

# Doing the Honourable Thing

Guy Vanderhaeghe's  
*The Last Crossing*

In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock emphasizes that European imperialism, rather than a unilateral imposition of authority, was a dialectical process, “a violent encounter with preexisting hierarchies of power that took shape not as the unfolding of its own inner destiny but as untidy, opportunistic interference with other regimes of power” (6). This “untidy interference” not only varied depending upon the specific colonial context but also in the triangulation of “the formative categories of imperial modernity,” race, gender, and class, which “emerge only in dynamic, shifting and intimate interdependence” (61). Though McClintock focuses largely on the representation of women, her study is grounded in an appreciation of recent feminist theory’s “insistence on the separation of sexuality and gender and the recognition that gender is as much an issue of masculinity as it is of femininity” (7). Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Last Crossing* (2002), the follow-up to his highly acclaimed *The Englishman’s Boy* (1996), provides a striking fictional exploration of how the triangulation of race, class, and gender in imperial modernity has indeed similarly shaped constructions of masculinity.

Set in the same cross-border Whoop-up country that provided one of the main settings for *The Englishman’s Boy*, *The Last Crossing* stages an encounter between the ossified, stifling social codes of Victorian England and the emerging, seemingly anarchic social codes of the Western frontier and explores the way in which notions of masculine identity and conduct on both sides of the Atlantic have been shaped by imperial attitudes. In the process, *The Last Crossing* revisits (perhaps *exhumes* is a better word) what

might seem—in a contingent, anti-foundationalist postmodern culture—an old-fashioned, traditional concern: honour. The word, it seems fair to say, resonates with chivalric associations that have been substantially discredited as socially authoritarian, patriarchal, and even imperialist. Written at a time of declining belief not just in honour but “in masculinity as a gender identity specific to men which accounts for their privileged command of power, resources and status” (MacInnes 46–7), *The Last Crossing* explores how doing the honourable thing pits individual conceptions of the right course of action against social codes of proper conduct shaped by imperial constructions of race, class and gender. The novel highlights how compromising the former to satisfy the latter often means sacrificing integrity for power and is a recipe for psychic and spiritual misery.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, McClintock contends, “the image of the natural, patriarchal family” served as an important discursive rationalization for imperialist intervention, “providing the organizing trope for marshalling a bewildering array of cultures into a single, global narrative ordered and managed by Europeans” (45). *The Last Crossing* portrays the dynamics of such hierarchical subordination in operation, as the novel is about a paternally legislated quest that takes the sons from the imperial centre to the remote “Wild West.” On the orders of their father, Henry Gaunt, Charles and Addington Gaunt travel in 1871 from England to Whoop-up country, the still-indeterminate Western frontier territory crossing the Canada-U.S. border, to locate their wayward, impressionable brother Simon, who has disappeared without a trace after following his religious mentor on a mission to “uplift the Indian” (108). Through this expedition, Vanderhaeghe deconstructs the Victorian patriarchal family, both writ small in the Gaunt household and writ large in the British Empire. Vanderhaeghe exposes the corruption and stifling social stratification of Victorian patriarchy and challenges its authority through the Gaunt brothers’ turbulent encounter with both the anarchic, democratic individualism of frontier society and the communal alterity of indigenous peoples.

Honour in the Victorian patriarchal family implies submitting to the authority of the father and safeguarding the social respectability of the family name. Henry Gaunt’s strict adherence to these principles, however, cultivates filial rebellion and Oedipal resentment. Indeed, all three Gaunt brothers are marked or marred by their emotional struggle with their father, an authoritarian, middle-class *arriviste*. In each case, this struggle gives way to behaviour that diverges from prevailing Victorian mores:

Addington's repressed jealousy and resentment expresses itself in transgressive physical and sexual excesses. Simon, in his ingenuous, eccentric romanticism and Christian idealism, flouts his father's wishes and threatens to make "the Gaunt name a laughingstock" (112). Finally, Charles' unfulfilled need for paternal affection cultivates a resentful obedience and a soul-stultifying conformity. In short, even before the sons' departure for the New World, the Victorian "family" is depicted as the site of dissension, repression, and thwarted self-actualization. By having the Gaunts transport this psychological baggage to the Western frontier, Vanderhaeghe complicates not only the stereotype of the rectitude and propriety of Victorian England but also the stereotype of the licentious anarchy of the Wild West, suggesting that the former is not as honourable, nor the latter as dishonourable, as it has been made out to be.

This deconstruction of stereotypes takes place particularly through the depiction of attitudes towards love and sexuality, in which considerations of honour traditionally have played a large part. The Gaunt brothers' respective and divergent departures from dominant Victorian notions of sexuality and courtly behaviour intensify as their travel to the West liberates them from social surveillance and sexual regulation. Their reactions to this liberation not only complicate the quest at the heart of the narrative but also highlight the inimical effects of imperial constructions of masculinity and sexuality. Vanderhaeghe's portrait of the Gaunts' excursion into Whoop-up country turns the tables on what McClintock describes as the Victorian paranoia over contagion, a biological image for a largely social anxiety about "boundary order": "The poetics of contagion justified a politics of exclusion and gave social sanction to the middle class fixation with boundary sanitation, in particular the sanitation of sexual boundaries." As a result, "[c]ontrolling women's sexuality, exalting maternity and breeding a virile race of empire-builders were widely perceived as the paramount means for controlling the health and wealth of the male imperial body politic" (47). Through his portrait of the Gaunts, Vanderhaeghe reverses the course of this contagion and figures imperialism as a migration of the ills of Victorian society outward to the margins of empire, subverting the trope of the genteel Victorian being confronted with the lawless, depraved Wild West.

The most destructive and most literal example of such contagion is Addington, whose violent and fetishistic behaviour, at home and abroad, is firmly rooted in the contradictions at the heart of Victorian society. As Ronald Pearsall notes, despite the façade of Victorian disapproval of

promiscuity, young men of the privileged classes were encouraged to keep mistresses or make use of prostitutes rather than marry imprudently (175). Such behaviour, however, as Addington aptly illustrates, could have negative consequences far worse than social opprobrium: “the Russian roulette of Victorian sex” was running the risk of venereal disease (Pearsall 285). While playing the role of the courtly and solicitous military gallant, Addington secretly combats a case of syphilis, requiring debilitating treatments of mercury that render him increasingly erratic and violent, a veritable sexual Jekyll and Hyde. “Going out to dine, his body smeared with mercury, gleaming like a sardine under evening dress” (159), Addington symbolizes the hypocrisy and decay beneath the veneer of Victorian moral and sexual propriety.

His predatory sexual behaviour—underlined repeatedly through images of hunting and fishing—also dramatizes the Victorian fetishizing of class distinctions. Compensating for the prohibition on premarital sex in his own social circle, Addington sexually exploits female servants at the Gaunts’ country estate, Sythe Grange, and steals articles of clothing from eligible ladies to hold “to his nose at the moment of climax, of spending” (27) with prostitutes. After his arrival in Fort Benton, Addington takes this disaffected, transgressive search for thrills to its violent extreme by murdering the socially marginal Madge Dray. As Pearsall notes, the “odd notion that the rape of a virgin cured venereal disease can only have carried weight with profligates who were far gone with that prime reward of promiscuity, general paralysis of the insane” (430–1). Acting on this assumption, Addington rapes Madge and then strangles her with his belt, a cherished talisman taken from his surrogate father, the Gaunts’ gamekeeper. The reaction of the Fort Benton authorities to this brutal rape and killing initially situates it as a relatively unremarkable, if gruesome, instance of frontier lawlessness and sexual licentiousness; the sheriff and justice of the peace unceremoniously leave Madge’s body covered with a horse blanket on the jailhouse floor as they accuse Custis Straw, a local, of murdering the impoverished and vulnerable young girl. The irony, of course, is that the perpetrator is a newly arrived English gentleman, whose ostensibly curative violation, and subsequent murder, of Madge can be seen as an extension of Victorian sexual dissolution and class exploitation.

Addington explicitly attributes his disease to the torpor imposed on him by a restrictive Victorian society, and his physical decline over the course of the novel sustains the theme of imperial contagion. Evoking the trope of

imperialist expansion as masculine penetration and release, he mistakenly views his Western excursion as a cure for the enfeebling, feminizing claustrophobia of England and stops treating his disease. When the search party reaches Fort Edmonton, however, his condition reasserts itself, and he slumps back into his volatile brooding, brutally embracing Lucy Stoveall during a dance in the Englishmen's honour and trying to purchase a young girl from a Blackfoot village. As the party's guide, Jerry Potts, resolves to put an end to Addington's dishonourable, predatory behaviour, he explicitly underlines the export of contamination: "As he spoils, he wishes to spoil others" (304). Addington's corrupt sexuality, which runs rampant in the West, suggests the continuity between Victorian sexual repression and exploitative imperial adventurism.

The genteel artist Charles, no less a product of repressive Victorian codes of sexual propriety, has a less dramatic but nonetheless dubious impact on the frontier. Charles' socially inadvisable fling with the homeless and abandoned Lucy Stoveall, who occupies a low rung on the frontier social ladder, puts him in a crisis of honour, forcing him to choose between following his heart and upholding the family name. Vanderhaeghe alternates third-person narration with the first-person perspectives of a number of his characters, including Charles, whose narrative emphasizes how his liaison with Lucy, though less predatory and more consensual than Addington's sexual forays, also represents a transgression, a dangerous crossing of class boundaries. Lucy becomes the search party's cook in hopes of tracking down the Kelso brothers, whom she presumes guilty of Madge's murder. Her situation troubles Charles's gendered class distinctions, as he reflects on "how difficult it is to set the boundaries . . . , to decide exactly what position she occupies, that of our servant or damsel in distress" (151). He treats their initial excursions away from the search party as shameful, but their affair progressively destabilizes his sense of social and sexual propriety, as he becomes increasingly intoxicated by Lucy's beauty, vigour, and self-assurance: "What uncharted waters I find myself in with her, far different from my previous situations, where things were always clear. . . . Can the word 'mistress' be spoken to a woman like her. I think not" (198).

Ultimately, though, Charles, obstructed by his conformist instincts, is unable to make the transition to the less stratified and less prohibitive social order of the West. Witnessing the passing of a Métis caravan, Charles unwittingly bares his conformist, "essential self," to Lucy by regretfully longing to live likewise "free of the constraints and prohibitions of civilized behaviour"

and revealing that he thinks “precisely in those terms” (279). Instead, Charles fulfills his rival Custis’ prediction—“Men like him don’t hitch themselves to buggies like her except for short trips” (231)—because he is too concerned with Victorian propriety. Fearful of his father’s disapproval, Charles leaves Lucy behind when he returns to England, promising to come for her after fulfilling his “clear obligation to [his] father” (364). His reluctance implicitly concedes that his behaviour has been dishonourable, a flouting of Victorian social and sexual codes, and it seals his romantic fate. Lucy perceptively realizes that Charles is too genteel and sensitive to stand the opprobrium that the social gulf between them would inevitably invite. That she is pregnant (a fact she decides to keep from Charles) clinches the decision. Thus, ultimately, Charles’ liaison with Lucy amounts to “a Sunday drive,” but one that leaves Lucy in a compromised position that she is forced to remedy by proposing marriage to Custis.

If the timid, self-righteous Charles fails to heed Simon’s injunction “to be ourselves and not someone else’s dream of us” (156), Simon, in contrast, is eager to shed Victorian constraints. A lost sheep in more than his rejection of social respectability, Simon has wandered from the heterosexual fold as well, and is found at the end of the novel living in a Crow village with a *bote*—a highly respected, ambiguously gendered “two-spirit” or *berdache*. His decision to remain with his lover scandalizes Charles to the degree that he plans to suppress the information that Simon is even alive. Whereas Charles refuses to give credence to Simon’s air of spiritual emancipation, he concedes that, in Simon’s eyes, to remain with the *bote* is to do the honourable thing: to be true to himself. In pursuing that ideal, though, Simon, like his brothers, puts his own questionable sexual stamp on the New World. While flouting Victorian sexual codes by co-habiting with the *bote*, Simon, however sympathetic and well-intentioned, imposes other codes on the Crow by discouraging the *bote*’s promiscuity, a culturally sanctioned part of her function (Williams 102). This angers the Crow warriors, who resent being denied her spiritually and sexually desirable company and suspect that he is stealing her power. Though Simon benefits from the Crow’s respect for, rather than ostracizing of, homosexuals, his intervention extends the regulation of native sexuality by missionaries that Walter Williams sees as largely responsible for the suppression of the *berdache* tradition in Amerindian cultures (181–92). In that sense, Simon exports some imperial attitudes as much as he tries to leave others behind.

While the Gaunts’ “untidy, opportunistic interference” through their sex-

ual behaviour can be seen as transporting the dissension, repression and corruption of Victorian patriarchal society to the margins of empire, Custis Straw and Jerry Potts—the cowboy and Indian respectively to the Gaunts' Victorian gentleman—wrestle more conscientiously with the dominant standards of masculinity and honourable behaviour in their respective cultures. Victor Seidler argues that a central characteristic of constructions of masculinity is a fear of “showing ourselves as vulnerable and dependent human beings, since this seems to ‘prove’ that we cannot be relied upon as ‘real men’” (50–1). Vanderhaeghe depicts both Custis and Jerry as willing to flout this convention in favour of a more personal and less conformist sense of honour. Custis, for instance, though considered a social outcast, comes much closer than Addington or Charles to the chivalric ideal echoed earlier by the genteel Miss Venables at an archery contest at Sythe Grange: “It may be silly of me to believe that in some distant time men wore their ladies’ favours upon their sleeves, as a pledge of love and protection. But that, sir, is a belief in *ideals*” (20). In his conspicuous courting of Lucy, Custis becomes a figure of public ridicule, his behaviour characterized as unseemly and unmasculine by his sceptical friend Aloysius Dooley. However, Custis is conscious not to overstep the bounds of a socially compromised position—openly courting a man’s wife—and in contrast with Charles puts his life on the line when he follows Lucy north to ensure her safety and to see justice done for the murders of her sister and husband. In short, Custis is careful to defend her honour, figuratively wearing her pledge on his sleeve.

However much Custis’ protection of Lucy might accord with traditional patriarchal constructions of men as protectors of women, his sense of honour excludes the sexual competition and assumption of masculine superiority typically associated with that role, especially in the rugged, individualistic culture of the frontier. As Seidler suggests, prevailing ideologies of masculinity emphasize strength and rationality over emotions and intuition, but it is possible “to discover our weakness and vulnerability as a different kind of strength” (92). Custis in particular reflects what Vanderhaeghe himself describes in his work as “a kind of dialogue between older, more conventional notions of masculinity” and “newer, more contemporary ideas of what it means to be male” (“Making History”). Custis prevails in his pursuit of Lucy not because he is the Alpha male but because he pursues her with genuine consideration and commitment. For instance, despite being rejected by Lucy for all his troubles, he selflessly urges Charles to reject conformity and claim Lucy as his own. When Charles balks, Custis

compensates for Charles' inability to do the honourable thing, accepting Lucy's offer of marriage and essentially "making an honest woman of her" in the eyes of society. Thus Custis compensates for the damage done by Charles' transgression (pursuing sexual relations outside of the bonds of marriage and outside his own social class) of a code of respectability that Charles is unable to shake off. In the process, Custis' intentions, as he professed all along, ultimately prove to be honourable, as he "did nothing to come between" Charles and Lucy (387). Indeed, in the novel's frame story, which Charles regretfully narrates decades after his New World excursion, Custis, displaying a sensitivity and lack of competitiveness in stark contrast with dominant frontier codes of masculinity, sends Charles a letter informing him of the existence of his daughter and paving the way for a possible reconciliation with Lucy. Custis' marriage to Lucy, furthermore, blurs the border of gender identities, as not only does Lucy propose the union—usurping the role conventionally played by the man—but she also continues figuratively to wear the pants while running the family ranch. "The neighbours used to say," according to Custis' son-in-law, who delivers the letter to Charles, "that when it came to work, Custis Straw was not half the man his wife was" (389).

A similar overcoming of gender hubris marks Jerry's story as well, as Vanderhaeghe elaborates on the story of the historical Jerry Potts' break with his Crow wife, Mary. Following the outlines of Potts' biography, the narrative relates how the half-white, half-Kanai Potts leads a reprisal attack against a Crow camp after escaping from his Crow captors (see Long 39–43, Dempsey 5). In *The Last Crossing*, Mary, though grateful for Jerry's safe return, refuses to honour him for his accomplishment, as custom dictates, because it is her own people who have been killed. Her ambivalent allegiance touches a sensitive chord in Jerry—his uneasy attitude towards his own hybridity—and teaches him "that to live divided is dangerous, a confusion that sickens the spirit" (100). When Jerry subsequently expresses a desire to move into the heart of Blackfoot territory (in the midst of Mary's traditional enemies) she balks and returns to her own people with their son Mitchell after challenging Jerry: "What do you wish to be, White or Kanai?" Their split comes in part because of a perceived insult to Jerry's honour: "She knew his secret. He wanted to be both and could not pardon her for reminding him of the impossibility of it" (105). At the end of the novel, however, Jerry is consumed by remorse and tracks Mary down in a Crow village, where he debases himself in the warriors' eyes because he "begs his



father-in-law for his daughter. Cries and pulls at his leg like a child” (347). If, as Jane Tompkins argues, the Western “is about men’s fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity” (45), Jerry, like Custis, manages to overcome the former without sacrificing the latter.

The concept of honourable relations between men and women in *The Last Crossing* is bound up with the concept of honour and reputation in physical strife, stereotypically the preserve of masculine accomplishment. “Strength,” Seidler notes, “is the easiest way to confirm your masculinity” (31), and Vanderhaeghe explores this side of masculinity particularly by contrasting Addington with Custis and Jerry. *The Last Crossing* provides reflections on such tests of physical capability as hunting, fighting, and warfare, questioning traditional conceptions of masculinity and further underlining the tensions between personal integrity, social conventions and imperial assumptions.

As Olive Dickason and other historians have observed, part of the stereotype of European conquest is the myth of the superior and independent colonist, a myth that effaces the historical reality of European dependence on native peoples for guidance and survival (xi). This arrogant presumption of imperial superiority is aptly embodied by Addington, who is a sinister parody of figures of adventure from *The Boys Own Annual*, which Vanderhaeghe cites as a key influence on his formation as a writer (“Influences” 324); indeed, Charles describes Addington as “a character in a boy’s book” (197). Especially through juxtaposition with the capable and unassuming Jerry, Addington is portrayed as the epitome of imperial bluster: self-important, bullying, and belligerent, a “trumped-up little martinet,” in Custis’ words (230). While Addington is courageous and physically adept, he is, in various ways, a loose cannon, utterly lacking in judgement and modesty, his volatile and brutal behaviour wreaking havoc throughout the narrative.

Addington’s disquietude and instability are traced back to his experiences in the colonial militia in Ireland, where he spearheads the brutal, indiscriminate suppression of a popular protest in Dunvargan, goading his soldiers into a deadly sortie against a relatively defenceless crowd of men, women and children. This undisciplined, bloody reprisal earns Addington a dressing-down from his superiors that prompts him to resign, seeing himself as the victim of a claustrophobic, hierarchical imperial order: “Elderly officers pushing down the strong for fear of losing their places” (160). Addington’s standing upon honour, however, seems to be contradicted by a more deep-seated discomfort with his bloodthirsty behaviour, suggested by recurring

nightmares in which the horse he rode during the riots metamorphoses into a scaly, decomposing nag, symbolizing his psychological, moral and physical decay.

The New World initially provides relief from his malady and scope for a masculinity that he associates with conquest: "Face it, overcome it, that's what defines a man" (160). However, as Addington arrogantly assumes leadership of the search party, his belief in his superiority as a gentleman and a soldier repeatedly leads to dishonourable and risky behaviour. His conceited braying alienates most of the party and violates Jerry's sense of honour and dignity: "The Englishman does not understand it is only correct to speak this way after the thing is accomplished, when the right to do so has been earned" (175). Utterly oblivious to the peril in which his self-indulgent and whimsical decisions place them as they travel north through hostile country, Addington bristles when his decisions are ignored and/or contradicted by Jerry, recognized by most of the party as the more reliable authority. At times seemingly admiring of Addington's capability while consistently usurping his authority, the taciturn Jerry, indeed, infuriates Addington with what can be seen as subversive colonial mimicry: "You cracking smart, Cap'n" (138).

In one of the novel's key incidents, Addington's high-handedness leads to a clash of codes of honour and a clash of fists. Both Custis and Addington stubbornly stand on principle defending their respective allies when an inebriated Jerry is assaulted by Addington's sycophantic fellow-traveller Caleb Ayto for filching the Captain's wine, which has been "restricted to the gentlemen" (142). In the ensuing boxing match, Addington gives Custis an almost fatal trouncing only because Custis is ambushed from behind by Ayto. Oblivious to this unsporting intervention, Addington is condescendingly and obnoxiously magnanimous in victory, while Custis, the moral victor, nearly wastes away to death after his somewhat quixotic defence of Jerry. Although Addington technically prevails in this contest of honour, his behaviour is clearly more unseemly and self-aggrandizing. Custis' obstinate insistence on a bout that he is almost sure to lose is motivated, moreover, not only by his respect for Potts (and his reluctance to shame himself in Lucy's presence) but also by lingering guilt over what he sees as his craven behaviour while fighting for the North during the Civil War. Having abandoned his friend to save his own hide during the Battle of the Wilderness, Custis has never forgiven himself: "And I tell myself, Custis Straw, next time you're carried out, let it be feet first. It's what you deserve"

(272). While his fight with Addington and his harrowing rescue of Lucy from the clutches of Titus and Joel Kelso can be seen as indulging his death wish, they can also be seen as gestures of atonement, expressions of his belief that a man “needs to serve something bigger than himself” (119).

Custis, however, does not compensate for his putative cowardice with the swaggering, demonstrative aggression so prevalent in Whoop-up country; indeed, his behaviour challenges the conceptions of honour and masculinity that prevail in a frontier town like Fort Benton. What his friends Aloysius and Dr. Bengough admire about Custis is his steadfast, almost masochistic inoffensiveness in a masculine culture that privileges aggressive self-assertion (as exemplified by Custis’ antagonists, Titus Kelso and Danny Rand); “Straw is the only man I know who does his best to harm no one but himself” (163), observes the doctor. At the same time, Custis retains a dogged and discriminating sense of honour, killing Titus (who has killed Lucy’s husband, but not her sister) but sparing his brother Joel (whose only crime seems to be craven sycophancy). Tompkins describes the moment of vengeance in Westerns as “the moment of moral ecstasy. The hero is *so right* (that is, so wronged) that he can kill with impunity” (229). Custis, however, thanked by Lucy “for settling with the Kelsos,” retorts, “I don’t care to be congratulated for shedding blood” (317). Here again, Vanderhaeghe seems to be revising the nihilistic and exclusive masculinism of the Western, which Tompkins sees as a rearguard defense against the Christian idealism and feminine influence of the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity:

in many Westerns, women are the motive for male activity (it’s women who are being avenged, it’s a woman the men are trying to rescue) at the same time as what women stand for—love and forgiveness in place of vengeance—is precisely what that activity denies. Time after time, the Western hero commits murder, usually multiple murders, in the name of making his town/ranch/mining claim safe for women and children. But the discourse of love and peace which women articulate is never listened to . . . , for it belongs to the Christian worldview the Western is at pains to eradicate (41).

Not only does the Bible-obsessed Custis show mercy, but also Lucy is depicted as no passive motive for male action. Playing the role of her younger sister’s protector, she confronts the Kelsos with a sickle in Fort Benton, courageously invades their Saskatchewan River trading post seeking vengeance, and demands that Custis kill Joel as well as Titus. As a socially isolated woman unaccustomed to meting out violence, Lucy is no idealized, invulnerable, avenging Amazon, but Vanderhaeghe’s portrait of her nonetheless questions “the assumption that it is only men who possess masculinity”

(MacInnes 57) and points to what MacInnes (for one) sees as the radical instability of the concept of gender (25).

While for most of the male denizens of Fort Benton honour and a robust, physically forceful masculinity are synonymous, Custis consistently distinguishes between the two and comes across as virtuous and honourable, while Lucy comes closer to Tompkins' image of the Western's taut, righteous avenger. In *The Hollywood Posse*, one of the key sources for *The Englishman's Boy*, Dianna Serra Carey describes the cowhands' code of honour: "Virtues such as fair play, honor, loyalty and chivalry that have since been reduced to the hackneyed staples of the Western film were to them untarnished moral values" (168). Through Custis and Lucy, whose first-person perspectives provide valuable insight into their complex and usually crossed purposes, Vanderhaeghe reinvests those virtues with meaning, while deconstructing the monolithic, patriarchal masculinity with which they traditionally have been associated.

If Custis serves as chivalric foil to the Gaunt brothers, Jerry serves to put Addington's accomplishments as a hunter and soldier in perspective, at the same time highlighting imperial constructions of military honour. Jerry matches Addington in physical courage and capability but in the heat of conflict also displays a restraint, sound judgement, and respect for others that Addington singularly lacks. Jerry's qualities are showcased most obviously in Vanderhaeghe's stirring portrait of what Alex Johnston dubs "the last great Indian battle," during which the historical Potts led an overwhelming force of Blackfoot against an attacking party of Cree and Assiniboine which had underestimated their numbers (see Johnston, Long 55–8, Dempsey 8–10). The clash demonstrated Potts' shrewd military judgement and courage in battle, as well as consolidating his reputation for having strong medicine. Vanderhaeghe emphasizes, furthermore—especially through the implicit comparison with Addington's murderous swashbuckling and self-aggrandizing, patronizing magnanimity—Jerry's restraint and his respect for his opponents. When the half-Cree, half-Scottish Sutherland brothers are finally killed at the Battle of the Belly after a courageous last stand against overwhelming numbers, Jerry pays tribute to their bravery by giving them an honourable burial. Later, at Fort Edmonton, he displays the same magnanimity in his treatment of Addington, who deserves it far less. Having perceptively diagnosed Addington's malaise—the death wish implicit in his erratic testosterone adventurism—Jerry accedes to Addington's request to find him a grizzly to hunt: "Maybe he is asking Potts

to help him find an honourable way to rid himself of his own feeble body,” to “enter the World of Skeletons like a man, with courage” (299). While Jerry’s cooperation can be read as a well-deserved bit of revenge, the emphasis is clearly on Jerry’s willingness to aid Addington in dying an honourable death by pursuing a creature whose strength and fierceness (like most of what he has come up against in the New World, including Jerry himself) Addington has fatally underestimated.

The wellspring of Addington’s hubris is his belief in the innate superiority of the English gentleman, and similar considerations of race and social status complicate Jerry’s sense of honour. Jerry pays homage to the Sutherlands not simply out of respect for them as warriors, but also out of a sense of identification with them as half-breeds “who, fair enough to pass as white men, chose to give their lives for their Cree brothers” (336). A reverse image of the self-aggrandizing, monstrous Addington, the mixed-race Jerry lives a double life in which, within a myopic Eurocentric perspective, his honour is shrouded: to English eyes he is disreputable (he is mistaken at first by Charles as the stereotypical drunken indigent), but by native people he is held in high esteem.

Vanderhaeghe’s portrait of Jerry’s struggle with this dual existence accords with McClintock’s caution that ambivalence and hybridity are not always cause for celebration (67–8). Jerry’s mixed heritage represents not so much a liminal, consistent in-betweenness but a more complicated, uncomfortable and uneven back-and-forth. Dishonoured by Ayto’s assault, Jerry abandons the search party, stymied in defending his honour because his previous killing of a white man has exacerbated his already subordinate status in white society. As Jerry reflects earlier in the novel, that status is predicated on racist conceptions of sanguinary contamination:

The Nitsi-tapi accept him as one of their own, despite his Scotchman father. The whites will never do the same. The whites are proud of their blood, always boasting that theirs is stronger than the blood of any other people. So how is it that the strong blood doesn’t overcome the weaker? If they believe what they say, why isn’t he a Scotchman? . . . One drop of black blood makes a man a nigger, and one drop of Kanai blood makes Jerry Potts a red nigger. (98)

Vanderhaeghe thus illustrates the difficulty of “doing the honourable thing” when negotiating the two heritages—trying to be true to two peoples in the process of cultural, territorial, and political struggle. Conscious that it may mean turning “his back on one portion of himself” (173), Jerry returns to the search party, primarily out of a sense of obligation that reverses the imperialist presumption of “the white man’s burden”: “To save white men from themselves is the burden Andrew Potts’s blood places on his son” (176).

This brooding over the tension between his sense of honour and his divided heritage is partly what prompts Jerry at the end of the novel to locate his wife and son. Jerry is saddened that his own son will grow up to hate his people, the Kanai, and that Mitchell's "spirit will be divided like his own is, never at rest" (99). When Jerry rescues the three-year-old Mitchell from a vicious dog, the boy takes him for an enemy, and Jerry—in a gesture of compensatory humility—bestows honour on the boy by letting him "count coup" on him and chase him away. Jerry then reconsiders the advantages of a mixed heritage: "perhaps to be shaped by many hands was a fortunate thing, far better than to be shaped by a single hand. A bundle of sticks does not break as easily as one stick. For Mitchell's sake, he prayed his son would become such a bundle" (361). Jerry's willingness to compromise his honour to make amends to his wife and son highlights the difficulty of navigating social conventions of masculine behaviour and personal conceptions of what doing the honourable thing entails. In this instance, though, Jerry's hybridity, his conflicted internal border crossing, aids in making the best of a situation (ultimately the legacy of colonization) complicated by competing attitudes towards race, class, and gender.

Simplifying somewhat the transformation of attitudes towards gender, MacInnes writes in *The End of Masculinity* that "the public evaluation of masculinity has undergone a profound shift. What were once claimed to be manly virtues (heroism, independence, courage, strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility) have become masculine vices (abuse, destructive aggression, coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment, isolation, an inability to be flexible, to communicate, to empathize, to be soft, supportive or life affirming)" (47). Vanderhaeghe's exploration of masculinity and honour in *The Last Crossing* revitalizes those virtues, without suggesting that those virtues are exclusively masculine or that men are exclusively virtuous. MacInnes argues that, within the context of identity politics, masculinity is often questionably posited as "a form of identity that prioritizes instrumentally aggressive and politically or ecologically aggressive relationships with other human beings and with nature over expressive nurturance or emotional intimacy" (56). Though Vanderhaeghe certainly portrays such aggression—not just through Addington but through Titus Kelso as well—it is on the extreme end of a whole spectrum of male behaviour. Furthermore, Vanderhaeghe, like MacInnes, draws attention to "the importance of social structures which force men and women to act in certain ways which they might not otherwise choose" (MacInnes 57)—not

just in the hierarchical, patriarchal culture of Victorian England but also in the ostensibly more egalitarian West, where that culture repeats itself with a difference.

Guy Vanderhaeghe titled his 1983 collection of stories *The Trouble With Heroes*; the title of *The Last Crossing* could well have been *The Trouble With Honour*. The trouble with honour, as *The Last Crossing* demonstrates, is that “doing the honourable thing” too often requires subordinating a more individual, contingent, and situational sense of what is morally, emotionally or spiritually appropriate to restrictive, distorting social conceptions of propriety, inflected by hierarchical and often imperial assumptions about race, class, gender and sexuality. Vanderhaeghe troubles the concept of honour by juxtaposing the ostensibly more civilized, ordered, and genteel conceptions of honour of the Victorian gentleman with the ostensibly more anarchic, uncivilized conceptions of honour on the Western frontier. However, though Vanderhaeghe deconstructs the stereotypes implicit in this dichotomy, particularly through the contrast between the dignity of Jerry and Custis and the corruption of Addington, he does not simply reverse its terms. Rather, underscoring the continuity of certain aspects of the Old World’s social order in the New, Vanderhaeghe highlights the way in which the dominant codes of masculine behaviour and honour in both worlds reinforce uneven and exploitative relations of power—power over women, power over animals, power over other men—instead of empathetic, mutually respectful, and equitable co-existence with others. Vanderhaeghe suggests that traditional conceptions of honour value status over moral, ethical and spiritual integrity and that, consequently, doing the truly “honourable thing” often requires resisting social dictates grounded in rigid assumptions about class, race, and gender. If, as Vanderhaeghe contends, “the historical novel is always about contemporary issues in disguise” (“Making History”), *The Last Crossing* thus makes a significant contribution not just to the burgeoning corpus of Canadian historical fiction but also to the increasing and profound reconceptualization of masculinity and femininity.

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