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The Pelt Belt
How beavers helped build a nation.

JAKE MACDONALD

Once They Were Hats: In Search of the Mighty Beaver
Frances Backhouse
ECW Press
256 pages, softcover
ISBN 9781770412071

Beaver
Rachel Poliquin
Reaktion Books
224 pages, softcover
ISBN 9781800324236

T

he denizens of Europe and North America have increasingly moved into cities. In Canada, the vast majority of citizens live along the American border. Driving from town to city by automobile, we are surrounded by an ocean of darkness. And as the world of nature fades into our collective rearview mirror, nostalgic books about wild places and wild animals have sprung up to remind us of the world we are leaving behind.

One of these is a recent Canadian book, Once They Were Hats: In Search of the Mighty Beaver, by Victoria author and magazine writer Frances Backhouse. The author of five books, including the prize-winning Children of the Klondike, Backhouse is a skilled and personable narrator who guides us on a tour of the long, fond and sometimes lethal relationship we have entertained with this pudgy little rodent.

“Little” of course may not be the right adjective. When people see a beaver for the first time they are usually shocked by its size. Topping out at about 32 kilograms, the adult beaver is the second largest rodent (after the South American capybara) in the world. They are the largest rodents in North America and anyone who accidentally gets chasing by a beaver and the water will testify that they are not stupid either, and at the sound of the first gunshot they will disappear, emerging much later (coincident with hordes of mosquitoes) to continue their determined work in darkness.

The title of Backhouse’s book refers to the fact that just as the beaver fur was once an extraordinarily valuable raw material for making hats in Europe. Many of us, when we think of a beaver fur hat, mistakenly envision the furry hat worn by generations of northerners. The Eurasian beaver was a distinct species, and demand for beaver fur was so relentless that beavers were hunted to extinction in Britain by the 16th century. They were drastically depleted across much of their range, and they make themselves unpopu-

lar by destroying private trees, flooding farmland and tainting water with giardia, the parasite that causes “beaver fever.” Every summer, the TransCanada Highway, our symbol of national unity, gets shut down in places by our other symbol of national unity. Highway engineers will no sooner dynamite the plug than the beavers will be back at work “repairing the damage” that evening. Inexperienced city dwellers may assume that eliminating beavers is a simple matter. (“Can’t you just shoot them or something? They’re so tame.”) But they are not stupid either, and at the sound of the first gunshot they will disappear, emerging much later (coincident with hordes of mosquitoes) to continue their determined work in darkness.

The title of Backhouse’s book refers to the fact that beaver fur was once an extraordinarily valuable raw material for making hats in Europe. Many of us, when we think of a beaver fur hat, mistakenly envision the furry hat worn by generations of northern woodsmen and Sheriff Marge Gunderson in the movie Fargo. But, in fact, the beaver hats that were popular in Europe in past centuries were made of pressed felt, and sported wide brims and stylish crowns to repel rain and express the personality of the affluent wearer. The Eurasian beaver was a distinct species, and demand for beaver fur was so relentless that beavers were hunted to extinction in Britain by the 16th century. They were drastically depleted across much of their range in Europe and Russia, and when early explorers returned from North America in the 1500s with samples of plush beaver pelts, the rush was on. The Hudson Bay Company was formed in 1670 with a distinct purpose of exploiting North America’s beaver population, and the rest is history, Canadian history.

Backhouse’s book and Beaver, by Rachel Poliquin, sometimes cover the same ground, but generally they take different approaches and would make good companion reading projects. Poliquin’s book is a more of a natural history, an almanac of mythology and amusing anecdotes from the intermingled histories of beavers and humans. Poliquin, like Backhouse, is a British Columbia–based journalist, author and the curator of various natural history exhibits. The publisher of her book is Reaktion books, a British press that hit a homerun in 2014 with H Is for Hawk, a savagely elegiac account by British poet Helen Macdonald of her lifelong infatuation with birds of prey. Reaktion has produced a library of animal books ranging from Allatross to Walrus. (One must expect that Zebra is soon to come.) H is for Hawk must have paid the bills for the whole series and then some, and Beaver is Poliquin’s worthy contribution.

If Poliquin’s book is a rambling natural history, Backhouse’s is somewhat of a road trip, employing shoe leather reportage to take us back and forth across the continent in search of beavers and beaver people. Backhouse starts her book with a trip to northern Saskatchewan, an area so rich in beavers that it is considered to be the beaver capital of the world. She establishes herself as a protagonist who intends to learn about beavers as she goes along, and this is an effective device as it gives her an opportunity to sort through history and spice up her narrative with little historical gems. Some of the commentary from early naturalists now strikes us as comical. The Jesuit historian Charlevoix, for example, travelled to New France in the early 1720s and reported seeing “sometimes 300 or 400 beavers together in one place, forming a town which might properly be called a little Venice.”

Jake MacDonald is the author of ten books of both fiction and non-fiction. His backwoods memoir, Houseboat Chronicles: Notes from a Life in Shield Country (McClelland and Stewart, 2004), won three awards, including the Writers’ Trust price for non-fiction.
Early observers such as Charlevoix enthused that beavers walked around on their hind legs like little construction workers with bundles of lumber balanced on their shoulders, using their tails as wheehobarrows and to build fabulous multi-chambered palaces in the Canadian wilderness. Charlevoix may have believed that it was easier to do his reporting from the comfort of his lantern-lit study, because his fanciful descriptions call into question whether he ever actually saw a beaver.

Both books also explore our ambivalence about nature. Since human beings first moved indoors and built roofs over their heads, there have been two main streams of philosophical thought about the world outside. Thomas Hobbes, Darwin and modern writers such as Richard Dawkins are often seen as representatives of the unromantic view—the view that nature is a fallen world, "red in tooth and claw," where the fierce and the strong rule the woods and the weak are hunted for food. The other view is that nature is a sort of Eden from which we have tra- gically exiled ourselves, a world where "noble savages" once lived in balance and harmony with Nature until white Europeans came along with their muskets and money. Both perspec- tives are still in sway today, with the added irony that some of the most idealistic lovers of nature are those who, like Charlevoix, may have had little actual exposure to it.

Both books devote attention to Archie Belaney, an Englishman who moved to Canada in 1906 and "went Indian," adopting the buckskins and braids of an Ojibway woodsman and championing the cause of the beaver and its impending extinction by exhibited "great signs of uneasiness, and on their return showed equal marks of pleasure, by fondling on them, crawling into their laps, laying on their backs, sitting erect like the squirrel, and behaving to them like children who see their parents but seldom."

It would be interesting to poll some school-children and determine how many know that Canada's first currency was the beaver pelt, and the country's first government was built almost entirely on the beaver industry. The HBC issued "MB" coins (one Made Beaver was equal the value of one prime beaver pelt) and the coins were common currency for purchasing cookware, clothing, hardware, guns and practically anything else required for easing the challenges of wilderness survival. Unlike the western United States, much of which was open country accessible by horse and on foot, Canada was explored chiefly by canoe, a necessity given that more than half the country is covered for- est, lakes and rivers. Both Backhouse and Poliquin remind us that early explorers were not gathering knowledge for its own sake. They were motivated by profit—that is, the search for fur—and it was due to the never-ending quest for beaver that the landscape was mapped and our country was built.

Unlike proponents of either side of the nature debate, Backhouse shows enough respect for read- ers to present her experiences and let us decide for ourselves. She is refreshingly nonjudgemental about attending the massive annual fur auction in a warehouse near Toronto's Pearson airport. Thousands of pelts of animals ranging from red squirrels to black bears are racked for buyers from around the world. She finds the scene appalling, in some ways, but the furs are luxuriant, and she points out that the loss of responsible, sustainable fur trapping and the backwoods culture that went with it are Canadian tragedies. Modern beaver traps kill the animal instantly and fur is arguably a more environmentally friendly material for cloth- ing than petroleum-based fleeces and synthetics. It is pure fantasy to think that removing the beavers would make great animal companions and 19th-century fur trader reported that his pet beaver would "lie before the fire as contentedly as a dog." The great HBC explorer Samuel Hearne also enjoyed the company of bea- vers. During his famous walkabout in the northern wilderness Hearne kept several beavers that came when called and were demonstrably fond of the humans they lived with. And when the Dene women and children were absent for a prolonged period of time, Hearne reported that the beavers died in a trap or in a snare or by a bullet, what's the difference?"

Backhouse says she does not "feel qualified" to sit in judgement. "Except for about five years dur- ing my twenties, I've always eaten meat," she says, "and although I've killed very little of what I've consumed, I have bludponed fish to death after dragging them from the ocean with barbed hooks ... I regularly execute slugs and insects in my vege- table garden ... I've had qualms about deaths I've inflicted or been party to, but I can't deny them."

Animals such as beavers and muskrat go through a boom and bust cycle that is driven by overpopulation, disease and overexploitation of habitats. They are tremendously prolific and if a sustainable number are harvested every year the core population can go on indefinitely without crashing. When the beaver population collapses, whether from a natural downturn in the cycle or from over har- vesting, the landscape suffers. Backhouse eloquently explains the importance of beavers in healthy landscapes. In the Rocky Mountains, where beaver populations were reduced catastrophically, entire landscapes were changed. Marshes were drained, floodplains dried out and slow-moving rivers grew deeper and faster, accelerating runoff and desiccating the landscape. She says that there is evidence that some early aboriginal groups understood the importance of beavers. On the Great Plains, beavers have always done yeoman work in preserving wetlands and conserving water. Alexander Henry, an English fur trader who travelled with an Ojibway family dur- ing the 1760s, noted that certain tribes of the open plains "will not kill a beaver ... to enable them to purchase an ax or other European utensil, though beaver are numerous in every stream throughout their country."

Both authors are obviously fond of the animals and the books are peppered with anecdotes that demonstrate the beaver's intelligence and per- sonality. Poliquin says researchers have tested the intelligence of beavers by wrapping trees with wire mesh. One night the beavers used branches to build ramps up the trees so they could gnaw above the wire. The researchers further tried to fool the animals by placing pieces of bread on the top of metre-high poles. But again, the beavers built ramps to get the prize.

Poliquin's book is filled with handsome engrav- ings and historic illustrations, and, although Backhouse's book has few illustrations, she pro- vides word pictures that are just as entertaining. At one point she wants to watch a beaver work on its dam, but instead it treats her to a grooming display.

Sitting upright like a fat Buddha, with its tail folded under its haunches, it began with downward strokes of its front paws, pressing water from the fur on its chest, belly and sides ... The beaver's skinny little front legs seemed too short to reach all the desired body parts, but it twisted and turned with remarkable flexibility for such a chubby animal. It also scratched vigorously at its head and torso with its hind feet, lying down at one point to get at its back ... It was a fine and rather comical display of grooming.

Humidity almost obliterated beavers from the North American landscape, and these books are full of reasons to celebrate their return.
“The story of sustained evil done by our government to Indigenous peoples … discomforting reading, but essential.” John Ralston Saul

“An exemplary piece of writing and reporting that merits attention from the country’s many non-fiction writing prizes.” Quill & Quire

“A must read.” Joseph Boyden

“This isn’t a typical political tome, ghostwritten to aggrandize the politician …. [It’s] the story of young people’s struggle for a better life.” Doug Cuthand, CBC News

“If you read only one book about Canada’s Indigenous children, it should be Children of the Broken Treaty.” Embassy News
No one with a shred of honesty can claim to know where the digital revolution—more properly characterized right now as a mobile revolution—will lead.
media and see if he liked the result. The columnist was unimpressed, and the lunch from hell ended, in Stackhouse’s retelling, with Simpson harumphing “Twitter!” as he left. (Simpson says this account is “inaccurate in important respects,” but declines to elaborate for the record. Walsmsley restored his fourth columnist last June.) By contrast, Mass Disruption has nothing to say about the controversy surrounding columnist Margaret Wente in 2012, in which mounting reader concerns finally pushed Stackhouse to acknowledge what he described at the time as Wente’s deficiencies in “sourcing, use of quotation marks and reasonable credit for the work of others.” The silence squares poorly with his comments that Toronto’s journalists “will have to be much more comfortable working with readers to assemble information, dig and explore.”

Editing a legacy news organization in these times must be wearing work. There is no road map; no one with a shred of honesty can claim to know where the digital revolution—more properly characterized right now as a mobile revolution—will lead. Even less certain is how to keep viable the journalism a free and democratic society requires: what Stackhouse calls “the discipline of newspaper journalism, of precise, written language, of assertions held up to legal scrutiny, of measured debate, and most importantly, of a collective of readers who don’t just pay for information and ideas but pay attention, serious attention, to those facts and arguments.” It is a relief when Mass Disruption steps onto firmer ground, dealing with actual coverage of actual events. Stackhouse posits Toronto’s policefomed G20 panodemium in 2010 as a watershed in recognition of the power of social media to foment G20 pandemonium in 2010 as a watered-ononto firmer ground, dealing with actual coverage of steps arguments. “It is a relief when...”

Like many critics of the mainstream media, Gorman—who spent many years at newspapers such as the Toronto Star, Ottawa Sun and Victoria Times-Colonist—is resolutely blind to their successes. He ridicules the Star for its at-times-obscene focus on Toronto, but the fact is that the paper remains Canada’s largest daily while maintaining a liberal editorial policy and regularly producing investigations based on shoe-leather reporting that hold the powerful to account and call attention to the plight of the weak. It is also far from clear that large-scale text-driven journalism—the “factory” or “industrial” model—is on its deathbed. Many newspapers are in big trouble, and newsprint as a medium is obviously seriously threatened. But as news systems are reshaped globally there is plenty of evidence that large-scale operations will survive. Titles with global reach—Britain’s Guardian, Financial Times and Daily Mail, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal—are rising to the digital challenge. The news agencies that supply much of the world’s international reporting have never been in greater demand. Companies such as Vice and Buzzfeed, whose origins are far from the mainstream, are moving rapidly to gain credibility as large-scale newsgatherers and presenters, and creating jobs as they expand into Canada and else-where. I know some of the tough young journalism graduates they have hired; they are flesh-and-blood refutations of Gorman’s contention that Canadian journalism schools are too busy churning out “can-non fodder for establishment media.”

In Mass Disruption, the narrative of John Stackhouse’s editorship begins to fade several months before he is replaced. In the final pages he takes us into meetings of news executives from around the world, where he argues that editors must be more open to collaboration with their sales forces and advertisers. Along with others, he believes part of journalism’s salvation may lie in embracing “spon-sored content”—stuff that reads like a reporter’s copy and appeals to the same sensibilities that draw audiences to a particular news product, while remaining, at least nominally, separately branded. As Stackhouse notes, “advertorial” material has deep historical roots in the news business. But on screen devices, the lines between straight-up reporting and paid content are much more easily blurred. In January 2015 Stackhouse became a senior vice-president at the Royal Bank of Canada, where, among other things, he “creates and dis-seminates thought leadership and intellectual capital for the bank and its clients.” In a way, the challenge for the news media he has left behind is to secure space for the same activity, on behalf of public rather than private interests.
They’re Still Missing

An insider’s account of the bungled hunt for Robert Pickton.

ROBERT MATAS

That Lonely Section of Hell: The Botched Investigation of a Serial Killer Who Almost Got Away
Lori Shenher
Greystone Books
348 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9781771640930

Lori Shenher, the first Vancouver cop to focus on Robert Pickton as a serial killer, thought about writing a book when she feared she would become a scapegoat for the failure of police to stop the barbaric murders. However, the families of Pickton’s victims criticized her for signing a book contract. Some felt Shenher had betrayed their trust. Some questioned whether it was ethical to use information collected as a police officer for a book that could (theoretically) earn a profit. Confronted by their concerns and subsequent publication bans imposed by the court, she broke the contract with the publisher.

Now, 15 years after she transferred out of the missing persons unit in the Vancouver Police Department, she has come out with That Lonely Section of Hell: The Botched Investigation of a Serial Killer Who Almost Got Away. She assures readers that she has relied only on information in the public domain. As a result, the story she recounts is familiar to anyone who followed the sensational arrest of Pickton, and subsequent tepid Missing Women Commission of Inquiry into the police investigation. The accounts of missed opportunities and prickly personalities in the police department have mostly been told before.

Nevertheless, Shenher has written an important work that goes beyond the shortcomings of the investigation and inquiry, especially since a national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women is now on the national agenda.

Many Canadians are looking to an inquiry to gain a better understanding of the causes, possibly reinvigorate efforts to solve the crimes and to stop the carnage. That Lonely Section of Hell sets the stage, offering a glimpse into the operations of one police department and a reminder of the numerous missteps of the first attempt to hold an inquiry into missing women.

The book also brings attention to the issue of prostitution and revives unease over current prostitution laws in Canada that continue to endanger the lives of sex-trade workers. Shenher, who worked as a consultant on more than two dozen episodes of the TV series Da Vinci’s Inquest, is a colourful storyteller. She recounts snippets of conversations with her colleagues with dramatic flair as she confronts her own demons when the investigation into missing women founders. She does not spare herself, exposing her innermost feelings as she wrestles, at times unsuccessfully, with overwhelming guilt and debilitating anxiety.

That Lonely Section of Hell is very much Shenher’s own story, including her difficult struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder. She offers a peek into the lives of some of the murdered women but leaves much unsaid. Similarly, she writes about the investigation as she experienced it but does not step back to give a comprehensive account of what went on. However, she also offers valuable commentary on policing, the British Columbia inquiry into the police investigation and the challenges of coping with PTSD.

Shenher was involved in investigating the missing women of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside for just over two years, from July 1998 to late 2000. Pickton was arrested in February 2002, went to trial in January 2006 and was convicted of six second-degree murders in December 2007. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole for 25 years. The inquiry, established in 2010, issued its report in 2012.

Despite the well-publicized trial and lengthy inquiry, we do not know how many women Pickton killed. He boasted of killing 49 women. Traces of DNA and bodily remains of 33 women were found on his Port Coquitlam pig farm. What we do know is that many of those women were aboriginal, connected to Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, addicted to narcotics and working as prostitutes. The Pickton murders are just a part—albeit a horrific part—of the brutal violence against some of the most vulnerable women in our country. Nationally, the numbers are even more disturbing.

The RCMP says 1,017 aboriginal women in Canada were killed between 1980 and 2012, and 120 of those crimes remain unsolved; 164 aboriginal women are now missing, and about 105 of them disappeared under suspicious circumstances.

Even more chilling, the Mounties also report 225 aboriginal prostitutes were killed from 1991 to 2012. How many Picktons are still out there?

Shenher emerges in her book as the damaged but heroic cop in the search for a killer of Vancouver’s missing women. She joined the Vancouver Police Department in 1991, the same year that women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside organized the first annual Valentine’s Day Memorial March to push for a police investigation into the disappearance of women from the neighbourhood.

She writes that she was assigned to the prostitution unit in 1992 and posed as a sex worker for six months, two nights a week. She stood on a street corner and “turned tricks to arrest Johns as an undercover operator.” Street sex workers since the mid-1980s have been saying that the law pushes them into the dark recesses of the cities, where police rarely patrol. They become easy prey for men such as Pickton who can pick them up unobserved.

Numerous academic studies, parliamentarians and the Supreme Court of Canada over the past three decades have concluded that the law creates conditions that endanger women. Blinded by ideology, the former Harper government refused to make changes in the law to protect the women. Shenher’s perspective on these issues would have contributed to the public debate. Unfortunately, she does not share her thoughts about the law and its impact on the safety of the women she came to know. Regardless, the tragic deaths of the missing women clearly illustrate the effect of the law.

Five years after working undercover as a street prostitute, Shenher in 1998 was assigned to track down missing persons. She was told that 17 sex trade workers had been reported missing. She writes she was naïve about why she was assigned to the job. She later realized that the assignment was mostly to pacify activists in the Downtown Eastside community, and not necessarily to pursue the cases. Senior officers in 1998 did not suspect foul play. They believed the missing women had just left the neighbourhood of their own accord without telling anyone.

As Shenher recounts the frustrations of her work day, she sounds just like those amiable cops who solve crimes on prime-time TV every night. She brings the reader along as she submerges herself in an investigation overwhelmed by dead-ends and frustrating ambiguities. Without a crime scene, she had no logical starting point for a search, no place to look for someone who might have seen something. In several instances, she did not even know when the women disappeared.

Shenher offers an account of her investigative techniques and the hurdles she confronted. She discovered serious deficiencies in policing, such as...
the failure of several police departments across the country to track missing women. Within a few months, she added ten more names to the list of missing women. Coincidentally, an anonymous tip on her first day in the missing persons unit suggested Pickton should be considered a suspect in the disappearance of Sarah de Vries and other missing women. The tipster went on to tell authorities that Pickton bragged about disposing of bodies, and that several women’s purses and bloody clothing had been seen in the house trailer on his Port Coquitlam pig farm.

Shenher tracked down the tipster and tried to verify the sensational information.

Her search of police records turned up a 1997 stay of proceedings for attempted murder and forcible confinement. She spoke to the Coquitlam RCMP officer in charge of the file and heard the whole story. Within months of beginning her investigation, she was convinced that Pickton should be a prime suspect. The first indication that something was amiss inside the police department came six weeks after she started. She found out that some officers were advocating for a missing women’s working group within the police department, but her managers were not coordinating efforts to find the missing women.

Senior managers continued to oppose a more energetic investigation and the Pickton tip was passed on to Coquitlam RCMP, as the Pickton farm was within its jurisdiction. After three fruitless days of surveillance, Coquitlam RCMP shelved the case. That was the first of many deaths of the Pickton investigation, Shenher writes.

She continued working in the missing persons unit. No matter what she did, she could not convince her managers that the missing women files required more police attention.

Largely in response to public pressure, efforts were expanded in the spring of 1999 to investigate Pickton and dig deeper into each women’s file. But the increase in support was minimal. New computers were provided but no one was available to enter historical data into the system and vital information was lost. Requests for nine more staff members were turned down; only two more officers were assigned and Shenher felt that the officers, with less experience than her, were incompetent, uncoordinated and relied on questionable police tactics.

Around that time, she also made “the first of many classic management errors in dealing with a case of this magnitude, errors that would quickly lead to my own burnout.” She did not trust anyone else to talk with the families and so became the only contact person for all of them. She developed strong emotional bonds with some families. In other instances, she discovered she was talking with men who had abused sisters or daughters and wanted to be family representatives in order to control access to information about the women’s past. In a couple of cases, she discovered that a victim’s mother had sold her daughter to men for sex and the mother was now overwhelmed with guilt, believing that many lives of some women could have been saved. She was overwhelmed with guilt, believing that many women had been killed because she had failed to turn the case into a priority for police.

The appointment of a provincial commission of inquiry into the police investigation reopened all her old wounds. She was in favour of an inquiry but was critical of who was chosen as its commissioner and how the hearings were handled.

She rightly points out that Wally Oppal, a former judge and cabinet minister, was not an appropriate person to head the inquiry. As an attorney general years earlier, he had ruled out the necessity for a provincial inquiry. With his appointment, the government set up the commission to fail. She is particularly critical of Oppal’s unwillingness to hold crown lawyers accountable for dropping criminal charges against Pickton in 1997. She feels that the role of crown attorneys deserved much greater attention, and they got a free pass, she writes.

Oppal was likeable enough, gracious to witnesses and supportive of victims’ families, she writes. But he was repeatedly sidetracked by what she feels were peripheral issues. The hearings lacked focus. (An experienced jurist, Oppal has acknowledged that the proceedings wandered. In a media interview, he dubbed it “a therapeutic inquiry” that gave women who were ignored an opportunity to be heard.)

Shenher testified for a week about her role in the investigation, recounting her futile efforts to work on the files and her helplessness in implementing the RCMP to pursue it.

And then the inquiry became personal. She spent another two days responding to questions about an early draft for this book. Shenher felt her manuscript was just another red herring at the inquiry. The final report of the inquiry, called “Forsaken,” identified more than 20 instances of police failures, explored some systemic causes including discrimination and public indifference, and offered significant recommendations for change. The report also offered compassionate accounts of the lives of the women.

But much of the advice from the $10 million inquiry has been ignored. The inquiry did not even lead to a unified police force across Metro Vancouver. The region remains a patchwork of municipal police forces and RCMP detachments. What can we expect from a national commission of inquiry? Shenher’s story suggests some pitfalls to avoid. To ensure that the inquiry is more than therapeutic, the inquiry should bring in Shenher to play an active role in its efforts to figure out what went wrong and how to fix it.
Lady Jane Franklin would be thrilled to be told of the discovery of HMS Erebus, the ship on which her husband, John Franklin, disappeared in 1845 while searching for the Northwest Passage. She would read Franklin’s Lost Ship: The Historic Discovery of HMS Erebus with avid interest because, like the authors John Geiger and Alanna Mitchell, she believed that Franklin’s legacy should serve as a lesson to a patriotic country. As she wrote to her prime minister in 1859, the 129 men who died on the expedition “have laid down their lives ... in the service of their country, as truly as if they had perished by the rifle, the cannon-ball, or the bayonet.” Franklin’s Lost Ship elevates the Franklin disaster to a national success story in a narrative sympathetic to the Victorian imperial visions of Franklin’s day. What Lady Franklin would be puzzled by, of course, is that the country in question is Canada and not Britain.

Like Victorian accounts of Arctic exploration, Franklin’s Lost Ship is full of praise for the search’s numerous patrons, both commercial and governmental, who found Franklin’s flagship in September 2014. Led by Parks Canada underwater archaeologists Ryan Harris and Owen Beattie, the Canadian search expedition and the actual technological failures of the admiralty’s Northwest Passage obsession.

Franklin’s Lost Ship is a compelling account of Beattie’s forensic anthropology investigations into the Franklin disaster and raised popular interest in the topic for a new generation of Canadians.

“Finding Franklin,” write the authors, “is Canada’s birthright.” The book is built on a double narrative alternating between the successful Canadian search expedition and the actual Franklin expedition, its disastrous unraveling and the early British searches. While Franklin is held up as the hero of the latter, the hero of the 2014 search is former prime minister Stephen Harper.

Franklin’s Lost Ship devotes much attention to Harper’s personal interest in Franklin and lingers over moments such as the one below, wherein Geiger (referred to in the third person) had joined Harper and his ministers on their 2013 northern tour:

Around an enormous bonfire built by the rangers, on the island where so many of Franklin’s men had died, the prime minister and Geiger spoke about the Franklin problem, the frustration that no ships had been found, the mystery and grotesque nature of the expedition’s end ... It was an amazing experience, huddled around the fire, with Environment Minister (and Gjoa Haven native) Lesna Aghukkaq, Chief of Defence Staff General Thomas Lawson, the prime minister’s wife, Laureen Harper, and others nearby, talking Franklin.

We are told that Franklin has come to represent the spirit of Canada that Harper admires:

He sees Franklin as a proxy for the daring, uninhibited, heroic Canadian—one who sails boldly into impossibly unforgiving territory, not knowing if success is even possible, not caring what it costs him, willing to risk everything in the hope of great reward. It is the story of these modern-day Franklin explorers, and, some would say, of Harper too, a leader who fashioned political power from the risky marriage of two parties and held on to it.

It is an interesting choice, linking the visions of two controversial men whom you see as heroes, especially when one of them was at the helm of the worst disaster in exploration history. But the Franklin we glimpse in this book is very much the idealized Victorian version that Lady Franklin would recognize. This despite that in the last 160 years there has emerged a more critical international consensus about Franklin’s personal shortcomings as leader and the larger cultural and technological failures of the admiralty’s Northwest Passage obsession.

Harper had invested in his narrowly nationalist Franklin myth since launching the first modern Parks Canada search in 2008. Harper’s dogged commitment to including Franklin in his northern policy, despite growing criticism from diverse quarters, was vindicated in 2014 when Parks Canada underwater archaeologists Ryan Harris and Jonathan Moore first spotted the outlines of Erebus lying on the seabed in Queen Maud Gulf. Part serendipitous and part the result of hard work, the
stunning discovery of Erebus was ironically aided by the stubbornness of the ice and poor weather, which had left the smaller vessels unable to reach the intended search area and stuck instead near O’Reilly Island. On the shore, archaeologists and crew located a curious iron artifact, which they realized could only have been torn off a ship while it was breaking up, meaning that a wreck lay nearby. Geiger and Mitchell give a good sense of the collective energy that made the discovery possible, as each person would contribute their part of the puzzle and hand off to another, leading to global headlines and well-deserved celebration. This makes the lionization of Harper seem even more out of place with this otherwise collective endeavour that the authors describe.


Franklin’s Lost Ship was published on October 27, 2015, a week after the federal election saw the definitive defeat of Harper’s Conservative government. Overtaken by these political events, the book ironically shares the fate of lost polar expeditions whose survivors would re-emerge in a political landscape transformed by revolution or war. Ernest Shackleton had left for the South Pole in 1914 just as the Great War had begun, and when he finally reached safety in 1916 he asked, “Tell me, when was the war over?” Came the reply: “The war is not over... Millions are being killed. Europe is mad. The world is mad.” Between the time the book had gone to press and the publication date, Harper’s Conservatives had experienced their own shipwreck.

Ultimately this vision of modern-day Franklin explorers is not modern, but rather is suitable for a Victorian oil painting hanging in a private members’ club. Canadian Geographic exploited exactly this nostalgia in its photographic tableau of a Victorian painting, The Arctic Council Planning a Search for Sir John Franklin, starring the worthies heading up the public and private agencies in the 2014 search, only with little sense of irony. The book evoke the heroic age of exploration in the close attention it gives to the photogenic wreck and the sublime icescapes in which it lies, beautifully photographed throughout. Enthusiasts of polar exploration and armchair explorers will enjoy the lavish visuals, which include historic images as well as photos of many of the artifacts collected. Could only have, the most prized being the ship’s bell and guns.

Franklin’s Lost Ship is itself a relic of the 2014 Franklin search, revealing the institutions invested in funding this expensive enterprise and perhaps even the omissions that their participation introduced. The defeat of Harper’s government is seen by many as a rejection of his administration’s northern policies, with all three northern members of Parliament losing their seats (Aglukkaq came in a distant third in Nunavut). Among the most contentious northern issues was the Conservatives’ muzzling of scientists working on “politically sensitive” research, particularly climate science, and their attempts to defund climate change research at the Polar Environment Atmospheric Research Laboratory, which had its funding eliminated by one funding agency, but was then able to secure $5 million for an additional five years of operation from a different government agency. By comparison, in 2015 Harper promised to build in Gjoa Haven a Franklin Centre for $16.9 million for five years plus $1.5 million thereafter each year for operation.

The epilogue of Franklin’s Lost Ship registers this silence on anthropogenic climate change in its curiously vague title, “The Age of Change.” What is this? “The change reshaping the mystical of the Arctic and the Northwest Passage—embodied in the find of Erebus” is referred to only as part of a list of contemporary northern trends, but it is climate change.

The Arctic is becoming less remote, less forbidding. No longer is it murderous and nightmarish. It is what the West used to be: ripe. The fabled path to the Orient is no longer just a fantasy; it is becoming a reality. As a result, others want in.

Here global warming appears as the bearer of ripe fruit: energy resources, new commercial waterways, and other opportunities for industrial and touristic development, free of the murderous and nightmarish ice. The book essentially presents Erebus as one of the opportunities opened up to us by global warming.

One of the private partners that Geiger brought on board the 2014 search was Shell, which still owns the largest number of licences for oil and gas exploration in the Arctic. At the time Franklin’s Lost Ships was being written, Shell was still actively pursuing Arctic drilling plans, which it called off after a disappointing test drill in September 2015. The RCGS’s involvement with Shell in 2014 included plans for Shell to develop educational materials on Erebus and the Arctic for free distribution to Canadian schools. In 2013 the RCGS and its Canadian Geographic Division (which publishes Canadian Geographic) also began a controversial partnership with the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, producing with the oil lobbyist group curriculum materials distributed free to schools across Canada.

During the follow-up “Mission Erebuses and Terror 2015” led by Parks Canada, Shell and the RCGS had disappeared from the list of private partners (although, based on Parks Canada’s application to the Nunavut Impact Review Board, the RCGS appears to continue being responsible for producing Parks Canada’s educational materials about Erebus). The parting of ways appeared to coincide with a controversy in which a journalist at the Toronto Star, Paul Watson, alleged that he had been effectively censored by editors while investigating the role Geiger and the RCGS played in locating Erebus. Watson also revealed that Balsilie had complained to environment minister Aglukkaq in April 2015 that the documentary film Franklin’s Lost Ships on CBC overstated the role of Geiger and the RCGS in the discovery of Erebus and downplayed that of the public agencies and researchers.

No tale of polar discovery is complete without a priority dispute—the most famous is that between Cook and Peary in their 1909 race to the North Pole (both men turned out to be lying). In Franklin’s day, the dispute had centred on who was the “first” to locate the Northwest Passage—Franklin, and those who came looking for him such as John Rae or Robert McClure, all had their champions. The suggestions that Geiger may have exaggerated the RCGS’s role in the discovery of Erebus is a tepid priority dispute by comparison, but one that is entangled with real concerns about the Harper government’s interference with public research and media. Franklin’s Lost Ship, its inclusions and omissions, is as much an artifact of the Harper government’s approach to Arctic issues, as it is a coffee table book about locating Franklin’s flagship.
A Knock on the Door gathers material from the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to present the essential history and legacy of residential schools and inform the journey to reconciliation that Canadians are now embarked upon.

"The attempt to transform us failed. The true legacy of the survivors, then, will be the transformation of Canada."
—Phil Fontaine, from the Foreword

University of Manitoba Press
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Serfing the Net
The material underside of the digital economy.

DANIEL JOSEPH

Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex
Nick Dyer-Witheford
Pluto Press
248 pages, softcover
ISBN 9780745334035

WHEN YOU THINK OF CRITICISMS OF TECHNOLOGY, what image comes to mind? For many it might be akin to Frankenstein’s monster. After all, technology is a thing we unleash onto the world, sometimes with the best of intentions, often in ignorance. And like Dr. Frankenstein when faced with his monster, we may recoil in terror. Certainly atomic weapons ignite such feelings. Even far more prosaic pieces of technology, such as smart phones, may be seen in this light. Always on, they leave us forever available for work of one kind or another.

Some commentators, such as French sociologist Bruno Latour, say we must love our monsters. In other words, we must do the opposite of Dr. Frankenstein, and rigorously confront the existence of our creations. But who is to say that when we confront them in this way we do not end with a conception as off-putting as that of Karl Marx, who at one point described capital (and by extension, the technologies it utilizes) as something “vampire-like, [which] only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”

It is metaphors like these that make critical texts come alive, adding flavour to what can all too often be the thin gruel of theoretical reasoning. In his most recent book, Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex, Nick Dyer-Witheford, a professor of media and information studies at Western University, concentrates on exactly such metaphors, mining them for their allusive power in helping us understand the economic contradictions we must live with today.

For Dyer-Witheford, the metaphor that does the most heavy lifting comes from physics. In The Communist Manifesto Marx and Engels describe capitalist globalization as “uninterrupted disturbance... everlasting uncertainty and agitation” in which “all fixed fast-frozen relations... are swept away” and “all that is solid melts into air.” Dyer-Witheford interprets this as a vortex—what Hans Lupt calls the “rotating motion of a multitude of material particles around a common center.” From here he steps out to diagnose and examine the role that digital technologies are playing in the vortex of our world.

The main feature of technology in our world today is that we cannot seem to escape its Faustian bargain: with new machines and computers comes increased productivity, yet with increased productivity and the cut-throat competition that accompanies it comes the need to take advantage of these productivity gains and reduce labour costs. Every new technology, then, comes prepackaged with the anxieties about what the future looks like for those people who are made redundant with every new piece of software, every new automated checkout counter, every new robotic arm on the assembly line.

This anxiety, to mainstream economists anyway, is misplaced. They place their faith in the market to take that surplus labour and plug it into a new, labour-hungry field of production. But what about the time between jobs? What about years and years of economic stagnation and the hunger and poverty that come with it? And maybe most importantly, what if it turns out the economy does not need those newly unemployed, now or years in the future? What if this reserve army just gets bigger and bigger?

It is telling that even mainstream liberal economists such as Paul Krugman or Paul Mason have begun to worry whether robots will permanently take over a whole range of jobs. The latter expects crisis, while the former has begun to float the possibility of something he describes as “post-capitalism.” It used to be assumed that the welfare state existed to assuage these fears about radical change or social strife, but as the world has limped from recession to recession since 2007, there has been little to suggest the golden days of welfare capitalism are coming back.

Inside this structured but sometimes chaotic vortex Dyer-Witheford walks the reader through a series of vignettes. For example, his discussion of cybernetics begins with a letter from one of the founders of the field, Norbert Weiner (who also went on to found the field of neuroscience), to Walter Reuther, then president of the United Auto Workers. This fascinating letter has Weiner steadfastly refusing to help a “leading industrial corporation” develop robotic technologies to replace workers. This was in 1949. Dyer-Witheford then proceeds through the history of cybernetics and its role in taking Detroit apart, piece by piece. Weiner refused to help, but he knew that even if he did not somebody else would.

Dyer-Witheford does the same work with silicon, describing both the process of extracting and producing silicon chips for our computers (carefully secured and environmentally devastating) and the feminized and low-skilled service labour that necessarily springs up around them. The reality for the former is that deskilizing technologies—as they were once used against auto workers in Detroit and elsewhere—are just as much at work in supposedly “high skill” workplaces like Google or Facebook. Both kinds of labour, in the end, are key to the current makeup of the cyber-proletariat.

Maybe what is most important about a book like Cyber-Proletariat is that it demands rigorous attention to the material world when considering the consequences of digital technologies. We need to beware of the digital utopian who pretends that with the advent of the internet the day to day texture of our lives recedes into the endless plane of cyber space. We must also never forget the costs that cyber space can impose on the material world: the environmental degradation and toxic waste needed to mine rare-earth minerals, the delicate hands needed to assemble the circuit boards of our smart phones, the growing economic pressure to let out our apartments and cars through rent-seeking services like Airbnb or Uber.

Although Cyber-Proletariat deals with a rarefied topic, it is the opposite of a dense, academic tome. Compared to Dyer-Witheford’s past works such as Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-technology Capitalism or Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games, it is considerably more accessible. It is the mark of a well-versed writer to strive for clarity when so many dwell in obfuscation. It is doubly needed here, if the wider public is to fully appreciate the ways in which we are inextricably entangled with technology as we move forward with political change. It can only be hoped that Cyber-Proletariat will be one of those books that sparks a wider discussion of how it is not our technology that will save humanity from misery and despair, but rather a rethinking of how to organize our whole society.

Daniel Joseph is a lecturer, freelance writer and a PhD candidate in Communication and Culture at Ryerson and York Universities.

January/February 2016
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Over the next several years, Canadian governments at all levels will undertake a multi-billion dollar attack on the so-called infrastructure deficit. Good infrastructure decisions will serve us for generations, expanding the quality and sustainability of our public services, improving productivity and increasing employment. Poor decisions will burden us for decades. We must also choose the right infrastructure, using financial and fiscal prudence while anticipating future technological and societal trends. If our priorities are wrong or if we pay too much, vital projects will be neglected.

All this is a tall order. In accomplishing it, the model of public procurement referred to as a public-private partnership—typically called a PPP, P3 or AFP, the latter based on the Ontario government variant called alternative financing and procurement—will be prominent. Heather Whiteside’s recent book, *Purchase for Profit: Public-Private Partnerships and Canada’s Public Health Care System*, is therefore a timely one. An expert on privatization, financialization and fiscal austerity at the University of Waterloo, she uses theories from political economy to examine Canada’s experience with P3s, with a particular focus on health care.

*Purchase for Profit* opens with an analysis to explain the desire to involve the private sector in public infrastructure. Whiteside’s logic here is based on political economy theory, including no fewer than four references to Karl Marx himself in the early pages. (Older readers may be reminded of the frothy change-the-world student politics of the late 1960s, at institutions such as Simon Fraser University, where Whiteside received her PhD.) Faced with this ideologically tinged introduction, readers grounded in contemporary public affairs might be discouraged from continuing. But they should persevere. Whiteside is offering practical advice on one of the most significant fiscal and public policy issues of our day. Although she fires off periodic polemical broadsides throughout her discussion, the rest of the book is much clearer sailing.

Admittedly, her propensity to cite public sector trade union sources and their allies as authoritative on the performance of PPPs can be unpersuasive, but so is the too-common practice of PPP proponents citing equally self-interested sources in the financial services sector and pro-business organizations. The ground between the ideological left and the ideological right on the topic appears to leave little room for objective, evidence-based analysis and hypotheses. Interestingly many would even exclude most auditors general from the middle ground. As Whiteside notes, “provincial auditors’ reports have thus far proven to be a leading source of support for anti-P3 campaigns.” Still, despite the ideological tilt of her own research, she does make an important contribution, by rigorously framing the debate over PPPs and implicitly inviting evidence-supported counterarguments where they exist.

Looking at the entire gamut of PPP projects would be overwhelming, so the book focuses on the financing of public hospitals in British Columbia and Ontario. Whiteside deconstructs four PPP hospital projects and the two provincial PPP programs for which those projects arguably cleared the way. In her view, the rationale for PPPs is the notion of “accumulation by dispossession,” whereby the accumulation and concentration of wealth is enhanced by allowing commercial interests to move into fields such as government programs, facilities and services that were previously closed to capitalism.

One of Whiteside’s main conclusions is that the commitment to PPPs is hard to kill off. When the earliest PPP projects failed to deliver on their promises, she argues, their successors were allowed to morph into something else, rather than being discarded as allegedly unsuccessful fiscal policy. She introduces the notion of RID— routinization, institutionalization and depoliticization—to refer to the means supporters used to overcome PPPs’ shortcomings. The model’s advocates, she asserts, wanted to ensure that disappointing outcomes did not result in the PPP principle being abandoned in favour of traditional government tendering—or even simple contracting out individual services—funded by tax-supported debt financing.

How did this RID process work in practice? Whiteside rightly points out that early high-profile PPP projects attracted so much intense scrutiny and opposition that proponents realized the model would have a short political shelf life if projects were developed and launched individually. The solution was twofold. First, an overall policy was crafted to govern all major sectoral infrastructure procurement using PPPs. Second, there was a transfer of responsibility away from proponent organizations or ministries to arm’s-length entities that had PPPs as their sole raison d’être.

The result was what Whiteside calls “P3 enabling fields”: crown corporations such as Partnerships BC and Infrastructure Ontario as well as fiscal policy frameworks to guide the initial evaluation and detailed structuring of projects. With considerable justification, she suggests that an agency committed to PPPs is impartial neither in developing a project evaluation model nor in applying it to individual proposals. She outlines a number of consequences of creating PPP agencies—in particular the fact that broader social and governmental policy questions receive limited attention, understanding or weight by these agencies. In my own experience, I would add that the PPP agencies usually have mandates and attract personnel for whom “the deal” is the main focus.

Whiteside is not always balanced in her treatment of various projects. Her book goes into considerable detail about the early Ontario hospital PPPs in Brampton and Ottawa, but neglects to discuss the contemporaneous and celebrated failures of the conventional procurement processes for similar major hospital projects in Sudbury and Thunder Bay. The latter were arguably among the strongest arguments within the Ontario government for an alternative procurement model. She also accepts some assumptions that are subject to
That is because of the large and sustained drop in
PPP value-for-money analysis has not helped win
over time. These are not mere methodological
problems in making objective
assumptions about the cost of capital
when calculating a project’s discount factor, which
tories refer to as value-for-money analysis to different
consequences—have largely disappeared.

When it comes to employing what commenta-
tors refer to as value for money analysis to different
consequences—have largely disappeared.

That is partly because of the need to make math-
ematical assumptions about the cost of capital
when calculating a project’s discount factor, which
is used to estimate the project’s long-term cost.

Whiteside argues that problems that should
have forced a fundamental re-evaluating (and
abandoning) of the PPP model were allowed to be
rectified by process redesign and modifica-
tions, thereby giving the model a new lease on life
and even more support. Others would argue that
policy makers did what policy makers are sup-
posed to do: learn from their mistakes and hone the
policy, rather than throw over the whole initiative.

One wonders how many hospitals in Ontario
would have been built or expanded in the subsequent
period if they had relied on taxpayer-funded con-
ventional debt financing and stakeholder-driven
program design, with the attendant scope creep
and likelihood of change-orders from contractors.

Perhaps it is a function of the extended cycle
time for academic publishing, but Purchase for
Profit would have benefited from looking at these
issues from hospital perspectives rather than the
first decade of the millennium. For example, citing
credit conditions before and during the 2008 fiscal
crisis seems like ancient history in our protracted
low-interest environment, where investment capital
for infrastructure projects is readily available
from pension funds and other sources of patient
capital at historically low cost. So does looking at
several prototype PPPs from the late 1990s, when
these do not shed much light on the dozens of
subsequent multi-million dollar hospital projects
that have been completed in British Columbia
and Ontario, most of which benefitted from the
hard-learned lessons that Whiteside illuminates.
For Ontario, it is also important to consider both
the relatively small number of APP agreements
among the provinces that have been procured through
traditional processes, as well as the annual third-
party reports on the timeliness and budget per-
formance of APP projects.

While Whiteside’s objective may have been to
discredit PPPs, her work will also serve to bolster
those engaged in what she terms R&D, addressing
things such as private windfalls from refinancing
(where high-cost early financing is renegotiated at
lower rates when risks are better understood
and discounted by lenders). As government’s skill in
inflation rates and cost of capital, both public and
private, and a greater availability of private credit
for infrastructure projects, especially on the part
of pension funds and similar pools of “patient
investment capital. This has brought the PPP model
and the conventional financing model much closer
together, for purposes of calculating long-term cost
estimates. Given governments’ desire to reduce
debt and deficits, the fact that PPP debt is only
marginally more expensive is not, on its own, likely
sufficient motivation to go the conventional pro-
curement route through incurring general public
debt by any level of government.

The passage of time has other implications.
As Whiteside suggests, the problems in making objective
assumptions about the cost of capital
when calculating a project’s discount factor, which
tories refer to as value-for-money analysis to different
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those engaged in what she terms R&D, addressing
things such as private windfalls from refinancing
(where high-cost early financing is renegotiated at
lower rates when risks are better understood
and discounted by lenders). As government’s skill in
structuring and negotiating PPPs improves with
time and transparency, public officials should
negotiate the opportunity for further financial gain
to the taxpayer’s advantage. Partial equity sales,
the refinancing of project debt, and “participation
agreements” could generate dividends. The Ontario
government’s PPP agreements will likely see an
increase in value, due to the performance of the
underlying projects. The Ontario land-
registry system illustrates the point. The public
land-registry system was an early public-private
venture in Ontario, with few precedents and no
earlier comparable projects. Under Ontario’s AFP model,
the province was able to delay, scope creep or budget overages than
the physical systems (e.g., HVAC, renovations, telecom)
but leaving other soft functions (e.g., catering,
cleaning, pharmacy) outside the deal, the private
partner in the latter model assumes significant
long-term risk, but does not become involved in the
kinds of issues best managed by these running
facility, including labour relations, clinical activities
and patient satisfaction.

At the beginning of this review, I referred to the
need to invest in the right infrastructure, allowing
for the larger technological and societal trends
that will change the kinds of infrastructure we will
need in the future. That is nowhere more obvious
than in health care. As Whiteside notes, the length of
Ontario’s APP agreements are being reduced,
since financing can be secured and amortized
over shorter periods with greater certainty, with-
out pre-judging the benefits and financing of long
lifecycle projects. She also persuasively argues for
more graduated penalties and provisions for pub-
licly initiated course corrections during the term of
long agreements.

It is equally important, however, that we not
commit ourselves for decades to a healthcare deliv-
ery model that is in a state of flux. With chronic
disease displacing acute illness as the prevailing
feature of public health care, and with hospitals
being the most expensive way to offer care, there
will be increasing efforts to stream patients away
from hospital admissions, emergency rooms and
long-term care homes in Ontario. Government’s
based and home-based healthcare delivery.
Indeed, hospitals are among the most “recyc-
etable” forms of physical public infrastructure.
They require reformating and adapting with each
decade, since what happens within the walls is far
more important (and expensive) than the physical
plant. Our PPP agreements need to have a range of
opportunities to share investment obligations, and
to alter underlying business assumptions, if they are
to serve us throughout their extended terms.
Tides
Among seaweed, the lovers found a shoe.
It was not an enormous shoe. Almost a shell.

The one Velcro strap still held fastened.
She stooped and set it adrift like a boat,

and for a moment it bobbed on the waves,
not wanting to leave sight of solid ground.

The Mediterranean reminded him of Icarus,
how a boy fell from something so beyond him,

his arms open wide could not embrace it.
At the ferry port, where a train waited

to carry them north, they saw the fallen.
The faces. Arms pressed against wire fences.

Infants held up as if offerings to love.
There was none. The boat had eyes once.

Bruce Meyer

A Solstice Is an
Astronomical Event

It’s been nearly eight years since you died —
and each time the earth swings past this close
to the sun, I feel the push of exclusion, years
accumulated between us like layers on rock,
rusted red sediments, granite faults, while
earth turns away from sun. Position is not
the same as instance. Each winter’s freeze/thaw
knocks certain relentless accidents loose

and I am slowly becoming someone
you have never known. Proximity reminds
that nearness alone is not intimate. Do solitary
rocks, in darkness, desire to remain as they are,
and therefore whole? Surely even rock must want
the cold that enters, cracks it open at the fault.

Lisa Martin

Bruce Meyer is author of 47 books, most recently the
award-winning The Seasons (Porcupine’s Quill, 2014),
The Arrow of Time (Ronsdale, 2015) and A Chronicle
of Magpies and Other Stories (Tightrope, 2015). He is
a winner of the Guenodlyn MacEwen Prize and the
2015 recipient of the Barrie Arts Award Excellence in
the Arts Lifetime Achievement Award. At present he is
reading Colin Carberry’s The Green Table, Ryan Van
Winkle’s The Good Dark and James Lindsay’s Our
Inland Sea.

Lisa Martin is the author of One Crow Sorrow (Brindle
and Glass, 2008) and co-editor of the 2015 IPPY-award
winning anthology How to Expect What You’re Not
Expecting: Stories of Pregnancy, Parenthood and Loss
(Touchwood, 2013). She has won several awards, includ-
ing the Alberta Literary Award for Poetry and a National
Magazine Award for Personal Journalism. She keeps an
intermittent blog at www.writerinresidence.ca. She is cur-
tently reading Greg Hollingshead’s Act Normal, re-reading
Spencer Reece’s poetry collection The Road to Emmaus
and carting around, with aspirations, several more. The
title of her sonnet “A Solstice Is an Astronomical Event” is
excerpted from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solstice.
View from a Slide
You Once Slept Under

Before time and war and other old gods
you slept under stars like a flapping owl
on the cooling crust of earth. Your bones were
soft, your body without form. Words of life
fell to the ground like burning globes of fruit,
you ate your fill; there was enough for all.
You flew with the wind, made love to the sun
whenever it asked, but the truth is this:
when you returned from the war, you didn’t
think of the dead much. You wanted to be
a child again. You walked wide streets at night
alone, and counted stars under a slide.
Owls watched you walk away at dawn, only
the owls were crows, their feathers wet with rain.

Benjamin Hertwig

Sonnenizio on the Unseen

Even before I saw the chambered nautilus
and that was only in the vast & blinking online sea —
or perhaps I did see one in a Neruda house
because his homes are magnets for marvel-seekers —
even before that, I heard the armoured cicada sawing
on a Chinese summer exactly how it saws back home
& tasted the gaze of a seemly young man
inking a scrimshaw boat into a Pleistocene tusk.
Before not-seeing gilt altars and guilted children
or the massacre of west coast walruses & seals,
I said the unseen is what will undo us, not so much
what is out of sight but what we refuse to see —
it will seed the future into our spines, chamber, arc & beam,
grow walls to seal us from each other, hardened pearly seams.

Maureen Hynes

Note: The sonnenzio is a blended sonnet form invented by American poet Kim Addonizio. She requires the poem to start with a line borrowed from another poet. One word from that first line is then used in each of the remaining 13 lines, and the sonnenzio must end with a rhymed couplet. In this case, the first line is taken from Bernadette Mayer’s “Incandescent War Poem Sonnet.”

Benjamin Hertwig teaches part time at Concordia University of Edmonton and he is apprenticing as a potter. He has poetry, fiction and non-fiction published or forthcoming in The Glass Buffalo, Geez and Pleiades Magazine and is currently reading Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others, Spencer Reece’s The Road to Emmaus, B.W. Jaxtheimer’s How to Paint and Draw, Sara Peters’s 1996, a frequently thumbed copy of The Wind in the Willows and a stack of first-year essays on Thomas King’s “Borders.”

Maureen Hynes’s book Rough Skin (Wolsak and Wynn, 1995) won the League of Canadian Poets’ Gerald Lampert Award for best first book of poetry by a Canadian. Her fourth book of poetry, The Poison Colour, was released from Pedlar Press in fall 2015. Her work has been included in more than 20 anthologies and in Best Canadian Poems in English 2010. Maureen teaches in the University of Toronto’s Creative Writing program and is poetry editor for Our Times magazine. She has just finished reading Priya Parmar’s novel, Vanessa and Her Sister, which led her to re-visit Virginia Woolf’s A Moment’s Liberty: The Shorter Diary; in poetry, she is reading Kim Trainor’s Karyotype and Glen Downie’s Democratic Beauties, and is about to dive into Frank O’Hara’s Collected Poems. Visit www.maureenhyes.com for more.
Run, Keita, Run

Lawrence Hill satirizes the senseless treatment of refugees.

ANN WALMSLEY

The Illegal

Laurence Hill

HarperCollins

400 pages, softcover

isbn 9781554468349

Lawrence hill has said that The Illegal, his fourth novel, has been on his mind since he first met Sudanese refugees in West Berlin in the 1980s. After that long gestation, the book now seems especially timely. This dystopian contribution to the genre of refugee lit (What Is the What by Dave Eggers, Ru by Kim Thúy) hit bookshelves this fall during the most acute refugee crisis since the end of World War Two.

Readers will recall Hill’s poin-ignant third novel, The Book of Negroes, which won both the Commonwealth Writers and the Rogers Writers’ Trust prizes for its startlingly imagined and dig-nified protagonist, Aminata Diállin, a girl kidnapped from West Africa and enslaved in the American South. Like Aminata, the protagonist of his new book (male this time) embodies grace, courage and resourcefulness. Keita Ali is incorruptible, kind, but just flawed enough to be real as he struggles to survive as a refugee in the fictional country of Freedom State.

A marathon runner, the 24-year-old Keita has escaped from his homeland of Zantoroland, a ficti-tional island in the middle of the Indian Ocean (red soiled like Madagascar) where the government has assassinated his father.

Keita has escaped from his homeland of Zantoroland, a fictional island in the middle of the Indian Ocean (red soiled like Madagascar) where the government has assassinated his father.

...deep in the heart of Ruddings Park" just after a scene in which someone has assaulted Keita on that very path. Other coincidences occur thanks to the zany omnipresence of a 15-year-old student named John Falconer who materializes with his video camera (sometimes in a brothel bedroom closet) just in time to record instances of corruption by government officials. Most hilarious of all is Keita’s absurd cat-and-mouse game of winning high-profile races while hiding from the authorities. As in all good satire, the reader is initially disoriented, then figures it out. Indeed, the satire does not kick in until page 63, following a less compelling young-adult-toned opening section on Keita’s youth in Zantoroland.

If The Illegal departs in tone from the more seri-ous The Book of Negroes, it shares a preoccupation with the author’s other fiction and non-fiction: race. Hill rarely introduces a character without situating him or her in the colour spectrum. The complexion of John, the young videographer, whose father was half-black, is described by one character as “faded right out” and “mixed awful thin” or by another as “coffee and cream.” Keita himself is only half Faloo, a fictional ethnicity possibly inspired by Barry Pain’s 1910 parody, The Exiles of Faloo. His other half is Bamileke, a real ethnic group from Cameroon. One of the villains in the story is revealed late in the novel to be a white “European stock” population and built on two centuries of Zantorolander slave labour. When Freedom State abolished slavery, it shared a preoccupation with the author’s other fiction and non-fiction: the illegal. Freedom State immigration policies. Each of these women makes a different moral choice in bat-ting aspects of oppression in Freedom State and as readers we cheer for Ivernia because of her willing-ness to dispense library cards to illegals. Unlike The Book of Negroes’ virtuoso first-person narration by Aminata, we get to know these women through an omniscient point of view, a handy tool for satire.

Also figuring in the novel are two charismatic characters from previous Hill fiction: the report-ers Mahatma Grafton and Yoyo. In The Illegal, Yoyo is Keita’s father. Their presence counter-balances the rogues in the ensemble, although newcomers to Hill’s fiction will not understand their significance.

In creating his protagonist, Hill has borrowed attributes from members of his own family (the diabetes that afflicted Hill’s father, his brother’s gift for singing), but when he has a complex view to making a point: that Keita truly comes to life. In one delightful passage, Keita takes his first bus ride in Freedom State: “It was the strangest bus ride Keita had ever taken. There were no chickens or goats aboard. There was only one passenger per seat, and no one stood in the aisles or sat among lug-gage on top of the bus ... Not a single person sang or laughed or danced during the twenty-six-hour trip.” How humanizing those lines are, allowing the reader to stand in the shoes of a young man observ-ing a new country through the lens of his own starkly different past experience.

In interviews, Hill has said that he chose to set his tale in two fictional countries in order to avoid singing out any existing country’s refugee policy, although he mentions mixing “a little bit of” Canada, Texas, Arizona, France and South Africa. Certainly, Africo’’s name evokes Africville, the black community in Halifax that was bulldozed in the 1960s. No matter. All countries’ policies are under scrutiny right now.

Satire frees the author to critique more point-edly without sounding pedantic. It also disarms the reader by provoking laughter and then guilt, thereby driving the point home. In The Illegal, Hill’s satire entertains while mocking nonsensical policies that leave undocumented stateless people stranded.

Ann Walmsley is an award-winning magazine journalist, who has written for Report on Business Magazine, Maclean’s and other publications. She is the author of The Prison Book Club (Viking, 2015).
Saskatchewan Journey

Diane Warren's upside-down novel is peopled with vivid small-town characters.

SUSAN WALKER

Liberty Street
Dianne Warren
HarperCollins
372 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9781554685608

Dianne Warren is a writer whose narrative technique is so subtle she might be an author without a strong sense of how her fiction works. Or perhaps with Liberty Street, her first novel since the Governor General's Award-winning Cool Water, the vivid prose came off the tips of her fingers without much conscious effort.

The reader wonders whether Liberty Street is somehow upside down—a collection of chapters that function almost independently of one another, seemingly shuffled into random order. Because the big reveal—what most novels' opening pages of fiction point toward—occurs on page 2 of this deceptively mundane tale.

"We were firmly lodged in a traffic jam in a small Irish town," says the narrator, Frances Moon, in the first sentence of the book. And then, several hundred words on: "I couldn't take my eyes off the scene unfolding ... Just nineteen, I thought, and a baby too." Frances is repeating the words of the local policeman who has announced the reason for the funeral that has caused traffic to come to a halt in the little town. Soon she has told Ian, her travel companion and partner of more than 20 years, that she was once married, and still is. And she once lost a baby in childbirth, but the husband and the father of the baby were two different men. A bit much for any long-time boyfriend to absorb calmly and certainly a jolt to the unsuspecting reader.

Liberty Street is an uncommon narrative, but not for Dianne Warren, a Saskatchewan playwright, short story writer and novelist who brings to all she writes such a fine sense of place—small town and rural Canadian prairie—that it is hard to separate her characters from the settings they inhabit. Not for the first time in Warren's work, this novel concerns a journey, a literal as well as a figurative series of trips into the past and ongoing in the present, in which we engage with Frances. Abandoned by her shocked and dismayed partner on their trip to Ireland, she is soon on a voyage to discover her own self.

Warren's manipulation of detail is one reason Liberty Street is a page turner even without an obvious chronological or even logical connection linking chapters.

Warren’s manipulation of detail is one reason Liberty Street is a page turner even without an obvious chronological or even logical connection linking chapters. experience is given a twist into the bizarre, is one reason Liberty Street is a page turner even without an obvious chronological or even logical connection linking chapters. Frances seems unruffled by the sudden departure of her lover, who goes back to Canada, leaving her to find companionship among a group of English Christian travellers—all men—while she lingers in Ireland a few more days. It is only on the plane home that Frances, alone, reading a Canadian newspaper story about a home- less man who allegedly dies in a hospital waiting for emergency treatment, is struck by the enormity of what has happened. "I wanted to weep because someone had died for being unpredictable." It doesn't take a psychoanalyst to realize that Frances is weeping for her own unpredictable self.

Chapter Two, "We Two Girls," takes the narrative back to Frances at five years of age. The title refers to the central relationship in her life: with her mother. Over the course of nine chapters covering all of Frances's childhood, adolescence, early adulthood (all except for her time with Ian; he is never heard from again except in a flashback of their meeting) and current middle-aged life, we piece together who Frances is. That is, the reader does the work of assembling a coherent portrait of Frances, maybe getting to know her a little better than she knows herself.

There are other mysteries, too. Whom did she marry? Who was the father of the baby? Who killed Silas Chance, the First Nations hired hand who had been a tenant of the Moon family? And what is the significance of Liberty Street? And what became of Dooley Sullivan, the boy with a troubled background in Frances's school who was the class clown?

Liberty Street is in Elliot, the small town closest to the Moon family farm. The house that Frances journeys to was built by her English uncle for his fiancée. But Uncle Vince dies before his bride can arrive from Great Britain and the Moons inherit the home. (Although place is so much embedded in these characters, the Moon parents, English immigrants, are always somehow out of place.) It is the Liberty Street house that eventually provides a haven for Frances's oddball mother, whose signature appearance is in the snazzy car she won in a raffle. Frances as a child understood that her mother once disappeared in it for a few days on a trip to Nashville, where she was to pursue a country singing career. This was, in fact, a lie—Mrs. Moon had gone on a shopping trip to Yellowhead. But Dianne Warren imagines such unpredictable small-town Saskatchewan characters and makes them more convincing than people in a newspaper report.

This way of storytelling has been present in Warren's work since her earliest success, the GG-nominated play "Serpent in the Night Sky," wherein a couple, Joy and Duff, meeting face to face for the first time are plotting to get married. Family matters ensue. This couple might be progenitors of Frances and the much older man Joe Fletcher, whom, we eventually learn, she marries. Never was there less romance in a marriage, short-lived though it is.

Due to her gift for imaginative dialogue, Warren's characters—Liberty Street has a huge cast —are as vivid as any seen on stage or screen, their voices so true you can immediately visualize them, even smell them. Here are Ian and Frances, in their final moments together:

"You know that you're a person who resists happiness, right?" [Ian]
"That's not true," I said.
"It is true. You don't trust it."
Then he closed the door and left.

Ian might have got her exactly right, but Frances, always ready to deny others' characterization of her, does not know who she really is. Soon we do not trust her as a narrator.

Writing as if life were as random as it really is, Warren gains our willing suspension of disbelief as her tale wraps up almost all the loose ends. When the long forgotten Joe, whom she married at 18 in defiance of her mother's plans for her, turns up in the Elliot hospital where Frances has gone for treatment of a rusty nail wound, we accept the coincidence.

Each chapter, even the awkwardly placed "The Ballad of Dooley Sullivan," written from Dooley's point of view, is eventually knitted into a narrative that becomes coherent in the reading of it. Not until near the end of the book do we find out how central Dooley is to Frances's story.

Continuity of imagery and character, rather than chronology, assures it all hangs together. And because Warren's people are so plausible, coming off the page like actors on a stage, we can close Liberty Street with the sense of having heard a satisfying tale and perhaps learned as much from fiction as we might have from a road trip to Saskatchewan.
Canadian Pacific: The Golden Age of Travel
Barry Lane
Goose Lane Editions
200 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9780864928788

The Beginnings of the Company We Now Know as Canadian Pacific can still evoke fascination and wonder. This is with good reason, for the company's early operations have a larger than life quality to them. In its glory days, Canadian Pacific carried passengers and freight across Canada, built luxury hotels for wealthy tourists and straddled the globe with its shipping and cruising vessels, while providing an avenue for the rapid settlement of the Canadian West. This multifaceted story is retold in Barry Lane's new book Canadian Pacific: The Golden Age of Travel.

The Regina-born author studied history at Royal Military College. Later he served at the United Nations Emergency Force's headquarters in the Sinai. More recently he retired from the vice-presidency of Mendel Tours, a company he co-founded in Quebec City to teach Canadian history and culture. In this capacity he lectured extensively on Canadian Pacific's history on rail tours across Canada and on cruise ships. For Lane, this history is also a personal one: the immigration of his own grandparents to Canada from Lincolnshire and Alsace Lorraine and their settlement on the Prairies in 1900 owe much to the CPR.

Canadian Pacific provides a rich visual history that draws heavily on well-known secondary sources. Lane's intended audience is the general reader, so those seeking a detailed knowledge of Canadian Pacific’s corporate development or a full view of Canadian railway history should not look here. What they will find are engaging summaries of various aspects of Canadian Pacific’s story, including descriptions of early railway travel and tourism. In his opening chapters, Lane covers territory that will be familiar to many of his readers: British Columbia's stipulation that a transcontinental railway be built to link it with the rest of Canada within ten years of the province's entry into Confederation, the establishment of the CPR syndicate and the difficulties experienced building almost 3,200 kilometres of rail track across some of the most rugged countryside in the world.

The formidable challenges encountered in pushing the line through mountainous British Columbia are described by Lane in considerable detail. This was where the most difficult terrain and weather were encountered. But he barely mentions the daunting problems to be overcome in the so-called eastern section, especially in northern Ontario, where contractors had to lay rails across the 1,600 kilometre-wide Canadian Shield with its lakes, steep cliffs and huge, bottomless muskegs that swallowed tons of gravel and even entire locomotives. All these construction challenges and their soaring costs taxed the determination and ingenuity of William C. Van Horne, a transplanted American railroad genius and a man of prodigious energy and imagination. As the CPR's general manager, he

pushed through the building of Canadian Pacific's portion of the main line at a frenetic pace, overseeing the completion of construction in 1885, five years ahead of the Canadian government's deadline.

First as general manager and then from 1888 to 1899 as president, Van Horne was the one who spearheaded the diversification of the company's operations. The completion of the railway's main line helped set the stage for a role in the mass immigration into the Canadian West, in which Canadian Pacific was involved in numerous ways.

Notable among the newcomers to Canada between 1896 and 1914 were Britons and agriculturalists from Central and Eastern Europe. To reach Canada, many of these immigrants crossed the Atlantic on CPR boats, for Van Horne had decided that the company should move into maritime fleets as well as numerous other non-railway sectors. In doing so he ensured that what was often described as the empire's greatest railway became an integrated transportation network that would girdle the globe.

The company's fleet had begun with the acquisition of a fleet of ocean liners to handle Pacific Ocean travel. As early as 1889, the company ordered three passenger liners, the Empress of India, the Empress of Japan and the Empress of China, to provide monthly service to destinations in Asia. Van Horne named all three ships, selecting the designation "empress" to reflect the vessels' superiority over all anticipated competition. Although the first of these, the Empress of India, completed the CPR's first global journey by train and ship in April 1891, it was not until 1906 that the Empresses, in this case

the Empress of Britain and the Empress of Ireland, made their first Atlantic crossing.

Part of Van Horne's motivation in branching into new sectors was his wish to develop traffic for the railway. As Lane explains, the railway general invested a lot of time and imagination in developing the company's tourist services, commissioning architects for its hotels, overseeing their construction and inventing witty advertising slogans to attract customers. In fact, Lane rightly credits him with firmly establishing an international tourist industry of significant dimensions in Canada.

Tourism promotion had valuable long-term consequences. For example, it ensured that a detailed visual record of the company's operations was left for posterity. Indeed, the most outstanding feature of Lane's book is its magnificent collection of photographs, often commissioned by the company itself. In his search for them, Lane visited archives in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Many are well known to railway history buffs, but others are not, notably those of the interiors of some of the iconic Canadian Pacific hotels, such as the Banff Springs, the Empress in Victoria and Ottawa's Château Laurier. Today, the company's most visible legacy in Canada is these great railway hotels and the distinctive château style that was adopted in their design.

Lane features the Château Frontenac in a chapter entitled "Gateway to the Orient." The reason is the distinctive role the hotel's host city played in the company's operations. As Lane notes, "Quebec City was the key entry point for Canadian Pacific's travel system in North America," and thanks to the company's Pacific fleet this also meant it could be viewed as a gateway to Asia. Only a business strategist as skilled as Van Horne could successfully brand Canadian geography in this way.

Of course, not all aspects of the early Canadian Pacific story were so positive, and these other aspects are only barely alluded to by Lane. Despite such gaps Canadian Pacific serves a useful function. Not least, by allowing readers to immerse themselves in an evocative age that did so much to forge modern-day Canada, Lane and his publisher have produced a volume that will delight and entertain. That is accomplishment enough for any book.

Canadian Pacific does not have an index, but it does provide suggestions for further reading. An unfortunate omission is Van Horne's Road: An Illustrated Account of the Construction and First Years of Operation of the Canadian Pacific Transcontinental Railway by Omer Lavallée, Canadian Pacific's penultimate archivist and historian. Readers interested in delving deeper after reading Lane's book would find it well worth their while to consult Lavallée's work and Canadian Pacific's bibliography.
“At 86, Augie Merasty has been a lot of things: Father. Son. Outdoorsman. Homeless. But now he is a first-time author, and the voice of a generation of residential-school survivors. . . . The Education of Augie Merasty is the tale of a man not only haunted by his past, but haunted by the fundamental need to tell his own story . . . One of the most important titles published this spring.” Mark Medley, Globe and Mail
We Have the Technology
Making the Senate relevant again.

HUGH D. SEGAL

Does Canada’s Senate Need Reforming?
If so, how best to do so? Like any statutory body whose design dates back to the 19th century, the Senate has features that seem ill-suited to the 21st. But it would be a mistake to neglect history when shaping reforms. That would be as unhelpful as suggesting that all the Senate’s present practices be meticulously preserved. Understanding how and why the Senate was originally structured as it was holds within it the seeds of understanding how it can best be reformed now.

One of the ways in which colonial Canada moved away from a hierarchical quasi-dictatorship, where all legislators were appointed by the crown or their local agents, was through upper chambers in each colony that protected the aristocratic and landed gentry while the real spending and legislative power resided in the elected lower house—legislatures, parliaments or assemblies. At the time of Confederation, it was therefore only natural that the provisions for balance and compromise operating in the colonies and provinces be sustained federally through the establishment of a new upper chamber.

There were compelling reasons why such provisions needed to be maintained. With its vast geography, a populous and well-armed southern neighbour, and internal divisions along regional, linguistic, religious and class lines, the new country required a series of compromises and concessions to coalesce successfully. And for many of the issues relating to this arduous process, the Senate became the crucible of accommodation. The massive population imbalance between the province of Canada (Quebec and Ontario) as compared to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia meant that regionally equal Senate delegations would act as a counter-balance to the principle of representation by population governing the structure of the House of Commons. Paralleling the American model of two senators from every state regardless of each state’s population, this assured that “place” would matter along with population concentration. Also, to deal with the linguistic divide, it was agreed that Quebec and Ontario would have equal Senate delegations.

It is important to remember that the federal government role we have today was created by the provinces and not the other way around. This was not some slapdash last-minute compromise. In particular, debate regarding the Senate and its purposes, structure and appointment took up more time than debate on any other issue, including the very division of powers between Ottawa and the provinces. We need to understand the resulting embrace of balance and compromise in the design of our bicameral legislative structure as we devise Senate reforms. Not only must such reforms be constitutionally sound, but they must also reflect our larger culture of representative and pluralist democracy.

Hence the validity and historical fidelity of the recent Supreme Court decision that the federal government would need substantial provincial consent before introducing elections or term limits on the Senate, with absolute unanimity required in any move to abolish the chamber. Conservatives in particular were deeply disappointed in this decision. This is somewhat ironic given that they were the ones who were most critical of any court seeking to reinterpret historical intent in new rulings that created new law. For better or worse, the court’s decision reflected precisely what the Fathers of Confederation had actually designed.

Hugh Segal was appointed to the Senate in 2005 by Prime Minister Paul Martin, and sat as a member of the Conservative caucus. He is a former associate cabinet secretary in Ontario for federal/provincial relations and chaired the foreign affairs and anti-terrorism committees of the Senate during his tenure. He was elected the fifth master of Massey College in December 2013 where he serves today.
of every new parliament so that for the life of that parliament it voluntarily relinquishes its ability to defeat any bill and limits its power to a suspensive delay of some maximum duration, say six months. This would be within the Constitution while ensuring that the Senate would be positioned to play a constructive legislative role. If the prime minister, to his credit, is ceasing and desisting from purely partisan appointments, it is not unreasonable to expect the Senate to relinquish, voluntarily for the life of a parliament, its more excessive, as in anti-democratic, powers.

Alone among the federal party leaders in the October election, Justin Trudeau spoke of Senate reform within the Constitution. Stephen Harper advocated simply not filling vacancies until the provinces acquiesced to the constitutional consensus formula that the Supreme Court ruled would be required: seven provinces equal to 50 percent of the population, plus the House of Commons. And Senator Yves Robert Mulcair’s plan of gathering up unanimous provincial consent for abolition, while idealistic and compelling, had very little chance of ever happening. I should mention that when I served in the Senate, I brought forward motions for a national referendum on abolition or reform so that Canadians in every province could express their preference before the first ministers tried to cobble together an agreement on reform or abolition. Colleagues on both sides of the chamber used antiquated rules to adjourn this proposal until its death when parliament prorogued.

Trudeau’s first move, that of cutting the Liberal Party of the House of Commons away from the Liberal senators in the upper chamber, was a serious, if not risky, sign of good faith on the issue of a more independent Senate. Further steps are possible. The Liberal government’s proposal of appointing a group of outstanding Canadians who would vet nominees has democratic legitimacy based on the recent election result. If new senators could come from the full dimension of Canadian civil society, including the arts, labour, business, the volunteer sector, agriculture, education and the broad reach of Canada’s different provinces, territories, localities, apathies, and faith and cultural communities, that would be a good thing. But it requires a nonpartisan effort at recruitment and engagement. Encouraging these communities to nominate people for consideration makes sense if a rich mix of candidates is to be available for vetting and for consideration by the prime minister.

So-called cross benchers chosen in this new way would become, within a decade or so, the new plurality in the Senate, reducing opportunity for partisan excess and bringing an “all the best talents” approach to the chamber’s operations. Moreover, the notion of balance and the need to counterintuitively the House of Commons representation by population dating back to Confederation would be respected if not enhanced. In combination with a suspensive veto, this measure would ensure that Canadians, represented via the House of Commons, would always prevail, as it should, within the constraints of the law and the Constitution. Not only are both these measures within the realm of possibility during Trudeau’s years as prime minister, but if a parliamentary committee develops an alternative to the wildly distorting first-past-the-post electoral system and puts this to Canadians in a referendum, then the Trudeau administration would have engaged in the most ambitious democratic reform of any Canadian government in history.

Recent Supreme Court decisions and a core respect for the legitimate role of democratic political parties suggest some important procedural caveats. The call for a nomination process and the list of potential nominees vetted according to competence and probity can only culminate in a list of people from which the prime minister would choose before he or she sends an “instrument of advice” to the governor general for appointment. After all, one can become prime minister only by being chosen by a party that has a plurality, that motions I made on this issue during my time in the Senate, while having some bipartisan support, were adjourned to death until prorogation by colleagues on both sides.

The Constitution mandates that the Senate exists. The Supreme Court, following the provisions of the Constitution, has ruled that its abolition or reform must clear a high bar of provincial consensus or unanimity—either of which is realistically unattainable in our lifetimes, if ever. The alleged extravaganzas in the Senate relate in some way to the role of its members, to partisan practice and to the provenance of potential appointees.

Rules were vague and unclear because that was the framework that produced the most freedom for partisan activity—an activity that the current prime minister has undertaken to end. All stem from the excesses and distortions of another era that have not been modernized or changed. In dealing with them now, we have an opportunity to produce a streamlined and coherent upper chamber. Canadians have every right to a bicameral parliament that reflects the confederal balance and compromises that made the idea of Canada a reality—one that manifests the many talents and pluralist nature of our society. Achieving it will require a careful sense of legislative prudence and inquiry.

History will treat Stephen Harper’s desire for electoral reform in the Senate, as well as his support of a nine-year single-elected term, with the respect that a democratic reform merits, even if the chances of actually implementing his reforms were always minimal. Mulcair’s position on abolition, consistent with the populist leanings of every CCF and NDP leader since time immemorial, also deserves respect. It is to our new prime minister’s credit that in dealing with Senate reform he has taken a different approach, respecting both core realities and constitutional constraints. This approach is a reasonable, coherent and responsible way to proceed, for which Trudeau now has a strong electoral mandate. Those in the Senate, who dutifully thought that their most important self-definition began with partisan distinction, have received a clear message that the world has changed. And, therefore, so too has the pervasive culture, a point to which the new prime minister should stick. The sooner he does so, the more legislatively inclusive and expansive Canadian democracy will be.

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Are bad mayors the result of electorates gone mad, or are they actually a feature of our system of governance?

Slayton is a keen and compassionate observer. It is a pity, then, that he interviews only three of the eleven “bad” Canadian mayors he features. In the remaining chapters, he uses media reports to offer brief synopses of their majorities. For analysis, he leans heavily on quotes from contemporary newspaper columns, and a few present-day columnist interviews and some personal anecdotes. This is troublesome: if Toronto’s canonical bad-mayor experience teaches us anything, it is that the media establishment can become totally detached from public sentiment.

It is not completely clear that Canada really is suffering from an epidemic of bad mayors; Slayton himself highlights the virtues of Western Canada’s municipal darlings, Calgary’s Naheed Nenshi, Edmonton’s Don Iveson and Vancouver’s Gregor Robertson. Other “bad” mayors’ qualifications for the title are harder to discern. Sam Katz of Winnipeg had a rocky road, but did he truly go bad? And Slayton holds a particular animus for Hazel McCallion of Mississauga, less for her brushes with conflict-of-interest law, and more for having built her city into a giant suburb. The problem here is that more or less every mayor on the continent was busy doing the exact same thing in the last century; Hazel is unique only in that she was around to be berated for it for so long.

But let’s look again at Slayton’s broader contention, that we can chalk Canada’s dodgy mayoral stock up to the constraints of the job. He is not wrong about the plight of cities, and he offers some sharp analysis about the disincentives that keep the status quo in place. But if a lack of formal power was really attracting the wrong sort of politician, one might reason that offices with more power would conversely be attracting the right sort.

I might have been more inclined to buy this if Stephen Harper’s former parliamentary secretary was not last seen getting perp-walked out the back of a Peterborough courthouse. Or if his closest advisors were not spending quality time in front of a jury at the trial of one of his hand-picked senators. Cretins and two-penny demagogues circulate freely between city councils and higher levels of government. If you want less corruption, then the answer is not to give individuals more power.

Given the right conditions, any elected office is susceptible to an attack of acute populism. Rob Ford did not come about because of a weak mayor system, or because there were not high-profile serious politicians who also wanted the job; he came about because he was the right character at the right time for the civic mood, which in 2010 was leaning toward “burn everything down.”

Here’s a thought: if we want to improve the quality of mayors, we should seek to improve the quality of the municipal councils that they are frequently drawn from. All too often, the composition of big-city councils is driven by incumbency over merit, and the councils attract a mix of bright sparks and dull implements. The ambitious ones move on, but the weak ones, rising to their feet upon year upon year to deliver braying, ratepayer-pleasing odes to received wisdom, become entrenched.

Better accountability—as Slayton suggests—and less incumbency would help here. Both are hard, because provincial governments tend to enact legislation that opens the door to these things, but then leaves the municipalities themselves to implement them. Toronto’s city council, for instance, recently backed away from the hard-fought idea of ranked ballots, which make it hard for divisive, weak candidates to win by splitting the vote.

Municipal governance is a fascinating and unique construct. Unlike higher levels of government, which are responsible for large swaths of territory bounded by abstract borders or, worse, some idea of a nation, cities are down-to-earth things. Municipal government is the most concrete level of government, literally—it involves pouring a lot of the stuff. Small wonder that mayors keep getting entangled in real estate and construction contract affairs.

And if, like Slayton, we want to draw a common thread through what we have seen in Canada’s cities, this might be a good starting point. What unites the mayors of Canada, good and bad? They are tied to their land. A good mayor navigates the interlocking territories of his or her city, and the eddies and currents of money and identity that play them off against each other. A bad mayor becomes servant to them.

Politicians themselves will always be a mixed bag, a heterogeneous assortment of the ambitious and the self-interested, the idealistic and the idealess, the gold-hearted and the sold-out. They will continue to be so for as long as public office is open to the public. Centuries of civil service reform have not transformed politicians into model administrators. Instead, they have made the municipalities they steer more resilient when something goes sideways at the top. Slayton is right: We should make it harder for mayors to go bad, and easier for the good ones to effect change. But let’s not fool ourselves into thinking that structural change will attract better candidates. Public office will continue to attract the people who see themselves fit for that life. And in a democracy, nothing is going save voters from themselves. Isn’t that the point?

Ivor Tossell was a columnist for The Globe and Mail and Maclean’s during the Rob Ford mayoralty. He currently works for BuzzFeed in New York.

Could the office of mayor be hardwired for failure?

Kooks and Cretins

IVOR TOSSELL

Mayors Gone Bad
Philip Slayton
Viking
277 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9780670068302

In the last few years, Canadian mayors have failed in such weird and varied ways that they seem like characters in an Edward Gorey montage. There was Peter Kelly of Halifax, who left his post after botching (of all things) the execution of an elderly friend’s will. And Susan Fennell of Brampton, turfed after going on a series of delusional junkets at her taxpayers’ expense. And there were assorted mayors of Montreal and Laval, tied a bit too closely with contracting and real estate interests, who kept getting cycled into office by voters and out again by the police. Then there was Rob Ford of Toronto, who became well known for being Rob Ford of Toronto.

But are bad mayors the result of electorates gone mad, or are they actually a feature of our system of governance? In Mayors Gone Bad, a survey of Canadian mayors who turned out to be the opposite of good, Phillip Slayton tries to make the case that the recent run of erratic mayors that has beset Canada’s biggest cities is less an electoral issue than that the recent run of erratic mayors that has beset Canada’s biggest cities is less an electoral issue than it is a legal one. Canada’s weak mayor system, he argues, essentially selects for losers.

Canadian mayors have little executive power, and even if they can herd their fellow councillors into agreement, cities are sharply curtailed in their ability to raise revenues to build things and deliver services. “In this world of legal and financial impotence, that we can chalk Canada’s dodgy mayoral stock up to the constraints of the job. He is not wrong about the plight of cities, and he offers some sharp analysis about the disincentives that keep the status quo in place. But if a lack of formal power was really attracting the wrong sort of politician, one might reason that offices with more power would conversely be attracting the right sort.

I might have been more inclined to buy this if Stephen Harper’s former parliamentary secretary was not last seen getting perp-walked out the back of a Peterborough courthouse. Or if his closest advisors were not spending quality time in front of a jury at the trial of one of his hand-picked senators. Cretins and two-penny demagogues circulate freely between city councils and higher levels of government. If you want less corruption, then the answer is not to give individuals more power.

Given the right conditions, any elected office is susceptible to an attack of acute populism. Rob Ford did not come about because of a weak mayor system, or because there were not high-profile serious politicians who also wanted the job; he came about because he was the right character at the
Portrait of a Young Buck

Rapper Rich Terfry serves up a fantastical memoir of his early years.

STUART THOMSON

Wicked and Weird: The Amazing Tales of Buck 65
Rich Terfry
Doubleday Canada
230 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9780385679775

T AELEVYEARSAGAIACRAMPHALIFAX club, the Canadian rapper Buck 65, aka Rich Terfry, etched a memory into my brain. Playing a hometown show to release his album Talkin' Honky Blues, he brought a full band, some matching coveralls from Mark’s Work Wearhouse and hours of sweaty energy.

The place was sweltering and the big, oscillating fans at the back did nothing to cool us down. After the first couple of songs, Terfry wiped his brow and said, “We’re sweating to the oldies tonight, huh?”

It was a line that would have been cheesy coming from anyone else, but somehow, in the gruff, Tom Waits–style drawl he had recently affected, it sounded perfect.

He paused the show to demonstrate his Mick Jagger impression and it brought the house down.

For years afterward I would perform the gag for my friends and, on one unfortunate, drunken occasion, for a waitress at Maxwell’s Plum pub in Halifax.

After that concert I considered Terfry the best showman I had ever seen. He had a dashing confidence that allowed him to wrap the audience around his finger.

Years later Terfry managed to burst the bubble for me when he plaintively asked his Facebook fans if he was too “over the top” on stage.

There were always hints that the showman we saw that night was a character Terfry was playing. Years after, I found myself wondering again and again if his decision to inject the book with fiction was simply to avoid his negative memories. Rather than face up to the bad stuff, he constructs a new version of it. Or it could be, as one of Terfry’s first loves tells him, because “authenticity is bullshit.”

These paper-thin passages add up, though. Women enter Terfry’s life as rich, complex characters and leave it with a sentence or two. The supreme low point of his career, a botched interview with Kerrang! magazine, found Terfry flinging into hip hop, decrying the “muscularity” of rappers, and challenging the interviewer to name someone in hip hop who could read music.

Terfry breezily describes himself as a shucks-ing (his way through a rabid journalist’s hostile questions, keeping his composure and providing only the bare minimum for a hit piece. He refers to it as “Clank” magazine.

Terfry’s explanation of what happened, in subsequent interviews, bears little resemblance to how he describes it in the book.

Weaving the whole story together is an obviously fictional account of a two-month detention in a Russian prison. The interludes are rife with descriptions of the horrible food and the pain of lying on hard concrete but provide little in the way of introspection.

From a man whose imagination dwarfs his memory, it is a disappointing effort and encapsulates much of the trouble with Wicked and Weird. The book’s truthful parts are not terribly interesting and the fictional parts betray a lack of imagination. It is a surprising conclusion to reach about a book written by one of Canada’s most vivid songwriters and who, until recently, I thought was one of its most interesting people.

Early on, young Buck achieves some minor notoriety for his baseball abilities during the town fair, when he is able to trigger the dunk tank at will with a sure-fire fastball. When he dunks a pretty girl named Sherry—wearing a white t-shirt and not much else—he collects dozens of high fives but has to wrestle with the sight of the town’s men losing their dignity over the spectacle.

Sherry, who had been cutting Buck’s hair since he was young, is a kindred spirit. Someone with big ideas beyond the squalid small town she is confined in. During his next haircut, he apologizes for dunking her.

“You’re not mad?”

“Mad? At you? Oh my goodness, no. Why would I be mad?”

“Well, I guess just ‘cause if it weren’t for me, all those men wouldn’t have looked at your boobies.”

It is like a rural Nova Scotian version of Leave It to Beaver.

Terfry can be a clumsy writer at times, but he does have his moments. On the topic of baseball he writes ecstatically about the sport and ruefully about his own missed opportunities to play in the big leagues. Every new encounter with a beautiful woman leads him to rapturous, florid language that flirts with excess, but never quite gets there.

The flaws are nothing we have not seen before in memoirs, and it is an undeniably charming effort, but Terfry veers in one artistic direction that reduces a reader’s ability to forgive the book’s flimsiness: he is making a bunch of it up.

The book carries a warning from the author that “his imagination is more reliable than [his] memory” and segments of it are clearly fiction. It is, after all, a literary memoir so that is no sin in and of itself, but the book feels brief, like a summary from a man in a hurry. Terfry’s childhood, which he wants us to believe was troubled and fraught with peril, is full of goofy hijinks. He loses his prized baseball mitt and enragés his father, he throws snowballs at cars, he husts for older girls, he heroically wins an egg toss.

The truly painful stuff, such as his relationship with his mother when he was a child, which seems trouble, is barely examined. A friend commits suicide and gets a paragraph or two of attention.

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Starchitect Saga
Two new accounts chart the emergence of Frank Gehry’s genius.

MARTIN LAFLAMME

Building Art:
The Life and Work of Frank Gehry
Paul Goldberger
Knopf
513 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9780374779053

Frank Gehry
Aurélien Lemonier and Frédéric Migayrou, editors
Prestel Publishing
256 pages, hardcover
ISBN 9783791354422

It was a disaster. At the very least, it was turning into a highly embarrassing professional failure. By the late 1990s, close to a decade after Frank Gehry had been given the commission to build the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, the project that would transform the downtown core of the city and become one of the new century’s most iconic constructions was in serious trouble. The budget had ballooned out of proportion. The relationship between Gehry and another firm involved had disintegrated. Dissonance among the county and city governments, the Disney family, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and a bevy of critics persisted. The project had gone completely off the rails.

Ironically, what helped break the impasse was another Gehry project, which was becoming one of his most celebrated achievements: the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. It opened in 1997, on schedule and slightly under budget, to nearly universal acclaim. Its impact on the community was even more noteworthy: it put the dying industrial town in the Basque country on the map and became a textbook case of how architecture, well planned and well designed, could revitalize a whole city—four million people visited in the three years after the museum opened, almost three times as many as hoped for. If Bilbao, a small city of fewer than half a million people in the middle of nowhere could commission and bring to completion a building by Frank Gehry, how was it that world-class Los Angeles, his adopted home, was unable to?

It did not take long for the Bilbao effect to be felt in Southern California. A movement developed to breathe new life into the project. Construction resumed in 1999 and the concert hall was completed in 2003. When it was finally unveiled, a critic from the New York Times called it “the most gallant building you are ever likely to see” before adding, in a barely exaggerated flight of hyperbole, that it had brought him to “aesthetic ecstasy.” It had taken 16 years to build.

Today, Frank Gehry is widely recognized as one of the most important architects to have emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, but his rise was not without controversy. For a long time, he was regarded as an eccentric outsider who, in the words of biographer Paul Goldberger, “produced buildings that provided spectacle more than architectural rigor.” Doubters were partly silenced in 1989, when Gehry won the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the most prestigious award of his profession, thus affirming his status as one of the most original voices in contemporary architecture. Now, a quarter of a century later, his entire career is being celebrated by a wide-ranging exhibit of his work, which was first presented at the Musée Pompidou in Paris last year and is now on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art until March 20, 2016. The show, perhaps the most comprehensive of the architect’s career, presents hundreds of drawings and pictures, and more than 60 models that, together, provide a broad overview of Gehry’s evolution as an architect, from the early 1960s until today. It is accompanied by a beautifully illustrated catalogue, edited by Aurélien Lemonier and Frédéric Migayrou, which constitutes an excellent and highly recommended companion to the biography by Goldberger, the first full-fledged, in-depth study of Gehry’s life and career.

Frank Owen Goldberg was born in Toronto in 1929, in a Jewish family of mixed Polish and American parentage—his first wife, despite being of the same faith, would later insist that he change his surname to the more gentile-sounding Gehry. His father, Irving, was a difficult and unstable man, with a poor education, who struggled all his life to support his family. He also had a tense relationship with his son—Gehry grew into a chubbly adolescent and his father often complained that he was becoming fat. At times, Irving could even get physically abusive. By comparison, Goldberger explains, his mother was a more positive force, one who strongly believed in the importance of education and who took her son “to a museum or cultural event as often as she could.” It is probably fair to say that Gehry would not have considered architecture as a profession without the life-long passion for the arts that his mother instilled in him early on.

Gehry’s maternal grandparents doted on him and were another important influence in his early years. His grandfather ran a hardware store, not far from his home on Beverley Street, near today’s Art Gallery of Ontario, and Gehry would spend many hours there, in the “wonderland full of screws and bolts and hammers and nails and every kind of household gadget.” With his grandmother, he erected buildings and freeways out of wood scraps on her kitchen floor. When Gehry began thinking about becoming an architect, Goldberger explains,
he often reminisced about those times, “the most fun I ever had in my life.”

When Gehry was eight, his father moved the family to Timmins, where he distributed and repaired slot machines. This was not a particularly easy period for Gehry, and the five years he spent in northern Ontario at times he felt like a long exile. But it would be significant nonetheless for this was where he developed a lifelong passion for hockey. Gehry played for decades, well into his sixties, and still regularly attends NHL games in Los Angeles. Far less positive was the anti-Semitism he encountered at school for the first time, but he found solace in friendships with local French Canadians, who often sided with him. As a result, he retains a “big soft spot” for them to this day.

In 1947, when Gehry was 18, the family moved to Los Angeles, where they had relatives. By then, Irving’s mental and physical health was deteriorating—he had suffered a heart attack the year before, after getting into fistfights with his son—and doctors suggested moving to warmer climes as they feared Irving “could not survive another Toronto winter.”

At this point, the odds that Frank Gehry would become a successful architect were remote. His family had settled into a dingy apartment infested with bugs and cockroaches, not far from the city’s downtown core. They had no money, and there was no way they would be able to pay for further education, so Gehry got himself a job. In time, he enrolled in free night classes at a local college and later moved, part time at first, to the University of Southern California where, aged 21, after toying with the idea of becoming a ceramicist, he finally settled on architecture.

After gaining experience elsewhere, Gehry decided in the early 1960s to establish his own architectural practice. But in those days, pace Hollywood stars and producers, Los Angeles was still a cultural backwater. Artists were few, art museums fewer and galleries showing contemporary works almost non-existent. There was little appetite or market for daring architecture. The city was a very conservative and closed community.

Gehry had always had a curious and inquisitive mind, and his interests went much beyond architecture, so he naturally gravitated toward the city’s tiny but increasingly dynamic art scene. He became friends with Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, Ed Kienholz and John Altoon, many of them pioneers of installation art and assemblage, people who found inspiration in the streets, dumps and abandoned lots of Los Angeles. Goldberger explains that Gehry felt comfortable with these artists in a way he did not with other architects, and, to the growing annoyance of his first wife, spent much of his free time with them.“listening with a careful ear, looking at everything everyone else was doing, and learning what he could from it.” It would pay off handsomely.

Gehry’s friends, but also respected artists elsewhere such as Robert Rauschenberg, had begun using found objects in their work. And thus, Goldberger writes, the architect felt entirely legitimized “about using cheap ordinary materials in serious architecture.” He started to rely extensively on rough-heewn beams, corrugated iron and, somewhat notoriously, chain-link fencing. The exhibition catalogue draws from extensive archival material to show how such components, along with Gehry’s evolving ideas about architecture, were brought to bear in the 1970s, particularly toward the end of the decade, when the architect bought a new home for his family, an old pink-coloured bungalow in Santa Monica. He kept most of the original structure intact, but expanded the house outwards, adding a shell of industrial materials. Some walls inside were stripped, others were left showing unpainted plywood. His own dwelling became a statement for his architectural vision. Gehry could not be accused of merely talking the avant-garde talk. He walked the walk too.

By the early 1990s, Gehry had obviously become an important architect, but it was unclear how deep an imprint he would leave on his profession. The advent of computer-aided design changed everything. By then, he had started experimenting with curves and fluid forms, inspired by the sculptural folds of Bernini and other renaissance artists, and CAD software allowed him to give free rein to his imagination. The Guggenheim in Bilbao, the epitome of the new Gehry aesthetics, was the first project to be almost entirely planned with such support—an informative essay in the catalogue explains how Gehry harnessed technology to support his artistic vision. As the models on show at the LACMA demonstrate, very few of Gehry’s subsequent works would have been possible without CAD. And all would have been prohibitively expensive to build.

Interestingly, Gehry himself does not use computers very much. For him, they are tools of “execution, not creation.” As he did as a boy on his grandparents’ kitchen floor, he always starts a project playing with blocks, taping plastic sheets, draping parts with cardboard paper of different colours—Sketches of Frank Gehry, a 2005 documentary by Sydney Pollack, contains fascinating scenes shedding light on Gehry’s creative approach. The architect further moves things around until he is satisfied with form and function. Only then does computer modelling come into play to transform his vision into actionable engineering plans. Had Gehry been born half a century earlier, his legacy would no doubt have been very different.

Gehry has built very little in Canada and thus information in Goldberger’s biography about his work in his home country is scant—indeed, the catalogue contains nothing at all. In fact, the only construction he realized here that still stands is the 2008 renovation of the Art Gallery of Ontario, a very successful project but a rather minor one in his overall oeuvre. This could change mightily, however, if Gehry is allowed to express his full creativity in his ongoing collaboration with local developer David Mirvish. At long last, the Bilbao effect might soon be felt in Toronto.

In clear and straightforward prose, albeit in flat terms, Goldberger thoroughly chronicles the professional ascent of the architect who arguably developed the most arresting visual signature of his age. Yet, the man behind the vision never quite fully comes out of the shadow. Gehry was a passionate workaholic and prescient creator, but he also spent decades in therapy struggling with feelings of guilt, angst and anguish, the consequence of his unsettled upbringing, the bitter failure of his first marriage, the resentment of the two daughters born of that relationship, and much else. Goldberger makes the young Gehry come alive, but the portrait he draws of the mature architect gets sketchier as the years progress. The attention is squarely on the architecture. This is fine as far as it goes, but it leaves the reader hungry for slightly more—Gehry was in New York City on 9/11 and yet Goldberger says essentially nothing on his reaction and very little on his politics in general. A full biography of Frank Gehry was long overdue, but Goldberger’s would have had a deeper impact had he struck a finer balance between the work and life of the "most famous architect in the world."
Enter the Dragon
Edited by Domenico Lombardi and Hongying Wang

Enter the Dragon: China in the International Financial System brings together experts from both inside and outside of China to explore issues regarding the internationalization of the renminbi (RMB). This volume tackles questions surrounding the process being used to attempt to achieve internationalization of the RMB, the broader issues related to the country’s financial integration with the rest of the world, and issues concerning China’s role in global financial governance.

Elusive Pursuits
Edited by Fen Osler Hampson and Stephen M. Saideman

Elusive Pursuits: Lessons from Canada’s Interventions Abroad is the 29th volume of the influential Canada Among Nations series. This book examines Canada’s role in foreign military and security missions, and its tendency to intervene under the auspices of international institutions. Canada is not just among nations in these efforts, but in nations on a regular basis.

Mutual Security in the Asia-Pacific
Edited by Kang Choi, James Manicom and Simon Palamar

Myriad challenges to regional stability and security threaten East Asia’s burgeoning growth and prosperity. Mutual Security in the Asia-Pacific: Roles for Australia, Canada and South Korea addresses the economic and security challenges that loom in the region and the role that these three countries can play to ensure a stable, predictable political environment.

Managing Conflict in a World Adrift
Edited by Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall

In Managing Conflict in a World Adrift, over 40 of the world’s leading international affairs analysts examine the relationship between political, social and economic change, and the outbreak and spread of conflict.

Governance and Innovation in Africa
Edited by Robert I. Rotberg

Courageous, intelligent, bold and principled political leadership is required if South Africa is going to build upon Mandela’s legacy, according to the expert authors in Governance and Innovation in Africa.

On Governance
Edited by Robert I. Rotberg

On Governance unpacks the complex global dimensions of governance, and proposes a new theory premised on the belief that strengthened, innovative national and global governance enables positive outcomes for people everywhere.

Crisis and Reform
Edited by Rohinton Medhora and Dane Rowlands

The 28th volume in the influential Canada Among Nations book series, Crisis and Reform examines the global financial crisis through Canada’s historical and current role in the international financial system.

Organized Chaos
Edited by Mark Raymond and Gordon Smith

In Organized Chaos, leading experts address a range of pressing challenges, including cyber security issues and civil society hacktivism by groups such as Anonymous, and consider the international political implications of some of the most likely Internet governance scenarios in the 2015–2020 time frame.
Cross-Border Cowboy

Owen Wister’s The Virginian may have a real-life Canadian connection.

MICHAEL DAWE

The Cowboy Legend: Owen Wister’s Virginian and the Canadian-American Ranching Frontier

JOHN JENNINGS
University of Calgary Press
416 pages, softcover
ISBN 9781552385289

One of the enduring iconic images of the American and Canadian wests is the frontier cowboy. He is independent, fearless, hardy and good-hearted, particularly with women and animals, but willing to indulge in violence to maintain a largely self-determined natural justice. To many, the frontier cowboy is the epitome of true democracy—unencumbered by the perceived effeminacy and social orders of the eastern American and European cultures—who is willing to vigorously defend the free exercise of individualism.

This image ties into other deeply held beliefs, particularly in the United States. He is free to exercise self-defence and defend democracy through the unfettered use of guns. He is also a willing participant in vigilantism to overcome incomprehensible laws and corrupt governments that impede natural justice.

Of course, life is never as black and white as this. Vigilantism is often an expression of bigotry and the violent oppression by majorities against minorities. Unfettered gun ownership leads to tragic levels of violence. Nevertheless, the frontier cowboy of folklore rarely has to face such a lack of moral certainty, if one can use such a mild description of these brutal events.

A benchmark in the creation of the iconic frontier cowboy was Owen Wister’s book, The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains. Published in 1902, it has been reproduced in a half dozen movies and a long-running TV series.

This popularity may reflect the fact that Wister witnessed first-hand the cowboy culture of Wyoming in the 1880s and ’90s. Hence, his accounts were more realistic than dime-store novels. Wister also addressed the complex elements of cowboy culture.

His protagonist hailed from Virginia, not the raw Texan frontier. He struggled with the consequences of vigilante justice, when forced to hang his best friend for cattle rustling. The love of his life is revolved by his use of violence and breaks away. He must win her back, by proving that his motives were actually “moral and just.”

With larger than life literary figures, there is generally a strong desire by readers to believe that they were inspired by real-life individuals. Hence, it should come as no surprise that there is much speculation as to who the mysterious Virginian was based on. Wister rarely gave any hint, if indeed there had been such person.

A noted retired history professor at Trent University, Jennings proposes that the Virginian can be traced back to a real-life individual, Everett (Ebb) Johnson, whom he had known as a young boy in southern Alberta. Jennings developed a youthful fascination with the stories he was told by Johnson and was further captivated by the stories in the Glenbow Archives that had been recorded by Jean Johnson, Ebb’s daughter-in-law. Thus, The Cowboy Legend is based on something more concrete than half-remembered stories from Jennings’s youth.

Jennings makes many convincing points as he tests his thesis that Johnson was either the Virginian, or else a significant model for the character. Johnson was born in Virginia, the descendent of a well-connected southern family. He lived and worked in Wyoming as a cowboy. He had extensive contact with Wister during the latter’s time in Wyoming. He also personally knew such famed figures as Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp and Butch Cassidy. The best man at his wedding was Henry Longabaugh, the Sundance Kid.

In the late 1880s, Johnson moved to southern Alberta. Consequently, his life story provides a first-hand link between the American frontier cowboys and those in the Canadian West. Jennings spends a great deal of time on a comparison between the two. He explores why the Canadian frontier was marked by strict law and order, with an absence of the gun-toting violence of the United States. He shows how the same individual could live a very different life north of the border than south of it.

There are times when Jennings overreaches. When talking about the role of the North West Mounted Police in the development of the Canadian West, he refers to a “police-state”—a far-fetched claim, given the usual connotations of the term. He claims a wonderful relationship between the NWMP and the First Nations. The police often did well, particularly in helping to prevent the participation of southern Alberta’s First Nations in the North West (Riel) Rebellion. Nevertheless, there is still much to criticize in their conduct toward the First Nations.

Jennings makes scant mention of the Riel Rebellion of 1885, even though it was a remarkable exception to the “peaceable” Canadian West. However, one can justify the omission since the cowboys of southern Alberta had little involvement in the conflict.

Jennings is much stronger in his arguments that a key difference between the frontiers was the legal system, particularly with respect to land ownership and grazing rights. Those rules were put into place in Western Canada largely before settlement, and not afterward. Hence, there was not the necessity for the early frontiersmen to create their own laws, as was the case in the United States.

The main argument that Johnson was the real-life model for the Virginian is now impossible to prove. Wister purposely left any identity as a mystery. There were apparently letters to Johnson from Wister and a specially autographed copy of the famous book. However, these were destroyed in a fire.

More importantly, as Jennings freely admits, while Wister kept extensive journals of his time in Wyoming, there is no mention of Johnson in them. One could reasonably conclude that if an individual made a major impression on Wister, then at least some sort of contemporary record of their relationship would exist.

Nevertheless, Jennings does make a strong argument, albeit with totally circumstantial evidence, that Johnson was the Virginian, or at least a significant influence on the way that Wister portrayed the character. Moreover, he provides a well-researched biography of this true-to-life frontier cowboy of the American and Canadian wests. At the same time, Jennings provides a sound academic analysis of the differences between the two frontiers along with excellent insights as to why those differences developed. All this makes The Cowboy Legend a good read for both aficionados of the frontier cowboy story and for those looking for strong academic research and analysis of the early West.
Letters and Responses

RE: “ADOLPH GAMES,” BY NAOKO ASANO (NOVEMBER 2015)

I believe the statement in Naoko Asano’s review of More Than Just Games: Canada and the 1936 Olympics, by Richard Meniks and Harold Troper—likely based on a passage in the book—that “Canada was the lone nation to repeat the gesture at the Summer Games in Berlin” needs clarification. My father, Abbott Conway, who competed for Canada in the 800 metres at the 1936 Summer Olympics, left an unpublished memoir of the opening ceremonies. In it he relates the following: “I remember the meeting that we had to decide whether or not the team should give the Olympic salute at the March Past as the Nazi Party had taken it over as their salute. We decided that we should retain it and this was considered by the crowd as a sympathetic gesture by Canada to Nazi aims. Even after what happened in World War Two, I am uncertain as to whether we should have done it differently. As athletes we simply felt that politics should not be used to deprive us of a symbol of what the Olympic Games really stood for. Not to have used the salute would have been a victory for a political force that we did not support—or so it seemed.”

My father’s experience of World War Two was direct, in France at Falaise and the Leopold Canal, and from there across into Holland. The Nazi salute, like the swastika, is not in strict form the same as its ancestor versions, at least not to the discriminating eye. But since when could strict form be assured, or was the popular eye discriminating? For example, there was great hullabaloo when an old home movie of the Queen, taken in 1933 when she was seven years old, saw her giving a straight-arm salute. But which salute can’t know, but nevertheless jump joyfully to the conclusion that it was the Nazi salute. We decided that we should retain it and this was considered by the crowd as a sympathetic gesture by Canada to Nazi aims. Even after what happened in World War Two, I am uncertain as to whether we should have done it differently. As athletes we simply felt that politics should not be used to deprive us of a symbol of what the Olympic Games really stood for. Not to have used the salute would have been a victory for a political force that we did not support—or so it seemed.”

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Suppose Olympians were to start again to use the Olympic salute, getting it right—arm high, slightly off to one side, hand open and fingers together—would any sensible, informed person think they were giving the Nazi salute? And why should it not be sufficient for them to say, to anyone who accused them of Nazi sympathies or naivety, simply: “I wasn’t giving the Nazi salute; I was giving the Olympic salute.” That’s what my father and his friends on the Olympic team in 1936 said, and why should we not believe them, and respect their decision?

PAUL CONWAY
NORTHERN BRUCE PENINSULA, ONTARIO

RE: “PINK PILLS,” BY WENDY MCELROY (DECEMBER 2015)

I am disappointed and alarmed by the LRC’s decision to publish a review of my book, Big Pharma, Women, and the Labour of Love, by anti-feminist author Wendy McElroy. While I welcome critical discussion of my book, unfortunately McElroy uses this review to advance her own disturbing agenda. The review makes unfounded, bizarre criticisms of my book, beginning with the methodology. She argues I employ a “shoddy” methodology because I use qualitative (I assume as opposed to quantitative) methods. Qualitative methods are highly recognized, even mainstream methodologies by any contemporary academic standards.

She goes on to take issue with the sources I draw on in the book, almost all of which are peer-reviewed academic books and articles from top-ranking journals. At one point she highlights two completely unrelated sentences from different chapters, claiming that they contradict each other, but really demonstrating her inability to understand the theoretical arguments I make.

She also criticizes the study that forms the basis of the book for being located in Vancouver, a city she notes is notoriously wealthy. She clearly ignores my careful breakdown of the diverse socioeconomic statuses of my research participants in Chapter One.

However, the central point she makes in her review is that I advance a gender feminist perspective, a term I never once reference in the book. I have a BA, MA and PhD in women and gender studies and have taught feminist theory at the university level for the past decade. I have even written a peer-reviewed encyclopedia definition of feminism. And yet, until reading this review, I had never heard of this ideology that my book apparently exemplifies. With more digging, I learned that McElroy describes herself as an individualist feminist, a term I had similarly never heard of before.

On further research, I have learned that the individualist feminism that McElroy advances, is actually an ideology that emerged from the explicitly anti-feminist men’s rights movement. With the campaign she’s waging against gender feminism (translation: any kind of actual feminism), McElroy has dedicated her career to denying the existence of rape culture and lobbying against sexual harassment policies in universities. The individual in individualist feminism refers to the belief that rape and other acts of oppression are not systemic, arising from systems such as patriarchy, colonialism, or other. Indeed, she outright denies the validity of frequently cited rape statistics and argues that rape is the practice of a few fringe men who should be held accountable strictly as individuals.

My book is not about rape culture specifically. It is about the ways in which the sexual pharmaceutical industry falsely constructs the vast majority of women’s sexual problems as biological issues, ignoring the social, economic and political context of their sexual experiences. One part of this context, as reflected in comments by several participants in my study, is the high incidence of sexual violence they had experienced, often from an early age. They also discussed the influence of stress resulting from double-work days of paid work and child care, low self-esteem related to the media’s sexualization of only thin white bodies, a distinct lack of sex education about female sexual pleasure, and the list goes on.

McElroy does not believe that larger systems in the outside world influence experiences and behavior at the individual level. Now that I understand her point of view, I am not surprised that she didn’t like my book. In fact, I would be alarmed if she did.

McElroy is entitled to her own political views, however anti-feminist they may be. I am most disappointed in the LRC, a well-established, intellectual and, I had assumed progressive, publication for publishing these views.

THEA CACCHIONI
VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA


In our book, The Myth of the Born Criminal: Psychopathy, Neurobiology and the Creation of the Modern Degenerate, we trace the history of psychopathy from 18th-century psychiatry to contemporary neuroscience, and critically evaluate the claim that psychopathy is a neurobiological condition. We argue that the idea of born criminality, although a legitimate scientific hypothesis, tends to generate dogmatic and dubious scientific claims, such as those made by Queen’s University adjunct professor D.B. Krupp a few years ago.

The November issue of the LRC published a review of our book, authored by Krupp himself. If his decision to review a book in which he comes off badly—and his decision to not disclose a conflict of interest—was ethically agonizing, it does not show. According to Krupp, we make many absurd claims, for instance that biological causes are necessarily inborn, and that the causes of human behaviour are external to the brain. Krupp is right: these are absurd claims, and that is why they are not in the book. Krupp’s remaining objections are stylistic and definitional, including our use of David Foster Wallace—who was on the panel for The American Heritage Dictionary—to define “ethical appeal.” In his defence, Krupp knows Wallace only as a novelist. Our main arguments, the ones not imagined by Krupp and the ones to debate, do not come up in the review.

The links between 19th-century degeneration theory and modern psychopathy research are intriguing. Both searched forobservable signs ofimmorality—whether in the face or in the brain—and despite a disappointing lack of evidence both found ways remain popular. Our book examines these ways. For example, Lombroso (the “father” of degeneration theory) and his followers discredited their critics with withering and sometimes personal attacks, often by way of the press. Krupp’s defence against our critique is not part of this lineage, but his basic error is the same: a confused loyalty to scientists and to scientific theory rather than to science itself. Perhaps Krupp is right, and we will eventually find evidence that psychopathy is a real disorder (the American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization do not currently recognize it), and perhaps neuroscience will find its causes. In the meantime we should ask why so many continue to believe that psychopathy is a neurobiological
disorder. Inadvertently, D.B. Krupp has supplied part of the answer.

JARKKO JALAVA
STEPHANIE GRIFFITHS
PENTICTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA
MICHAEL MARAUN
VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

D.B. KRUPP RESPONDS:

The thrust of my review of The Myth of the Born Criminal was the book is less an earnest scientific critique than a rhetorical campaign. Remarkably, the authors take the same tack in their letter, testifying once again to the very “exaggeration and self-contradiction” I previously charged them with.

In its entirety, their book devotes but two sentences to my work: “Another set of Canadian researchers found that psychopathy actually decreased the likelihood of killing one’s kin. According to the authors, this too was an evolutionary strategy, called ‘nepotistic inhibition.’” Aside from a small technical error—my colleagues and I studied a range of violent offences, not all of which were fatal—I’m at odds to see what grievance I could possibly have with this unexceptionable passage. It is the nature of expert reviews that the reviewer is cited in the work being reviewed, as Jarkko Jalava, Stephanie Griffiths and Michael Maraun know. To take seriously their claim of a conflict of interest implies that my review would have been appreciably different had they never written those 29 words. This is nonsense. In their book, at least, the authors graciously spared me the ad hominem.

As I argued in my review, The Myth of the Born Criminal has a tenuous grip on biology. If, as they say in their letter, the authors do accept that, one, the brain is the cause of human behaviour and, two, biology does not equal inborn, their book insinuates precisely the opposite. For instance, they err on both counts when they ask whether patterns of brain activity can “make a more compelling case for the neurological causes of psychopathy,” because it fails to determine whether these “patterns are inborn or if they are caused by the environment or the choice to engage in repeated antisocial behaviours.” If we all agree the brain causes behaviour, then why the need for a more compelling case that psychopathy has a neurological cause? Why the dickering over inborn and environmental origins—let alone the ludicrous third option of choices—if each nevertheless depends on the workings of the brain? Why, that is, the endless harping on about the biological theory throughout their book? The authors are either profoundly ignorant of their subject matter or deliberately trying to mislead the reader with an alarmist, if unoriginal, red herring. I can’t decide which is more troubling.

D.B. KRUPP
DENVER, COLORADO

Erratum

In “Heal Thyself,” Marc Lewis’s review of The Brain’s Way of Healing: Remarkable Discoveries and Recoveries from the Frontiers of Neuroplasticity by Norman Doidge in the October 2015 issue of the LRC, the text should have read “this captures how low-intensity lasers reduce inflammation and scarring following brain surgery.” Neither the book nor Doidge claim that low-intensity laser therapy can be used to treat cancer.
China’s Turbulent Third Era | Gordon Chang

The history of the People’s Republic of China, according to the dominant narrative, falls into two broad sections, the tumultuous decades dominated by Mao Zedong, the founder of the “New China,” and the time of reform and opening up started by successor Deng Xiaoping. And as China rose, the West engaged the country to bring it into the international community.

Now, however, the Chinese state has passed political and economic inflection points. As a result, the third era of the People’s Republic has already begun. Gordon Chang explains how in this third era, dominated by strongman Xi Jinping, other countries are struggling to develop new approaches to deal with a China moving in deeply troubling directions.

Girl Power: The Rising Economic Potential of Women | Sally Armstrong

Despite certain headlines, the future is bright for women, globally: this year, women cast their first ballots in Saudi Arabia, and India passed legislation addressing sexual assault. At home, we achieved a federal cabinet with gender parity, and Alberta sent the highest number of women to public office in Canadian history.

Sally Armstrong details an international realization of the vast economic and financial benefits that come with bringing women to the table. She notes that this financial recognition is coupled with a gradual change in mindset: economies and states are beginning to see women as equal players, spearheaded by individuals with immense personal will; whether it is Pakistan’s Malala, who faced off against the Taliban in her fight for female education, or Kenya’s Milly who demanded her government protect her and others from sexual assault.

A week before International Women’s Day, the LRC invites Sally Armstrong to discuss where change is happening internationally, who is leading it and what continues to stand in the way of women.

Tickets are FREE for subscribers, $10 for the general public and $5 for students. Special subscription rate available at $49/year including a ticket to this event and subscriber access to future events in the series.
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