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REVIEW ARTICLE:
THE YEAR OF THE INDIAN*

Various reviewers have labelled 1973 as "the year of the Indian"—at least in book publishing—and since I made a personal contribution to foster that, it may be I am the wrong person to discuss these three books. In any case, let me say at the outset that I am already prejudiced in favor of books about Canada's Indian past (I hesitate to use the word 'heritage') and if this year begins at last to right the balance of the stereotype Indian as a sometimes exotic but mostly deprived and drunken frill at the edges of our humor and realism, well, praises be.

In a sense, *Wilderness Man* is the more straight forward of the two non-fiction books in that it proposes to be, very simply, the biography of Grey Owl, or Wa-Sha-Quon-Asin (He-Who-Flies-By-Night), or Archie Belaney—choose whichever name you can pronounce the most easily. Although digging up the past of a man with so many names is difficult, it is not necessarily impossible and the subject at least is clear as given by the title. On the other hand, Turner cannot ever seem to decide whether his subject is Superintendent James Walsh or the Sioux Sitting Bull, or both, and so he compromises by using an image, the Medicine Line, the Canada-U.S. border, for his title. It seems to me that if he had actually made the border his *subject* he would have had the better book.

Dickson is at his best as a fact-monger, and his re-creation of that English boyhood with its broken family and austere maidenly aunts which eventually produces the young man who flees to Canada to live like the Indians and ultimately outdo them in his knowledge of their lore, is the finest part of the book. Strangely though, the more I read about Archie in Canada, the more I learn of his wanderings, his associations with his several wives and more women (this aspect so delicately handled with a 19th century reticence as to be almost incomprehensible in the 1970s), of his drive to change from trapper to conservationist to writer to public lecturer to idolized symbol for all that remains good and pure in the great outdoors—the more Lovat Dickson tells me of these facts concerning Archie Belaney's strange life, the less I seem to know about *him*. So that by the last pages, when Grey Owl spends three days (!) alone in his cabin in Prince Albert National Park and then at his own request is carried out to hospital, I have the strange feeling that I know no more about this gaunt, brown, world-famous man than the

Across the Medicine Line. By C. Frank Turner. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1973. Pp. 270, illus. \$8.95.

Wilderness Man. By Lovat Dickson. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973, Pp. 283, illus. \$9.95.

Gone Indian. By Robert Kroetsch. Toronto: New Press, 1973. Pp. 158. \$7.95.

anonymous Saskatchewan doctors clustered at his bedside know about the disease—or is it one?—this is killing him. Whatever I once grasped of him, it's been—cancelled. As if the book were a kind of pendulum swing: at the end I am in exactly the same spot as I began, in ignorance, though at the middle of it I seemed to be at the very edge of the centre of profound understanding.

Turner subtitles his book "The epic confrontation between Sitting Bull and the North-West Mounted Police", and he has done a great deal of digging for facts in the right places. The book, however, desperately needs footnotes; the footnote mechanics could have been handled either obviously, as Stanley does it in *The Birth of Western Canada* or inconspicuously as Berton in *The Last Spike*; neither method disturbs the more casual reader, but it does cost publishers money, and that may be the problem here. Any history book with good footnotes is three times the book without them. It also makes a writer more careful with his facts: the reader can check back and decide how well the sources have been read; and Turner does have one factual problem which needs some careful study.

The question involves Louis Riel, and what he was doing during 1878. He is released from Beauport Hospital, Quebec, on January 23, 1878, and Stanley, in the only good biography written to date (*Louis Riel*, 1963), indicates that for the rest of that year Riel is looking for work, and moving between friends in the eastern United States; that he does not arrive in the west until late fall, 1878, and then gets only as far as Pembina, Dakota Territory. Riel is certainly in Manitoba in January, 1879, and it is not before November 10, 1879, that the first precise mention is made of him on the Missouri: this reference I discovered for myself reading Edgar Dewdney's diary (now in the Glenbow Archives, Calgary) of his first trip across the prairies as Indian Commissioner. Frank Turner, however, seems to follow that other Turner, the commissioned John Peter in his *The North-West Mounted Police, 1873-1893* (1950: also an un-footnoted effort and one which, despite its exciting individual incidents, makes something very much like a god out of every policeman, or at the least a superman). J.P. Turner says "the notorious Metis leader" was on the Missouri River during the summer of 1878 (when, according to Stanley, Riel is in New York City looking for work!) and subverting American Assiniboine chiefs, trying to get their help against the Canadian government. Frank Turner goes so far as to imply that in the summer of '78 Riel sent messengers from the Missouri brakes country to Sitting Bull in an attempt to form one great Indian-Metis alliance against all whites in the Canadian west. There is obviously a jumble of contradictory facts here; historians I have questioned tell me that they cannot explain these contradictions. Clearly, more work needs to be done on Riel between 1871 and 1884, but Frank Turner should not so blithely accept facts about a man who has been too often maligned in the past. In 1878 Riel is not, as I read him, "nursing his anger in exile, preparing a revolution". When he writes like that, Frank Turner sounds a lot like J.P.

Speaking of sound, stylistically *Across the Medicine Line* is dreadfully uneven. Turner seems to be working on a slangy newspaper idiom that has to crank up obvious drama by means of verbal inflations—as if we were all such semi-TV-morons we could no longer imagine what was happening from the page. So Sitting Bull's

eyes are always "exuding hate", and Big Bear is "the perennially obstinate and independent chief of the belligerent plains Cree, the fierce and undisputed leader of those eternally dangerous Canadian malcontents." It's a barker style, a style typical of much popular writing about our history: a style that does not at all trust its own material. Typically too, however, the strength of the story makes you mostly forget the horrendous manner in which it is often presented.

Gone Indian is the involuted novel of Jeremy Sadness, American graduate student (his thesis supervisor happens to live at exactly the same Binghamton, New York, address as does Professor of English Robert Kroetsch) coming in his buckskin jacket to Edmonton looking for a job but mostly for whatever he can find of the spirit of his ideal, Grey Owl. Sadness, lost identity American, is last seen (?) astride a snowmobile and his earth mother (such physiological marvels are by no means rare in Kroetsch novels) as he snarls north across the longest railroad (the railroad is the Canadian instrument of national unity, as war is the American) trestle in the world which spans the *Cree* River and on the north bank of which, somewhere, Grey Owl is buried. Jeremy's silly act is a unified, comprehensible one which drives us towards understanding in a way that is never achieved by all the mustered facts concerning Walsh and Sitting Bull. Perhaps, historically, we never expect anything but a kind of sequential "first-he-did-this-and-then-he-did-that" kind of understanding about police officers, especially such as got their position by political patronage (What? A NWMP officer in the 1870s have a profound *personality* which might explain some of his incredible successes as well as his equally incredible flops? Surely they all, especially Macleod and Walsh, just did that stuff, already knowing how a hundred years hence the historical facts would solidify them into deified incomprehension). Perhaps historically we already know that every Indian, especially a great one, has to be inscrutable (I mean, how could mere white men, today, dare analyse Indian personality? After all, they were, are, so *different*).

So in Turner's book we have the mustering of facts. Accurate, except for the problem I have pointed out, and in the end these facts leave little more for the mind than the elementary sum of themselves. In this sense Turner's history is more useful than Dickson's biography: because Turner does not pretend understanding; he mostly allows you the freedom to gather together your own comprehension of Walsh and Sitting Bull. And, since his facts seem accurate, neither officer nor chief appear very humanly distinct—as they never will until a truly artistic intelligence subsumes all that fact for us and carries us with it beyond history. We need an Herodotus, a Donald Creighton or perhaps a Phyllis Grosskuth in the west; perhaps best a 1970's Canadian version of Lytton Strachey. We certainly need more for Walsh and Sitting Bull than Frank Turner (or Grant MacEwan).

Or much more than Lovat Dickson for Grey Owl. Dickson goes beyond Turner's factuality; he tries to really "get into" his biographee. In almost lyric sections that I find very moving he grapples with this incredible man:

He becomes a man with a mission. Those who have had to live closely with someone so imbued will know that nothing can be more difficult. Grey Owl could change his name, his habits, even his mode of speech; the meta-

morphosis could in the end be so complete that no stranger meeting him would suspect him to be anything but an Indian, and at the same time he could mesmerize himself into believing that he was what he claimed to be. But one thing he could not change, and that was the complexity of his inherited cast of mind. Belaney upon Belaney, generation upon generation, back to those who had walked behind the plough, or ridden with falcon on wrist in the misty hills of the Scottish lowlands, had contributed to that pattern, and nothing in a short life-time could change it.

So he could be two things at once, and not be conscious of the ambivalence. Anahareo as an Indian could recognize only directness. We stand back amazed at what we consider to be her frankness about herself and her courage. But this is the Indian in her, just as the complexity of motives and impulses were the inexpungeable Anglo-Saxon in Grey Owl. [p. 262-3]

And yet, by the end of the book, Grey Owl has escaped Dickson's word-net more completely than Jeremy Sadness will ever escape the obtuse Professor Markham; we are left with Dickson's personal puzzlement, longing, sense of mystery. And I am not denigrating that: by no means. When a man as sensitive as Dickson sets out to explore one of the enduring drives of his own life, that is a book to be studied, and admired; but then, that is not exactly what he set out to do in writing *Wilderness Man*.