

Tops and Tales: Mountain Anecdote and Mountain Metaphor

by W.H. New

This paper on Rocky Mountain poetry and the resonance of the Great Divide begins and closes in memoir.¹ In between it reflects on mountain realities and the literary metaphors to which the realities give rise. It considers ways in which mountain images variously signify order, division, ownership, and the existence of an alternative, and ways in which they constitute the site of a different kind of working environment, an ecology of exchange and a challenge to accept a social responsibility. These reflections on the cultural function of metaphor lead into readings of particular poems and passages of prose by Sid Marty, Peter Christensen, and Jon Whyte, demonstrating how (in their several works) anecdote and metaphor serve descriptive, cultural, and ecological ends.

By referring, in the most conventional way, directly to the Rocky Mountains, I wish first to draw attention both to the North American continent's mountainous "great divide" and to the implicit import of this spatial metaphor. In the cordilleran mountain range, the continental rivers begin—it is the place where they flow from, in contrary directions to the seas. But as my subtitle suggests ("mountain anecdote and mountain metaphor") I am interested further in how we tell stories about the Rockies, how we imagine them in metaphor, and why: do they tell of division or of upheaval, of height or of headwater, bedrock or aspiration, sustenance or language—or do they tell of all the above? How does the Great Divide become narrative, in other words, and how narrative—how constructed—is the representation and the idea of the Great Divide? To illustrate, I begin with a *personal* anecdote.

The first time I crossed the Rocky Mountains, from the Kootenay Valley of British Columbia into the foothills of Alberta, I was with my uncle in an old car. I was 14. But it was not quite "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," and it certainly wasn't "On the Road." For I was one of three boys in the back seat, each of us refusing to be pig-in-the-middle, all of us complaining about lack of space, while all around us the mountains soared to unimaginable heights, canyons dropped to unimaginable depths,

and distance opened up vistas. There, if I was willing to see, lay the magnificent Valley of the Ten Peaks, there rippled the blue-green rainbows of Moraine Lake—and I was preoccupied with minutiae of my own making. This was a time when Castle Mountain, near Banff, had temporarily been renamed Mt. Eisenhower, and young nationalist that I was, I complained—but I think it was on aesthetic grounds. To me the mountain *looked like* a castle, and that was that. Had I realized that the word “eisenhauer” meant “iron tusk,” I might have been a little less intransigent. But as I was also unaware that the Mohawk word *canadaghi*—which has been translated to mean “castle” and has been hypothesized as one of the root sources for the word “Canada”—I was perhaps being more political than I knew.

In any event, I did look out the window some of the time, and did get out of the car and walk. In fact, going into the Rockies, crossing the Great Divide, took me out of my world and into another. I could not have told you at the time what that other world was: I knew it differed from city sidewalk, chicken run, hayloft, and orchard, and it wasn't “school” with its red map of Empire-where-the-sun-never-set. It had something to do not with place but with promise.

The second time I crossed the mountains was by train. This time I was seventeen, and leaving home alone for the first time, having won a Rotary Club-sponsored trip (along with several score of students from other parts of the country) to visit Ottawa for a week, see Parliament in action, meet Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent and my local MP, have my picture taken, and come back home and report on democracy. The train trip itself took three or four days. I was exhilarated beyond belief—though less impressed by the antics of government than a young idealist wanted to be. One non-governmental event, however, stands out in memory as strongly as any other from that occasion: being from Vancouver, a place that Ottawa then considered “far away,” I was picked as one of several cross-Canada young citizens for an individual interview on local radio. This, too, was a first, and I regret to say I was neither suave nor helpful. However articulate on other occasions, I reverted to monosyllabic 17-year-old defensiveness when the adult interviewer wanted to know about *me*. In what I now recognize as an opening gambit, she said “I hear you came through the Rockies.” “Yes,” I replied, thinking “How else would I get here?” After a brief pause she said, “And I hear that yesterday you were taken for a visit to the top of the Peace Tower here in Ottawa.” “Yes,” I said. Another pause. “Well,” she said, the desperation mounting, “How does the view from the top of the Peace Tower compare with the view from the top of the Rock-

ies?” Alas, her desperation was no match for mine: “You don’t see as many mountains,” I said, and the interview, blessed relief, was soon over.²

It is, of course, only in retrospect that I see how this trip extended the promise of a world I could inhabit beyond the Great Divide. I can also see now why the inadequate radio exchange once rankled, and why it subsequently became for me a metonym—of the promise of cultural connection and (for all the good intentions) the politics of cultural disengagement. Tied up in the non-conversation were competing sets of attitudes and assumptions. I was young and coastal, accustomed to the irregular heights and sheer depths of a mountainous granite landscape; the Ottawa interviewer had—perhaps—been educated to see herself as Central, her rolling landscape as the norm, the coasts as distant and marginal, and mountains—the Gatineau Hills as her only comparative measure—as structures not unlike the Gothic pile of the Peace Tower, to whose tops, apparently, trains as well as people could readily ascend. Had one of us been more articulate and both of us more informed, we could have talked about the engineering feat of building a spiral tunnel through the Rogers Pass, or about climbing axes and pitons and the physical travails of scaling named and unnamed peaks, or about the politics of distance and the relativity of judgment implied by such words as “near” and “far,” “centre” and “margin,” “great” and “divide.” We could have told anecdotes.

Or we could have talked about metaphor. Mountains as metaphors. As in John Donne’s “Satire III, on Religion,” for example, where the landscape is gendered and the goal absolute: “On a huge hill, / Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will / Reach her, about must, and about must go, / And what the hill’s suddenness resist, win so...” (257). Less firm in conviction, if no less absolute in result, are the political statements about bureaucratic futility that we all learned as children’s rhymes at a grandparent’s knee: “The bear went over the mountain, and all that he could see was the other side of the mountain,” or, “The Grand Old Duke of York, he had ten thousand men, he marched them up to the top of the hill and marched them down again.”³ Conventional anecdote and metaphor, that is, invite us to see the grass greener on the Other Side—it’s the language of spiritual revelation as well as economic desire. (Some readers might recall the New Christy Minstrels hit song of 1963: “Green, green, it’s green they say / on the far side of the hill, / Green, green, I’m goin’ away / To where the grass is greener still.”) But it’s also the language of expressible freedom and imperial acquisition. Freedom from where we are; acquisition of where we would like to be. *Do we see the greener world? Do we want it? Can we have it? Can we get it?* This sequence of questions represents a whole

range of possible connections with a future we characteristically define as absolute but usually experience as inchoate. Mountains shape for some of us the edge of what we know, the beginning of alternative. But for others they represent a perfect order, the mastery we can stand on top of. For others still, though I have not yet told a tale to illustrate how, they constitute a working environment, an ecology of exchange between ice and organism, rock and leaf, water and the ineluctable direction of flow.

Decades of travel remind me that there are mountainous divides on every continent, and sometimes more than one; everywhere they represent both division and interdependence, the fact of separation and the point of contact between alternatives. In early American society, it was the Appalachians, not the Rockies, that seemingly had first to be breached—hence the tales of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone and the eager assertion that a Christian God had ordained the continent for European settlement, with border skirmish, territorial war, the reservation system, and Manifest Destiny as political chasers. The crossing itself—the opening of the grassy green on the other side (no matter that it sometimes turned out to be desert or with lack of foresight and care was turned *into* dustbowl)—became a claim both on territory and on the green hope that the “other side” had come to symbolize. So the conventional working of the mountain metaphor—the great divide—is readily apparent. It suggests alternatives, it promises possibilities, it charts a division, it invites a claim.

Yet another North American mountain range at once extends this metaphor and suggests a different way of reading it: I’m referring to the steep slopes of the Coast Mountains that separate Skagway, Alaska, from the British Columbia border and Yukon—and therefore to another great North American divide, the political demarcation line between the U.S.A. and Canada. Skagway, of course, at the head of Lynn Canal, was born of the 1897-98 Klondike gold rush; it was the access port, and still is, with a road connection to Dawson (and therefore with Canada and, through Canada, with northern Alaska). Even now Skagway is only half a dozen blocks long and three or four wide—but now it depends on tourism; it carefully cultivates its goldrush image through the construction and preservation of board sidewalks (where you can charter day trips into the mountains), honkytonk saloons (where you can order ice cream), and general stores (where you can buy souvenir gold pans to take back home). One of these trips takes you along the old White Pass and Yukon rail line, which rises rapidly from sea level to nearly 1300 metres [4000 feet]. From the train, in addition to the receding view of the ocean, you can see, still etched along the mountainside, the trail that the goldseekers tramped into place a cen-

tury ago. During 1897 and 1898, over 100,000 of these prospectors arrived. A few chose to head to the Klondike by land from Edmonton (taking two years to get there, by which time the lode was exhausted); others, on foot, took the White Pass route from Skagway, or the Chilkoot route (the pass slightly lower, but likely steeper: there are extant photographs of a long and uninterrupted line of heavily burdened men tramping their vertical way towards a dream⁴). By 1898 the railway had been built; a year later, another gold strike (in Nome) stampeded the prospectors still further north. But it is that border with Canada I want to focus on for the moment: the pass at the height of land.⁵

Nowadays, on the White Pass & Yukon line, this border is scarcely marked. There is a cairn, and a customs post stands on the road—as opposed to the rail—side of the Skagway river. What you do see, however, there at the top—and this is the political point of this anecdote—is a fragile ecology: a crystalline small lake, the stunted spruce trees of alpine tundra, undergrass and lichen. It marks not just a place for the tourist train to turn around but also the point at which water begins to run both ways to the seas. I am talking simple biogeomorphology here; I am also talking cultural metaphor. For all the transgressions into this landscape, the point of connection is also a point of disconnection; this metaphorical, ecological, political Great Divide marks a persistence of process, tells of a system in place that opens to alternative visions of custom and nature.

For reasons that I've already suggested, rivers and mountains function more than just referentially in this process of differentiation. They become signs, related to each other (declaring at once both source and destination). They are emblematic not just of limit but also of the shape of responsibility. Think of such notions as heartland and hinterland, the American Frontier and the Canadian Idea of North. In more general terms, rivers and mountains become associated with ideas of purity and pollution and with their commercial counterparts, exploitability and expedience. Unfortunately—the consequences of altered nature, accident, and irresponsibility—examples of water pollution in Canada in 2004 are legion: mercury in lakes, industrial outflow, untreated garbage, raw sewage in rivers and sea: dying fish, poisoned wells, contaminated groundwater. Perhaps no example had a greater public impact than the tragedy in Walkerton, Ontario, in 2000, when people died after error, misjudgment, and the failure of ostensible safeguards led to pollution of their local drinking water supply. There were political repercussions.⁶ There were also meditative responses, making clear a different kind of relation between land, water, and the wellspring of

memory. As Isabel Huggan later wrote, in her Taylor Prize-winning memoir *Belonging* (2003):

I don't bother getting the map out of the glove compartment, for I know this countryside extremely well. . . it's part of who I am. I take my time driving, naming out loud familiar roadside flowers—Queen Anne's lace, toadflax, fireweed, chicory—and stopping now and again to drink it all in.

Eventually I reach Walkerton, and as I'm passing through remark to myself how pretty the town is and how similar to Elmira, not only in size and appearance but because both have suffered such critical problems with water supply—in Walkerton deadly E.coli from animal waste and in Elmira chemical pollution. In both cases, disaster has been the result of carelessness, blindly attendant upon progress and profit. The dreamscape of my childhood is not all it seems. . . . (113)

Huggan is alluding to attitudinal borders here, involving time as well as place, and while she does not hazard ways to resolve the challenges of pollution, she does hint at the imperfection of the idea of perfection that lies behind dreamscapes of memory, the dangers of assuming all too easily that change does not occur, and of “drinking place in.” The rhetoric we use—*how we speak about the place in which we live*—expresses deeply embedded sociocultural assumptions, not simple and unassailable objective truths. The river-mountain nexus is a complex metaphor.

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I have lived in or near mountains most of my life. As a native of Vancouver, moreover, I have also known from early on the local mantra for direction-finding. “Look for the mountains,” the local people say: “Mountains mean North.” Never mind that on the west coast's rainy days you can't see the mountains at all: the mantra persists, perhaps encouraging tourists and natives alike to use loss of direction not as an emergency but as a chance to meditate on where they happen to be. The idea that “Mountains mean North” is a localism, of course—British Columbia is lined by a series of mountain ranges (Coast, Monashee, Selkirk, Purcell: the Rockies are just one in the series)—and perhaps this “sea of mountains,” as it was once called, is not even imaginable to those who think that the Rockies have a single top to stand on, and that they drop one direction directly to the Coast and the other steeply into Saskatchewan.

Surprisingly more widespread in North America is the notion that “all rivers run south.” The Fraser does, of course, and the Columbia, and the Milk (which, as the cross-border writer Wallace Stegner made eloquently clear in *Wolf Willow*) winds unerringly out of Saskatchewan into the Missouri system and thence to the Gulf of Mexico. But how does one explain the results of a geography “mental mapping” exercise that was conducted a few years ago, in which a surprising number of Canadian university students permitted the north-flowing St. Lawrence to turn a corner, avoid Quebec, and empty directly into the Atlantic southwards through New England? Perhaps it’s just a sign of wilful ignorance. Perhaps there is a flaw in the way geography is taught. Or perhaps this misconception reflects a curious combination of political presumptions involving the precedence of self and the irrelevance of other. Consider the commentary that dealt with the massive flood on the Red River system in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Manitoba in the late 1990s. American and Canadian television news broadcasts both made a major “story” of it, converted it into a nightly narrative of heroics and destruction. When the crest of the flood in the United States got to the international border, however, heading north towards Winnipeg, American news broadcasters turned their focus elsewhere; for them, there was apparently nothing more to declare: the floodwaters had no more significance, or had somehow, miraculously, stopped. The Red River did *not* stop at the customs post, however; it poured into Canada, inundated the land around Winnipeg, and for awhile one of the major cities of Canada was practically cut off. This “story” was still “news.” But when a late-night caller to a U.S. talk-in show happened to mention that the flood on the Red *was* continuing north, the “newsman” contradicted her, saying with enviable certainty “That can’t be; all rivers in the USA flow south.” Shortly after, another caller phoned in with incontrovertible counter evidence at the ready; she asserted “That isn’t so; the Willamette River in Oregon flows north, and it’s the largest river in North America to do so.” I guess the Mackenzie had dried up that day. At first glance what this anecdote highlights is a widespread if rudimentarily incomprehensible mistake: “down” on the map—south—means, in the minds of a lot of people, “lower” in elevation: rivers flow downhill, therefore rivers flow south. But I think it’s more than a mistake: for deeply implicated in this misapprehension is the sense of cultural responsibility that’s tied in with the idea of headwaters and height of land, and the ecology of the drainage basin that extends from it. Put another way, these height-of-land metaphors pose not just the will to differentiate contrary directions and competing systems; they also spell out a kind of geograph-

ical sociology, asking *whose* height of land is it, *whose* system, *whose* direction to follow—yours, mine, ours, someone’s, anyone’s, or no-one’s? And does it matter? In all kinds of ways, of course it *does* matter: not just because the metaphors of space so readily turn into metaphors of territoriality, but also because the metaphor is potentially reversible: notions of ownership (and its implications—freedom of access and control, for example) *can* turn into notions of responsibility (and its attendant commitment to some value other than simple *use*).

To pursue these distinctions further, I turn to the work of three contemporary Canadian poets—Sid Marty, Peter Christensen, and the late Jon Whyte—each of whom has made a career, both literary and vocational, in the Rocky Mountains. In addition to being poets, Whyte (the nephew of Peter and Catharine Whyte, who founded the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff) was a journalist, regional historian, museum curator, and specialist in the topography and representation of the Banff area; English-born and Alberta-raised Sid Marty has been a mountaineer, park warden, guitarist and singer (who once opened for Céline Dion at a Calgary concert, and whose two song albums are called *Let the River Run* [1990] and *Elsewhere* [2002], both available from Centre Peak in Calgary); and East Kootenay resident Peter Christensen is an anthologist, librettist (for an opera called *Canyon Shadows*), park ranger, climber, and registered guide. One finds in their work both an intimate knowledge of mountain life and mountain behaviour and an intimacy of feeling *for* the mountains themselves. In their work, moreover, they move from seeing the landscape as *there* (why climb a mountain: because it is there), to claiming it as *mine* (why climb a mountain: to establish authority over it), to experiencing and appreciating it as a kind of *life force* in its own right, “there” to be connected with, and perhaps, in some measure, slowly understood.

Christensen’s work sets out clearly the general themes and motifs of this engagement with place. His are poems of work and of escape from work into Nature, especially through climbing. Along the way are difficulties to be encountered and overcome; at the summit is an extended view. Nature is particular: anemone and paintbrush, jay, wolf, coyote, mountain goat, and bear; Nature is also elemental: rock, fire, water, air. Climbing sometimes means falling, sometimes necessitates rescue. Hence (at least potentially for the climber-poet) the mountains are a place of exultation. That they also sometimes prove a place of comedy testifies at the same time to a kind of mordant realism, a recognition that keeping one’s feet on the ground, as it were, is a requisite attribute of those who would rise above

it. And finally, in this litany of Christensen's themes, this mountain world is stubbornly, insistently, affirmatively male.

The difference between *up* and *down* is implicit in just about everything Christensen writes, whether the oil-worker poems of *Rig Talk* (1981), the climbing poems of *To Die Ascending* (1988), the river poems of *Winter Range* (2001), or the animal adventures of *Wilderness Tales* (2003), but it's at times explicit. A poem called "Seven Trout" in *Rig Talk*, for example (40), is contemptuous of government laws that, in the name of clean-up, encourage more and more pollution: such laws are made for downstream people who apparently have no taste for fresh water because they drink only that which has shit in it. For himself, the poet says, "I used to go fishin / but you are what you eat."

The mordant phrase, the enigmatic utterance, also has the power to instruct the speaker to hang on to his own common sense as well as to criticize the institution for no longer having any. In "Deep Slab Instability," for example (from *To Die Ascending*, 16), the poet reflects on what the "avalanche man" knows: "He remembers the saying: / *All the experts are dead.*" In other words, the mountain is a reality, not just a symbol of a reality, and the great divides are fissures to deal with, not just summits to scale. Consider these lines from "Angel's Belay," with their disruptive mix of concrete technical terms and abstract generalizations:

*Continents collide
the earth crust cracks
uplifts through oceans
builds rugged monoliths,
pyramids of spiritual evolution.
To be at the summit on a clear day
is to view the precise chaos of creation.*

We climb the steep green
shoulder of the mountain
limestone protrusions give footing
for our plodding pace,
On a moss-covered shelf,
a white goats' bed,
we rest and wonder
if the whole fragile
conglomeration could collapse.

.....

My partner and I
scramble the igneous spine

of nerve grey granite
running to the southern spindrift summit.

Alone I move up
a ridge of broken orange
and black rock sheaves of shale
to the exposed and final col,
across this fatal gap
a wind driven crumbling black tower
rears into the adrenalin clouds,
Fear is an angel's belay,
You don't need a rope until you fall.

(10)

Falling and descent are two different things, of course, but the poem goes on to spell out the ambivalence that blurs them. After common sense overrules his "oxygen-thin faith" (11), the climber-speaker descends slowly; he feels "alien" at first when he reaches his truck, then is reabsorbed into "main street" values. No longer climbing, he sits on a bench, licks ice cream, and leers pruriently at "beautiful women" and "impure tourists and townsfolk" (11). The mountains, in other words, offer him an escape from that conventional self, but never forever: the challenge that this poetry affirms is to find out how to recognize the familiarity (not just the danger) of the revelations to which he aspires, and the dangers (not just the familiarity) of townsfolk limitations. *This* great divide is again attitudinal, and it's buried just below the skin of the human psyche.

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For Sid Marty, too, the Rockies epitomize a combination of emotional challenge and physical survival. Marty's literary technique, however, is more anecdotal than Christensen's; his poetry and prose rely more on story than on image as a way of engaging the listener with his message—and there *is* a message: ecological in part, but more obviously an open exposé of stupidity. Even, that is, at his most lyrical, as in a mountaineering poem called "On Lineham Ledge: an alpine route in Waterton National Park"), from *Sky Humour* (1999), the poet is still the narrator of behaviour. The poem opens with sage observation, proceeds to vernacular narrative, in which the reader becomes the poet's climbing partner, and then asks a resonant, more-than-merely-realistic philosophical question:

The goat believes in the mountain
and it often looks down

See that one trotting like a shaggy white dog
across the face of the cliff?
That is the ledge where you and I will crawl
sideways like crabs
because we don't believe in ourselves
and we have to keep looking up

Why do our knees tremble
when we have to face
the abyss?

(21)

Advice and warning will shortly follow:

So here, a goat dance is commanded
Turning outward, bow to the void
Step down to meet it slowly
turn inward now
and up you go

A man came drunk there once
and broke the law of gravity
The punishment was death

(21)

But neither of these human achievements—survival or falling, concentration or inattentiveness—is of consequence to the mountain goats. This deduction has implications for the trust we place not just in the footholds of rock and experience but also in those of a familiar, conventional, and unexamined system of rhetoric:

We have names for all the goat feed
Campion, lichen, sorrel
We have taxonomy, geology, the camera
and the transit—we have everything
in the world to know
this mountain

Yet look back now
and see it change into a waterfall

a pillar of salt
a tower of smoke

It's time to write a different text
(22)

A much earlier poem, "Inside the Map" (*Headwaters* 16), tells this challenge directly when it declares: "There is a trail into those ranges / Its continuity more mapped than real." In other words, the mountains are metaphors for life, and even those people who plan their lives ahead of time are going to be faced with real fissures they have not anticipated. Still, as another poem, "In the Dome Car of the 'Canadian,'" makes clear, if people fear the fissures too much, they also run the danger of so overplanning that they lose their access to pleasure, their taste for joy. Joy is possible, Marty insists. But danger is everywhere, and you have to recognize that, too. "For Young Men" (*Headwaters* 68) knows that "To be caught on the wrong side / of creeks or crevasses / when the temperature will change" changes the world. Danger can come, that is, from the mis-step, or from the drunken dismissal of danger, or from nature's weather, the swollen stream, loose rock, avalanche, and elemental fire—or from presumption. The balance is all. As though to illustrate, numerous Marty narratives deal with emergencies—some tell of foolish decisions that endanger climbers themselves and also the search-and-rescue team that goes out after them, and thus are stupid twice over: but Marty's intent is not merely to criticize incompetence and a lack of preparedness. His writing aims to instruct indirectly more than by precept; hence he is drawn to story-telling as a strategy of teaching. As a park warden, Marty has been witness to many moments of real and metaphoric "imbalance"; his anecdotal method at once engages the listener/reader in mountain narrative, distances the event from its immediate or initial pleasure or pain, and elaborates the event into a cautionary tale. For example:

1. Cautionary tale #1 ("The Fires": *Headwaters*) tells of working with some draft dodgers on a fire-fighting line, made more difficult when the helicopter drop, like the fire itself, is inconvenient:

The Air Element so called
dropped us on an island in the river
freaked us out most bitterly,
our amphibious assault

Poor dodgers suffered for their bread that night
pitch black, all of us naked
formed a line in the glacial water
balancing ten gallon drums, tents, fire pumps
up to our balls two hours, nearly swept away
by the strong current, and moving rocks
of the Athabaska, near its headwaters
the Columbia Ice Fields

One man sank in a hole with a tent
on his head, shouted "it's alright I can swim!"
but when he tried, he couldn't move his arms
and was fished out by the hair, the best handle
(48)

2. Cautionary tale #2 ("The Colours," *Nobody Danced With Miss Rodeo*) tells of foolhardiness and loss in the "disjointed days," the disparity between the words "high water" and "creek"—that is, between the empirical reality and the map of the real—proving more than merely ironic:

A boy came and asked me in May
about high water in the mountains
I saw his long limbs in the doorway
and warned him

But a week later,
we pulled his body
out of Stony Creek

(75)

3. Cautionary tale #3 tells of Marty nearly losing his friend in a climbing fall above Lake O'Hara, and of what he learned about himself. One of the episodes in *Switchbacks*, that is, has Marty telling of a climbing mistake that he himself made, and of his initial refusal to accept that it *was* an error and that he was responsible. Determined to reach the top, he proposes to treat a "band of broken rock" as though it were a "ledge," which only about a thousand years of further erosion might really construct. Moreover, the route that he says "looked like thirty minutes of effort" would require more skill than his climbing partner had, but so keen is he to "cleverly. . . turn my error into triumph" that he pressures his partner to agree to undertake the route. Scarcely underway, however, he hears "the axe clatter on the rocks a few metres behind me. George cried out, but when I turned to look he was gone from his holds and doing a somersault down the rock. He hit the ice right-side up a me-

tre or so down the ice slope, and there was a loud crack” (149-50). Several paragraphs of vivid description follow, with George turning into a “rag doll, coming apart at the seams,” and the “tumble” turning “into a high speed slide right toward the ’schrund. Should he fall into its depths, he would either be killed in the plunge or wedged in where the crack narrowed further down and quite possibly die of asphyxiation” (150-1). More pages follow, tracing the narrative across the “blood-streaked snow” (151), as Marty reaches his friend, and then has to help him off the mountain. The halting conversation between them is barbed with pained swearing and black humour, the rhetorical survival tactics that are the stuff of many male friendships. Even then, the two men need help from others, and the tale is told after the fact as a story of trust and folly; reflecting on the possibility of “someday” meeting again. The anecdote then closes in *maybe* and *perhaps*: “Maybe we’ll argue about what mistakes were made; what was learned; who rescued who; or whether it’s even possible, ultimately, to save anyone or anything, and to keep laughing. . . even when there is nothing left to remind us of youth but scars, like a winter count, on our aging bodies” (158).

4. Cautionary tale #4 recognizes that it is not only the incautious man who is a danger but also the man who would overturn the balance that the warden has sworn to protect. “On the Boundary” (*Headwaters*) makes *this* “divide” a culturally specific one: “Last year a guide and his yankee hunters / threatened a warden with loaded rifles” (85)—to which the response is to arm himself against possibility (knowing his own rifle will “blister” him), but also to locate a different kind of defence in speaking aloud a kind of gender-specific divide, claiming the solace of conquest (“We ride forward toward the Rocky River / talking of hunters / and women we once knew”), knowing the anecdote to be transparent myth, more imagined than real, more nostalgic than historical, flimsier than bullets but, to survive the emotional moment, more effective.

Significantly, for Marty, such dangers seldom come from animals. From his perspective (as in “Territory,” *Nobody* 19), animals live out their territoriality. Coyote can come to the edge of his house with a ptarmigan in its teeth to laugh at him, the trickster reminding him that his window glass “protects nobody,” but this recognition serves more as an intellectual reminder than as a threat—indeed, “Only the stupidest animals / cows and men / will let death ride them.” On the subject of bears, therefore, Marty has much to say, recognizing that humans’ arbitrary design and division of territory, like their photographic documentaries and their taxonomies of fauna, flora, and rock, do not circumscribe or predict behaviour, but merely describe some of it. Always there is a fissure between imaginative desire and mountainous real.

At this point Marty quotes a Finnish proverb, to the effect that ““The offspring of a bear and a woman is a hero, with the strength of a bear and the cleverness of a man” (*Switchbacks* 175). But he goes on to observe that, as with many contacts, “it is the bear that draws the line and shows a kind of common sense that humans often lack” (175). To punctuate his point, he uses anecdote as satire. He retells a tale of a nameless woman, lying naked, who has covered herself in cold cream to soothe her sunburn, whom a bear licks clean; Marty reflects that the woman was fortunate to have avoided a “humourless warden” of his acquaintance who would no doubt “have immediately charged her with ‘unlawfully touching wildlife and enticing it to approach by setting out foodstuffs or bait, contrary to section 4.1.(f) of the National Parks Wildlife Regulations’” (176). For the most part, though, he opines—perhaps a fraction less apocryphally,

I learned to live with bears like a close neighbour, cultivating a respect for them which I feel they returned. It wasn't prudent to encourage them to come too close, especially when I was travelling alone in the bush. But often I have travelled on horseback with black bears ambling through the bush alongside of me, sometimes ahead, sometimes behind when we happened to be travelling in the same direction. Bears find our human trails quite convenient to use at times. And I would sing to them, songs that I made up for the occasion, warrior songs, bragging songs which I thought they would find amusing.

(174-5)

This moment, too, becomes the stuff of poetry in Marty's world, as “Too Hot to Sleep” (*Headwaters* 58-9) makes clear. It is a poem about what happens when one is asleep in the mountains: there are conversations then that only the imagination can tap in to, that other great divide between rationality and desire. These might have become *my* mountains, the poem suggest, but who is “me”?

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Using image like Christensen, and anecdote (though less than Marty does), Jon Whyte turns to rhetorical form itself as a primary mode of understanding. Particularly, he uses literature to try to understand how physical form—whether mountain peaks and mountain pastures or the concrete shape of words on a page—is a manifestation of time. The Rocky Mountain Great Divide, that is, turns for Whyte into an epistemological environment, a place where knowledge happens, in the present, in the present's dialogues with the past, in the present's invitation to the future. Whyte's

questions are variants on Marty's. If these are "my mountains," how did they become so, and how does that allow me to think? How does the past impact on the past's future, moreover, the changing "now" and the changes still to be apprehended? The great divides here are those of history, memory, and life itself.

Whyte's books constitute a series of encounters with such questions—sometimes taking the form of reportorial history, as in his commissioned account *Indians in the Rockies* (1985), his appreciation of the hikers who carved the trails at Lake O'Hara, *Tommy and Lawrence* (1983),⁷ and his enthusiastic celebration of the representational paintings and animal portraiture of *Carl Rungius* (1985). Such books have their place in any account of mountain writing, but in an odd kind of way they also reinscribe the conventions—of sublimity and the picturesque, for example—that separate setting from its inhabitants, and that construct landscape, animals, and "others" as objects of privileged view. Listen to the terms that inform the opening of *Indians in the Rockies*, for example:

Chill winds blew from the glacier in the main valley. Barren mountain peaks protruded above the ice rivers in the hanging valleys. . . . The glacier, receding thirty to sixty metres per year, was rapidly exposing new ground for plants to colonize.

It was a landscape of titanic dimensions. Upvalley the ice was a kilometre or more deep. Smaller glaciers, contributing to the main valley glacier, tumbled from the cirques they'd carved in the mountains' once sheer slopes. Where two or three glaciers joined to form one valley glacier, long streaked moraines of grit, gravel, and boulders snaked on the surface. Gouged and bulldozed piles of rock, gravel, rough soil, and grime heaped up on the land everywhere. On the valley floor, near where the grumbling river murkily poured from the glacier's snout, a small herd of bison browsed the meagre grasses.

The bison were unaware of a family of hunter-gatherers advancing up the valley in quest of meat. (15)

The rhetoric here is fascinating for how it works and what it works to serve. The adjectives—*chill*, *barren*, *murky*—spell out a territory marked by its *unusability*. The glacier, however, is animate; the plants are *colonizers*; the moraine is *snakelike*, the dimensions are *titanic*: this is landscape composed as epic—even as a form of epic that one might characterize as Christian Imperial—it lacks only a hero figure, who will shortly come along as "man." Such is the conventional side of Whyte's writing. More arresting, I think, is the side that uses words cumulatively, and that sees perception as the inheritor of the past (hence his long 1981 poem, *Homage, Henry*

Kelsey) but open to revelation. In particular, in his poetry, Whyte understands that fracture and fissure—his geologic terms—can articulate his commitment to intellectual creativity and not just function conventionally as a metaphor for the Fall.

Gallimaufry, a poetry collection from 1981, hints at what was to come from Whyte, especially in its preface—called, with deliberate literalness, “A few words before.” “Gallimaufry,” of course, means “hash” or “hodge-podge,” and the *stew* metaphor invites all readers to help themselves as they will. Spooning up words. This is a book by a man who claims with not unsubtle irony to have compiled a dictionary of words without rhymes, for free verse poets. Here is language at play, or (as Whyte himself puts it):

I am the “odd man.” Language spates me frequently and I try to employ as much of it as I can. Slang and banter, cant and argot, jargon, tech-talk, nomenclature, bombast and badinage, the high mimetic more frequently than the lower forms of rhetoric. These words brim in a pot of the great tradition in a very un-post-modernly fashion. If I jam-slam spondees like pilot biscuits into a survival kit, resuscitate dormant or dying words, fly banners with Elizabethan flourish, and relish kennings, it is because I believe Freedom of Dictionary is as vital as Freedom of Spoon. *Caveat Lector*, mon semblabe, mon frère. (ix)

What this has to do with time and mountains will shortly become clear.

In 1983 Whyte published “Some Fittes and Starts,” the punning first part of what was to be a five-volume poem called *The Fells of Brightness*; the second, “Wenkchemna,” the Stoney word for *ten* (applied here to the ten peaks along the valley that leads into Moraine Lake, near Banff), followed two years later; they were the only volumes to appear before Whyte died. “Wenkchemna” is, then, apparently self-explanatory: but the naming/numbering of the ten peaks by illustration as well as by word—Heejoe, Nom, Yamnee, Tonsa, Sapta, Shappee, Sagowa, Saknowa, Neptuak, Wenkchemna—asserts three overlapping systems of identification (visual, verbal, numerical): none alone adequate, all together interdependent, a small ecosystem of understanding articulated by the systems of human record. The terms “Fells,” “fittes,” and “starts” reinforce this overlap from the beginning, or as Whyte explains, language is itself another complex of overlapping processes:

The Fells of Brightness, which is to say “Assine Watche,” directly translated from Cree, “brilliant mountains,” the Rockies; volume 1, *Some Fittes and*

Starts, which is to say “several cantos and beginnings or surprises.” But “fell” is also a folded edge of cloth or textile (which word we derive from the Latin for “text”) and “fite,” we find, is a thread weavers used to mark a day’s text-making, hence a “hem mark”; and thus “fell” and “fite” both connote a raised ridge of text, the mountains ranged or arranged. (“Preface,” 8)

Later, Whyte adds: “My Rockies are, I hope, an archetype of anywhere, a complex of folk tale and anecdote, personal experience and Earth, a geography of climate, passions, and place” (10).

The poems themselves then assert an ecosystem directly: they tell of

Dark, ancient woods, lichen-hung with Old Man’s Beard
and toadstoled, cool, damp, and musty, the rich blush
of swift mountain summer’s ripening and rot,
pleat folded seasons

(*Fittes* 32)

And they tell of “decaying roots and rotting leaves forming / the dun of striving soil; / if there be colour here, / the lake reveals green in blue as wind ruffles shot silk, / fracturing sky”—the “Eozoic ooze, Late Cambrian exoskeletons discarded, / the Pleistocene’s devouring too of what lived here / **to form what’s here**” (*Wenkchemma* 13). In subsequent pages, a substitution game turns the word TARN into the word RISE (*W*, 15)—*tarn, warn, ware, care, core, bore, born, torn*, etc, through 37 variations in all to *mast, mash, rash, rase, rose, rise*. “Rise” after “rose,” notably. This canto of the poem ends not with the finished past but in the indeterminate present. In other cantos, words construct tree-shapes, construct typographical faultlines (an ambiguous term to correspond with memories of adolescence in this case), they construct squares, where “range” means *travel, location, mountains, and limit of sight*. And they construct mountainous towers on the page, and cumulative lexical towers that *snap, slip, skid, sink, fall, chip, rift, rent, gash, split, cleft, crack, break, slump, cleave, tremor, topple, as tribes scatter, tongues disperse, and form fails to last* (*W* 21) but where “By forced passage, trial, travail, / [horsemen] forded rivers; / by hardscrabble, shintangle, deadfall, down timber, / found routes to alpine” (*W* 50).

These are poems that “sort” the past and also “sortee” it (*W* 32), where geology’s history, arboreal history, Cree and Stoney history, European exploration history, social history, family history, and personal history come together, overlap in the taxonomies of narrative and myth, the categories of separation and systems of record (picture, number, word) that

produce the ecosystem we call “understanding.” These are “My Rockies,” Whyte writes, “an archetype of anywhere.” Because of ego?—is his comment presumptuous? I think not. The poems *assert* self, but not to make the world *like him*; rather, to probe a paradox, to see how comparable systems of inheritance and overlap work everywhere, constructing through similarities of change the separate shapes by which we identify difference. Through process comes the Great Divide. But if Whyte’s work emphasizes any one thing more than any other, it is that Great Divides are also themselves processes of change, glimpsed at a moment, recorded into an illusion of fixity, but only as valid as how we see and as unstable as the system we use to measure.

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To phrase this question another way: when we contemplate the mountains, where is it that we stand? I realize that my examples have been Canadian, that the Rockies extend south into the U.S.A. (that’s *my* perspective again), and that—here’s the real exception—Maori is *not* a North American language, but it seems to me at this point, with the ideas of archetype and ecosystem in mind, that a Maori *mihi*—or traditional greeting—is relevant to what I have been saying. Among other things, a *mihi* explicates the principle of *turangawaewae*, “home place” or “where one stands”; it is a paradigm, spoken individually, whereby each speaker who greets another person specifies first the canoe that brought him or her to this place (i.e., specifies his/her ancient lineage), then in sequence declares his mountain, his river, his home place, his family name, his mother’s name, his father’s name (a series of contexts, in other words), before declaring his own given name—all before greeting the other and inviting from the other a parallel reply. When I was first trying to understand how the greeting worked, New Zealand friends helped me to construct a *mihi* of my own; it takes a form like this:

Ko *Wolven* te waka
Ko *Iti* te maunga
Ko *Fraser* te Awa
Ko *Vancouver* te marae
Ko *Niu* te iwi
Ko *Ani* räua ko *Hoani* öku mätua
Ko *Wiremu* toku ingoa
Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou

By this paradigm, I would tell you who I am and where I come from—and greet you—but say further that each of us is who we are because of the contexts through which we acquire identity (canoe, family, parents, mountain, river—my mountain *and* my river). The contexts matter; they enable connection, help foster community understanding. And the riffs of the personal constitute a context for ecological survival.

I find that I still cannot compare the view from the top of the Rockies to the view from the top of the Peace Tower. What life teaches is a little more complex and a lot less binary than that desperate radio interview I mentioned earlier ever left room for. The quest for the Great Divide, moreover—as I have been emphasizing through mountain anecdote and mountain metaphor—leads not to the top of the rock alone but to the interconnection between rock and *water*. Not just to border and barrier but also to sustenance and process. It involves water access and water quality; people who don't have it and people who do; those who have it and look after it, and those who don't; those who recognize that individually *and communally* they have a relation to and a role in the hydrologic cycle and those who consider it outside their ken. It does not lie simply between one owner and another of territory, whenever claimed and however metaphoric, but more imprecisely between the assumption that we can do as we like with the Earth and the belief that we live and must live in integration with it. So if I say that the Great Divide is global, not national or continental alone, I want to be clear: the word 'global' can hide numerous presumptions. In contemporary discourse it functions all by itself as a kind of compressed anecdote about opportunity and power, which has come recurrently to mean one nation's political priorities writ large, is used to justify corporate cartels, and stakes presumptive claims on legitimacy of action. As I use the term here, however, 'global' means an opportunity for shared information and collegial understanding. Put metaphorically, all rivers do not flow south. As is clear from the tales and trails that I have been tracing, if we are sensitive to how we live in the world, we seek the "top of the Great Divide" not to claim the view but to appreciate the ecosystem that functions there, the system of interdependence and renewal that starts rivers off in glaciers and small tarns, then sends them in all directions to the oceans—rivers that keep each one of us alive, together, "step by sea by singing" ("Continental Drift,"⁸ *Science Lessons* 90).

Notes

- 1 Two earlier versions of this paper were delivered at conferences in Tampere, Finland, and in Winnipeg, Manitoba. For conversations on river writing and ecocriticism I am indebted to my friends Charles Dawson and Laurie Ricou.
- 2 For the record, Vancouver is approximately 4500 km from Ottawa; the Peace Tower is 92.2 m (302 feet) tall, and Kicking Horse Pass in the Rockies (through which the Canadian Pacific Railway runs) is 1627 m high, and is surrounded by Mt. Hector (3394 m), Mt. St. Bride (3315 m), and Mt. Goodsir (3562 m).
- 3 The song is reputed to refer to Prince Frederick Augustus (1763-1827), the second son of George III, created Duke of York in 1784. Although now considered something of an army reformer, and noted for founding the Duke of York's School in London, he was known in his day as a spectacularly unsuccessful leader, both as field commander (in the Netherlands, 1793-9) and as British commander-in-chief between 1798 and 1809.
- 4 For a poem about this moment (and about the photograph of the prospectors), see Florence McNeil's "Chilkoot Pass."
- 5 The Alaska Panhandle agreement of 1903 was yet to be surveyed and signed; hence the act, which formally established the height of land as the international boundary, through which the coastal rivers cut, was yet to become law. But an earlier 1825 agreement was in some measure still in effect, and in 1897, at this particular height of land, some of the cultural differences that separate the U.S.A. and Canada asserted themselves—or were asserted. The North West Mounted Police, under the legendary Sam Steele, required all would-be (which is to say, mostly American) prospectors to bring with them, across the border, a year's worth of supplies. Some men, carrying heavy loads of food and equipment, walked up and down the Chilkoot or White trails several times to satisfy this demand. Of course, *having* all these supplies did not in practice guarantee either success or failure at finding gold, but it did have a social effect. Dawson, in Yukon Territory, came to be considered more orderly than Skagway—though any such order was inevitably relative. It is clear that those who made most secure money at such frontiers were the goods suppliers and the banks. It is also clear that one reason the Klondike remained Canadian, given the lop-sided treaty negotiations that ultimately demarcated cultural territoriality, is that, at the time, the US government, looking mostly in the opposite direction, was otherwise engaged in the Spanish-American War.
- 6 For the report on the O'Connor Inquiry into the Walkerton events, see <http://www.ene.gov.on.ca/water.htm>
- 7 I.e. Tommy Link and Lawrence Grassi, who developed many of the trails in the Lake O'Hara region in the early decades of the 20th century. Comments on Lake O'Hara also appear in *The Rockies*, where Whyte's descriptive and historical essays accompany photographs by Shin Sugino.
- 8 The poem reads in full:

Then he is another, and himself, and still
 changing: the land drifts apart, the
 great divide to the east, the rift valley,
 rivers flowing all ways to the oceans—
 and he is torn between them, longing to be,
 something, not this ragged corpse he half
 invents, half recognizes behind
 the masks he wears, old holograms of hope.
 To be: he lives in aspiration, each
 breath a gasp, and speaks in inarticulate
 monosyllables, *yes, no, there*.
There is where he would be, at the heart,

while some insistent drive towards displacement
edges him onward, step by sea by singing.

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