah challenges us to live in this limbo, this linguistic tilt, even if our father's first language was also English. "I know / there are words for trees in this tongue, words / that say things I can never understand." Getting to know these absent landscapes means learning the words for trees in other tongues.

19 MAY 1999

First past the rusting Dodge slumping its way into the dry grass and the pine duff. Then past the skeleton of a steer, oddly on its back. Just past a scree of rusted tins and the top of a jug of Calona Red. Just past that next pine, we're staring at a maze, a street system of boulders. A quiz again. And no answer again. The name Van Winkle Bar is no answer.

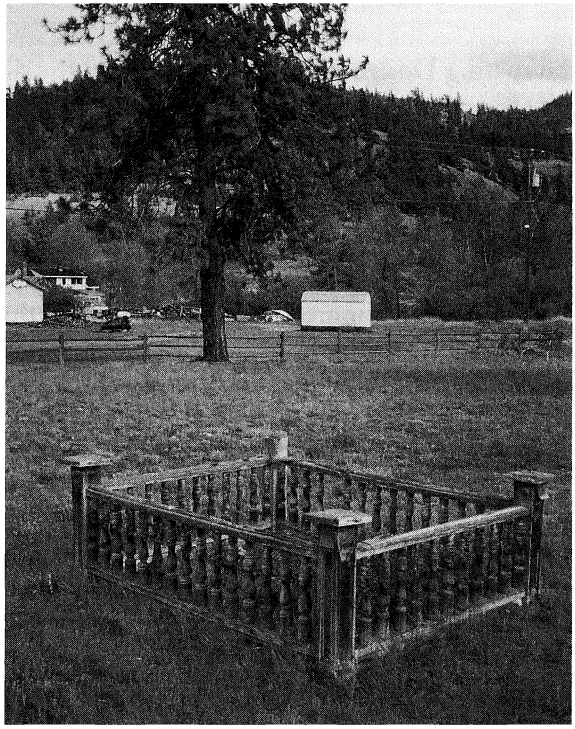
A new landscape of absence. All these boulders are what's left from decades of Chinese labourers mining gold. So all the dirt, sand, and small stone is gone. The gold, minuscule, is of course gone. And what remains is a city of boulders, the streets taller than me, where the flues once ran.

19 MAY 1999

600 or 700 metres (Cole says 1,000) above the Fraser. We are on a table of gravel that would once have been the floor of the river. Glacial retreat, followed by an enormous river, 100 times the current volume. It was what geomorphologists call an *abrading* river; that is, its pace and volume were insufficient to carry the material in it. Therefore, it kept depositing, until the river bottom was 1,000 feet above this present river. Then the river cut its way through this material. On top, we are at the bottom of an absent river.

19 MAY 2001

On the field trip before, the landscapes were lost. And now, everything is tilted and off balance. The landscape we need is "just out of [our] reach." As Colebrook Peace phrases it in "Twenty Questions," braking and straining on this tilted landscape, we are "clasping the word *home* so [we] won't fall."



Grave site at Murray Church, Nicola Lake.

Ruins of the Alamo mill near Sandon.