

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

Modern Pioneers, Vanishing Cultures, and Nostalgic Pasts

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Light at the Edge of the World: A Journey through the Realm of Vanishing Cultures

Wade Davis

Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 2001. 180 pp. Illus. \$45 cloth.

Off the Map: Western Travels on Roads Less Taken

Stephen Hume

Madeira Park: Harbour, 2001. 264 pp. \$32.95 cloth.

The Inlet: Memoir of a Modern Pioneer

Helen Piddington

Madeira Park: Harbour, 2001. 200 pp. Illus., map. \$32.95 cloth.

"If the past is a foreign country, nostalgia has made it the foreign country with the heartiest tourist trade of all."¹

"The apparent nostalgia ... must occupy the place of another – and unarticulated anxiety: How does one sing to the ever-changing tunes of capitalist modernization and retain at the same time a comfortable sense of being at home in it?"²

"Nostalgia at play with domination ... uses compelling tenderness to draw attention away from the relation's fundamental inequality. In my view, ideological discourses work more through selective attention than outright suppression."³

A CENTRAL IRONY of modernism is its anti-modernism: the tide of capitalist modernity that threatens to obliterate cultural difference – to destroy the diversity of human experience in time and place – also generates deep anxiety about what has or will be lost. Anxiety about a homogenous future often takes the form of nostalgic anti-modernism as desire for

¹ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), 4.

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 182.

³ Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 87.

an alternative present finds expression in longing for the past. Anxious about their own sense of home and place, anti-modernists set out in search of living alternatives to the apparently irresistible deluge of modernity. They comb the earth in search of isolated watersheds, exotic refuges from the culture of global capitalism. Anti-modernist nostalgia transforms time travel from science-fiction fantasy into modern tourist reality. Arriving at their destination, travellers often feel as though they have moved back in time. If the past is a foreign country, then it is equally true that tourism transforms foreign countries into proxies for a lost past.

Nostalgic journeys through space and time are inevitably bound up with the traveller's sense of home. The question Dipesh Chakrabarty finds lodged within Bengali nostalgia, "how to be at home in a globalized capitalism now,"⁴ is similarly embedded within the anti-modernist nostalgia of modern global travellers. While for us the word "nostalgia" refers to the past, it actually derives from the Greek words *nostos* (a return home) and *algos* (pain). Modern tourism is no less nostalgic for the fact that it takes us away from home more often than it returns us to it. Nostalgia is the hinge that eases the apparent paradox of leaving home in order to find it.

In their journeys, Wade Davis, Helen Piddington, and Stephen Hume have all swum against the flow of modernity. As travellers and writers, each has sought alternative ways of life against which to chart his/her own path. And each has produced a retrospective, a genre particularly inclined towards nostalgia. In *Light at the Edge of the World: A Journey through the Realm of Vanishing Cultures*, a beautifully produced book of photographs augmented by essays, Wade Davis

reflects on the last twenty-five years of his work and travel in the high Andes, the Amazon, Orinoco, Haiti, Borneo, Kenya, Tibet, and Canada. Stephen Hume's *Off the Map: Western Travels on Roads Less Taken* also presents the fruit of many journeys: two dozen written snapshots of diverse people, primarily, though not exclusively, in British Columbia. *The Inlet: Memoir of a Modern Pioneer* is Helen Piddington's autobiographical account – lovingly told through words and watercolours – of life after moving in 1975 to remote Loughborough Inlet, 200 miles up the coast from Vancouver.

While the distances they travel vary, each author enters foreign, that is unfamiliar, territory and arrives at a place of cultural – and temporal – difference. In his or her own way each explores a piece of what Davis calls the "ethnosphere ... the full complexity and complement of human potential as brought into being by culture and adaptation since the dawn of consciousness" (12). The authors share a common conviction that the ethnosphere's diversity is endangered, and they share a common longing for better, simpler times – times when the environment was cleaner and communities were stronger. Beyond this, their visions of a "better society" vary. Collectively the divergent journeys captured in these books push us to ask ourselves what kind of home we want to fashion within capitalist modernity, not only for ourselves but also for those different from ourselves. Will we mourn the passing of difference by looking nostalgically upstream at those left behind? Or will we insist upon maintaining a diversity of routes for navigating the rapids of global modernity?

These accounts reveal the richness of the ethnosphere – a richness that far surpasses the standard multicultural triad of traditional food, dance, and

⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 213.

costume. It is not just ways of life but also their very rhythms that differ. Piddington's life as a "modern pioneer" exists in a cycle of time difficult for urban residents to imagine. Work is unremitting. "Spare time" and "planning" have little place. Tasks assume an urgency dependent upon the vagaries of season and weather. Yet the immediacy of tasks to hand also lends itself to an ability to "distance yourself in time and space so as to see better" (197). Small pauses, or simple daily acts – bread made or ground dug – become momentary vessels for catching time.

Davis's book offers an even broader sense of difference and diversity with regard to time. One of his initial guides through the ethnosphere was Gitxsan elder Alex Jack, whose oral narratives bound a distinct sense of time to a distinct way of being. Jack did not recount stories as abstract anecdotes. Collapsing present and past, secular and mythic, Jack relived the story more than he retold it; he returned "to the very place and time of its origin" (29). Non-Aboriginal audiences might assume that tricksters and transformers belong to past or imaginary worlds, but Jack knew otherwise. As one scholar has recently noted, the nineteenth-century story of the "disenchantment of the world" is a European one; elsewhere "the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of so-called 'superstition' have never died."⁵ Enchanted space and time cannot be measured with the tools used by secular modernity. Asked the length of time required to relate the cycle of creator tales, Alex Jack's father walked the twenty-mile length of Bear Lake and back, telling the story as he went. The time required to tell the story was inextricably tied to travel, to movement through landscape. Other distinct

conceptualizations of time appear elsewhere in Davis's ethnosphere. The Inuit word *wotiarrru* can be translated as either "long ago" or "in the future" (172). Tibetans endure Chinese occupation with a sense of time shaped by the conviction that the nature of reality is impermanent and illusory. And no notion of disenchanted time that excludes gods and spirits from the routine of everyday life can explain the marvellous worlds of Haitian Voudoun or of the Bora and Witoto tribes of the Amazon.

Having journeyed to places where even time itself is different, these authors must place these differences *in* time, somehow situating them in relation to the homogenizing currents of modernity. Piddington and Hume make an explicitly and typically nostalgic move by equating difference with the past. While the physical journey to Loughborough inlet may not be far, Piddington uses time to imply that the *actual* distance travelled was much greater: "By coming to this inlet, to this particular piece of land, we were changing not only place but moving into a different era some fifty – perhaps one hundred and fifty – years back in time" (11). Piddington's self-identification as a "modern pioneer" reinforces the message that the life she crafted with her family was something of a historical artefact. Hume likewise uses time travel to convey a sense of the difference between modern life and life off the map, beyond the "urban boundary that defines everyday life for most Canadians" (5). Piddington and her inlet neighbours would fit easily into his cast of characters, many of whom are modern pioneers in their own right. Hume finds the past all over present-day British Columbia. He tells us that the life of Albert Faille, a twentieth-century explorer and prospector in the Nahanni Valley, was "a voyage away from the present and into a simple, austere

⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

archetype of the past”(22). Joe Breti, craftsman of knives, tells us that “you have to be a refugee from the twentieth century to take up this kind of thing” (36). And we learn that a trip to the Vancouver Island community of Quatsino requires “passing through barriers of time, returning to a culture that’s vanishing” (47).

In contrast to Hume and Piddington, Davis explicitly resists the nostalgic cast of mind. He argues that “these cultures do not represent failed attempts at modernity, marginal peoples who somehow missed the technological train to the future” (173); rather, they are “alternative visions of life, birth, death, and creation itself” that can be viable in the present and in the future (*ibid.*). But the captivating images at the book’s core create a nostalgic visual feast that contradicts Davis’ words. When readers, steeped in the nostalgic trope of the “vanishing Indian,” look at these photographs, they are unlikely to see the indigenous times and ways as parallel to their own. They will more likely understand these alternative ways of being as anachronistic remnants of a past era. Davis’s subtitle, “A Journey through the Realm of Vanishing Cultures,” only reinforces the impression that the diverse exoticism of the ethnosphere is not long for this world. It is a subtitle that could serve any of these books equally well.

There is, however, a paradox here since most of the lives that appear “past” in these pages are, in fact, contemporaneous with the authors’ and, indeed, our own lives. It is worth asking how these ways of life, these kinds of time, belong to the past. Without a doubt, much about Piddington’s life makes “modern pioneer” an appropriate self-identification, and elements of life no less foreign to urban modernity can be found in Hume’s and Davis’s works. But, there are also many ways that the lives

in these pages are distinctly modern. Piddington now has satellite television and a computer. Her children’s experiences at boarding school on Vancouver Island and the summers she spends in Paris indicate that the family’s circle is more cosmopolitan than it first appears. Other changes have made life as a “modern pioneer” more rather than less difficult to navigate. Free delivery of groceries and supplies, once regular services, exist no more, and the fishery has become more bureaucratized and complicated. In Davis, the very presence of a Harvard-trained, internationally acclaimed ethnobotanist, ethnographer, and photographer suggests something modern about the “edge of the world.” The tension of the past in the present is succinctly contained in Hume’s account of Lawrence Joiner’s Chilcotin cattle ranch, which is “right out of the 1800s, except for the pickup trucks, tractors and other mechanical implements” (81). The fact that such a sentence makes sense to us is telling. It speaks to the blindnesses that our nostalgia sanctions.

That these nostalgic views have such blind spots is not in itself a problem. All views of the past are partial. But difficulties arise when the selective attention of nostalgia obfuscates the workings of power and domination and, more importantly, our own complicity in such processes. Piddington erects her nostalgia for an earlier era in the name of the “strong independent people who worked alone or in small groups” along the inlet (22). Reflecting on the loggers who felled the coast’s giant old-growth forests, she imagines “it must have been splendid watching them swaying back and forth so high above the ground, then seeing the great tree fall” (22). Notably absent from Piddington’s account is a sense of connection between these early pioneers and subsequent environmental degradation and Aboriginal dispossession.

“Here was an inlet rich in history” (11), she writes, but the history she refers to is neither Aboriginal nor colonial. With the exception of her reference to the oral history of Aboriginal abandonment of the inlet, she assumes archaeological midden excavations to be the only source of information about Aboriginal lives and histories. Aboriginal peoples are the prehistory for the history that inspires her nostalgia. In a move typical of what one anthropologist has dubbed “imperialist nostalgia,” Piddington draws Aboriginal peoples into her nostalgic gaze only when she mourns transformations wrought upon them by her own immigrant society (81).⁶

Taken on their own, Hume’s accounts of modern pioneers are vulnerable to the same critique. But Hume also includes chapters about Aboriginal peoples and issues, in which he explicitly connects the pioneer past with “conquest, occupation, oppression and denial of self-determination” (125). He addresses our colonial past directly and denounces our tendency to “mask the whole brutal process in self-congratulatory lies about the wonders of Canadian democracy” (125). The coupling of Hume’s imperialist nostalgia with his understanding of Aboriginal history creates uneasy juxtapositions. Seventy pages after romanticizing gold rush traditions and locating Albert Failla within a grand-sounding genealogy stretching back to Coronado, he recounts the devastating effects of the Fraser River gold rush on Aboriginal peoples. Hume leaves such contradictions unresolved; however, simply by setting these stories side by side he provides readers with the opportunity to ask questions and to draw connections for themselves.

It is Davis who argues most explicitly against the nostalgic equation of difference

with the past, but it is Hume who is more successful at conveying a concrete sense of possibility for an indigenous future. There are several reasons for this. Hume has a penchant for situating events in relation to Biblical or ancient time, referring repeatedly to Babylon, Egypt, and Greece. When he invokes the time of Moses, he creates a timeline to which non-Aboriginal readers can relate – one that surely makes more sense to them than does the enchanted time of Alex Jack. Having situated Aboriginal peoples in terms of what could be called universal time, Hume proceeds to tell Aboriginal stories of hope and triumph as well as domination. In his chapters on Canada Day at Yuquot, the Nisga’a treaty, the Gitanyow overlap dispute, and the repatriation of a Haisla pole from Sweden, Hume orients Aboriginal peoples towards the future rather than the past. His focus on particular political issues and events highlights indigenous people’s practical engagement with the present and helps us envision the mechanics of a heterogeneous future.

There is, nonetheless, a trade-off involved. With his universal time-line, Hume loses some of the strangeness and enchantment of indigenous lives and timescapes that Davis captures so well. Hume may help us better understand the possibilities for Aboriginal peoples to engage with the future, but without the thick cultural description of someone like Davis, we may not appreciate the full significance of ensuring that such possibilities become realities. Aligning Aboriginal peoples with our notions of time diverts attention away from the varied constructions of time throughout the ethnosphere.

Piddington, Davis, and Hume have all journeyed through the realm of vanishing cultures, but their travelogues reach unanticipated conclusions. They

⁶ Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” 69–70.

challenge teleological notions of progress, reminding us that modernity facilitates very particular ways of being in the world, while hindering, if not actually foreclosing, others. Yet these books also remind us that modernity has not swept away the viability and vitality of alternative lives and times. These are certainly endangered, but whether or not they become extinct is a different question. It is a question that we cannot address if we admit the loss of cultural diversity as a regrettable but inevitable side effect of modernity. It is a question that we cannot address via nostalgia since nostalgia reconciles us too easily to a fatalism that accepts, rather than challenges, the erosion of difference. Both Piddington and Hume cast the lives of “modern pioneers” as a remnant of the past rather as alternative modernities. And Davis unwittingly suggests something quite similar about the vanishing peoples he documents with words and images. Through their nostalgic association of difference with the past, these authors make a significant concession to the totalizing current of modernity against which they swim. They concede that alternatives to modernity can do little but bide their time before their inevitable assimilation into modernity’s inexorable flood. They thus diminish the very difference that they seek.

Nostalgia’s selective attention gently turns our faces from the circumstances of domination that engender our sense of loss. This is convenient since we are often implicated in those circumstances. Piddington and Hume make an important point when they suggest that pioneer life might be counted among the endangered ways of the ethnosphere. Aboriginal peoples are not the only ones threatened by modernity. Capitalist modernity has endangered, and nearly eliminated, the small independent workers of Loughborough inlet and

elsewhere. But a selective nostalgia that overlooks the fundamental inequality of early settlement is not the way to resolve the crisis of the ethnosphere. Diverse societies are threatened not because they cannot adapt to modernity (they can) but because the political and economic configurations of global capitalism deny people control over the pace and degree of change in their lives. As Davis writes, “It is not change that threatens the integrity of the ethnosphere, it is power, the crude face of domination” (105). Wittingly or not, pioneers were the vanguard of the “crude face of domination” that degraded the environment and dispossessed Aboriginal peoples. And, wittingly or not, non-Aboriginal British Columbians today remain beneficiaries of a doubtful inheritance of privilege rooted in that same domination.

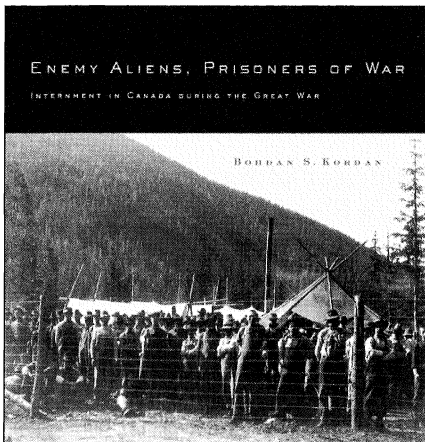
Considering the colonial power relations that shape British Columbia’s past and present complicates our sense of nostalgia, but it also opens up new possibilities for our future. It challenges us to consider how we might conceptualize “modern pioneers” as endangered inhabitants of the ethnosphere without eliding the realities of colonialism. And it allows us to think through the implications of how we understand supposedly “vanishing cultures.” What would it mean to take these alternative ways of life seriously as alternative ways of being present in modernity, as legitimate potential futures, rather than assuming them to be remnants of vanishing pasts? How different might the landscape of social justice look if we accepted those who live alternative ways of life as viable and entitled members of a modern, global community?

Favourable conditions exist in Canada for exploring these difficult questions. Hume reminds us that Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia are firmly embedded in a distinct but nonetheless

modern future. And Davis sees in Nunavut a redemptive promise, “the most remarkable experiment in Native self-government anywhere to be found” (172). This is no cause for complacent self-satisfaction. Whatever sense of promise exists is woefully far from fulfilment. But if it is to be fulfilled, then we need to discard the selective – and

protective – stance of the nostalgic. Nostalgia may feel like a comfortable home for us; it may help us feel less at sea within capitalist modernity. However, we need to ask not only how to make ourselves at home within modernity but also how to ensure that home includes, and fosters, the diversity of the ethnosphere.

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