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## **MAKING FACT FROM FICTION: USING ORAL HISTORY TO CONSTRUCT THE 'FRICTIONAL' PLACES OF CHARLES G.D. ROBERTS' WESTCOCK<sup>1</sup>**

COMMUNITY MEMORY EXPRESSED THROUGH oral history is a particularly effective means of exploring the blurred lines between fact and fiction. Memory is also a key means by which we structure knowledge of place, transferring both the knowledge itself and its largely narrative form from one generation to another. When a literary text is involved—particularly one that garners national attention or fulfils some other symbolic role—community memory reinterprets and reinscribes meaning from text onto place. Oral histories demonstrate the resulting friction or tension between the seemingly straightforward, observable realities of place and the construction of a cultural sense of place through fiction. Many of the literary works of Charles G.D. Roberts provide useful demonstrations of this, in part because of Roberts' intentional ambiguity and mixing of fact and fiction. Situating Roberts' work (particularly his 1906 melodramatic novel *The Heart That Knows*) at the intersection of literary geographies and community histories, place is continually remade by the friction between fact and fiction, providing a key means of constructing both knowledge

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and landscape. In addition, this friction assumes a political dimension as a means by which a community asserts its identity.

Scholars of various disciplines have devoted increasing attention to the intersections of place-making and literary texts. While there is a relatively long tradition of analysis of the regional novel and its contributions to the study of historical and contemporary place, more recent discussion has focused on the politics and power relationships articulated by authors and the development of a discourse of place between author and reader.<sup>2</sup> In particular, we have seen critiques of historical place reconstruction and the manner in which a text legitimizes and directs heritage tourism and local economic development.<sup>3</sup> Little attention, however, has been paid to the manner in which a text becomes a reflexive device in the shaping of place through the mechanism of oral history. This article explores the role of the writings of Charles G.D. Roberts in the development of a sense of place in Westcock, a small community on the outskirts of Sackville, New Brunswick, and the setting for Roberts' early childhood. Interviewees in an oral history project initiated in 1997 largely within the community associated with St. Ann's Church in Westcock provided numerous examples of the manner in which Roberts' writing was perceived, mythologized and appropriated, frequently creating significant confusion between reality and fiction. Using the oral history interviews as the primary focus, the argument is developed that Westcock's place identity is legitimized and constantly recreated by the appropriation of Roberts and his work. Roberts' texts themselves are thus constantly reinterpreted to provide a romantic anti-modernist counterpoint to contemporary economic processes of centralization and cultural homogeneity as experienced by the interviewees.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> J. Douglas Porteous, "Literature and Humanist Geography," *Area* 17.2 (1985): 117–22, and "Deathscape: Malcolm Lowry's Topophobic View of the City," *The Canadian Geographer* 31 (1987): 34–43.

<sup>3</sup> Ian McKay, "Among the Fisherfolk: J.F.B. Livesay and the Invention of Peggy's Cove," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23 (1988): 23–45; "History and the Tourist Gaze: The Politics of Commemoration in Nova Scotia, 1935–1964," *Acadiensis* 22.2 (1993): 102–38; *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); Shelagh Squire, "Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being: Literature, Place, and Tourism in L.M. Montgomery's Prince Edward Island," in *A Few Acres of Snow: Literary and Artistic Images of Canada*, ed. P. Simpson-Housley and G. Norcliffe (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1992), 137–47; P. Steven, "Rhetoric and the Authority of Ethnography: 'Postmodernism' and the Social Reproduction of Texts," *Current Anthropology* 29.3 (June 1988): 405–24.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief summary see Robert Summerby-Murray, "Collective Memory and the Anti-modernist Foil: Romance and Resistance in the Oral History of Westcock, New Brunswick," in *Proceedings*

## PLACE AND TEXT: DEVELOPING A DISCOURSE

Cultural geographers have embraced the literary text as an object of analysis of place, drawing on the “cultural turn” in geographic study and the influence of contemporary social theory.<sup>5</sup> For much of the twentieth century, however, the strong scientific positivism of geography as a field of study situated literary analysis in the subjective and less easily defined sectors of the discipline. One of the earliest examples in the twentieth-century geography literature is Henry Darby’s analysis of Wessex as described in Thomas Hardy’s novels.<sup>6</sup> Clearly falling into a traditional mode wherein the novel is used as a means of investigating the place behind the story, Darby’s work broke ground for others to study the regional novel.<sup>7</sup> In most instances this traditional regional approach concentrated on rural, historical settings and sought to investigate the realism and accuracy of the novelist’s depiction of landscape.<sup>8</sup> Frequently, the regional novel was investigated as representative of some mythical golden age in which regional identity functioned as a touchstone of moral value and certainty.<sup>9</sup>

A shift away from a traditional regional novel approach in cultural geography reflected an increased use of analytical tools from literary criticism. By the 1970s, cultural geographers had begun to view the novel (and literature in general, as well as other forms of artistic expression such as painting and music) as a means of introducing a more humanistic approach to their analysis, a focus on experience within place.<sup>10</sup> Many argued that a rigid division between factual geographic realism and literary symbolism hindered the potential contributions of geographers to the debates on language, resistance, symbol and signification that were becoming increasingly important in the

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of the *Twentieth New Zealand Geography Conference*, ed. M. Roche, M. McKenna and P. Hesp (Hamilton: New Zealand Geographical Society, 1999), 293–96.

<sup>5</sup> See *Geography and Literature: A Meeting of the Disciplines*, ed. W. Mallory and P. Simpson-Housley (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987); also Simpson-Housley and Norcliffe, *A Few Acres of Snow*.

<sup>6</sup> Henry C. Darby, “The Regional Geography of Thomas Hardy’s Wessex,” *Geographical Review* 38 (1948): 426–43.

<sup>7</sup> A point made by Porteous, “Literature and Humanist Geography.”

<sup>8</sup> Marc Brosseau, “Geography’s Literature,” *Progress in Human Geography* 18 (1994): 333–53, esp. 336.

<sup>9</sup> McKay, “Among the Fisherfolk,” and Porteous, “Literature and Humanist Geography,” 117.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Press, 1976); *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems*, ed. David Ley and M. Samuels (Chicago: Maaroufa Press, 1978); Yi-Fu Tuan, “Literature and Geography: Implications for Geographical Research,” in *Humanistic Geography*, 194–206; Simpson-Housley and Norcliffe, *A Few Acres of Snow*; Brosseau, “Geography’s Literature.”

world of academic literary criticism.<sup>11</sup> An inertial commitment to a realist perspective, coupled with a view of the author as omnipotent and reliable, obscured the possibilities of the text itself constituting its own discourse.<sup>12</sup> In calling for the removal of this “partial silencing of the literary text as text,” Marc Brosseau, for example, argued for a view of text as being in dialogue with the reader and vice versa, and thus creative of new geographies, including those that combine fact and fiction.<sup>13</sup>

In the following example, this dialogue with a text is elevated to almost mythic proportions, but it is also reflexive in that both the text and the reader shape a perceptual geography that slides uneasily between fact and fiction, in effect creating a “frictional” landscape where meaning is dragged uneasily between memory, text and observable reality. In the Westcock case, Roberts’ various texts describe and interpret contemporary place and social relationships, provide a source of historical evidence, influence collective and individual memory, and then operate reflexively to legitimate the collective or individual experience and memory of the text itself.

While there is an established discussion on the use of collective memory and oral history in developing sense of place, there are few examples where such place-making is conditioned by a formalised text.<sup>14</sup> Even less attention has been paid to the intersection of oral history and literary text in terms of encoding meaning wherein the text becomes “a vehicle that transcends the role of ‘source’ to become constitutive of social relations and complex symbolic systems.”<sup>15</sup>

A humanistic concern with place, particularly realist place, as represented in literature, is frequently built around some nostalgic perception of history. For some scholars, this reflects dissatisfaction with existing societal

<sup>11</sup> Mallory and Simpson-Housley, *Geography and Literature*, xii; Porteous, “Deathscape,” 42; Brian Osborne, “Fact, Symbol, and Message: Three Approaches to Literary Landscapes,” *The Canadian Geographer* 32 (1988): 267–69; R. Bordessa, “The City in Canadian Literature: Realist and Symbolic Interpretations,” *The Canadian Geographer* 32.3 (1988): 272–74.

<sup>12</sup> Osborne, “Fact, Symbol and Message,” 267.

<sup>13</sup> Brosseau, “Geography’s Literature,” 349.

<sup>14</sup> Although, see W. Montell, *Don’t Go Up Kettle Creek: Verbal Legacy of the Upper Cumberland* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); W. Robbins, “Narrative Form and Great River Myths: The Power of Columbia River Stories,” *Environmental History Review* 17.2 (Summer 1993): 1–22; R. Hay, “A Rooted Sense of Place in Cross-cultural Perspective,” *The Canadian Geographer* 42.3 (1998): 245–66; Shauna McCabe, “Contesting Home: Tourism, Memory, and Identity in Sackville, New Brunswick,” *The Canadian Geographer* 42 (1998): 231–45; McKay, “Among the Fisherfolk”; Squire, “Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being.”

<sup>15</sup> Osborne, “Fact, Symbol and Message,” 268.

conditions, and is frequently held to be a logical outcome of the linear progress of modernity wherein the past is always subsumed by the present and the future. In more concrete terms, the homogenizing effects of industrial capitalism and rapid information exchange have reached nearly all corners of our physical space and society, subsuming many aspects of local place and offering severe challenges to the maintenance of local identity. For David Harvey, increased concern with the historical past and the rise of a heritage industry reflect a broader societal search for stability of time and place where identities and social and moral positions supposedly existed with greater certainty.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, John Agnew posits the devaluation of place in relation to the rise of cultural modernism, a point that Ian McKay demonstrated in his now classic studies of Nova Scotia.<sup>17</sup> However, in re-constituting the past for present consumption (essentially commodifying the literature of the past), interpreters of literature are necessarily selective in their view of history. In some cases, heritage thus constituted might be considered instrumentalist in that it serves a particular, usually economic, agenda. Nuala Johnson's discussion of heritage tourism highlights many of the commodification imperatives surrounding historical authenticity, and Shelagh Squire's analysis of the role of Lucy Maud Montgomery's fiction on the Parks Canada-sanctioned tourism development of the Cavendish area of Prince Edward Island indicates an extreme form of the re-reading of a text onto the contemporary landscape.<sup>18</sup> While Roberts' writing has not resulted in a landscape of "Mrs. Bembridge's Pizza," "Jim Warden's Laundromat" or "Luella's Convenience Store" in the manner of the Cavendish landscape, it continues to be read into the collective memory of the resident population, reinterpreting fiction and fact and vice versa.

#### PLACE: WESTCOCK, NEW BRUNSWICK

Westcock is a small, scattered settlement on an elevated ridge adjacent to the Tantramar marshlands and the upper reaches of the Bay of Fundy.

<sup>16</sup> David Harvey, "Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination," *Annals, Association of American Geographers* 80 (1990): 418–34.

<sup>17</sup> John Agnew, "The Devaluation of Place in Social Science," in *The Power of Place: Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations*, ed. J. Agnew and J. Duncan (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 9–29; McKay, "Among the Fisherfolk," "History and the Tourist Gaze," and *The Quest of the Folk*.

<sup>18</sup> Nuala Johnson, "Where Geography and History Meet: Heritage Tourism and the Big House in Ireland," *Annals, Association of American Geographers* 86.3 (1996): 551–66; Squire, "Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being."

It is one of many such settlements that have existed on the upland margins surrounding the former industrial service centre and now predominantly university town of Sackville (population 6000). Westcock was a site of native encampment for perhaps a thousand years prior to European contact in the late seventeenth century. The name Westcock is an Anglicization of the Mi'kmaq "Oakshaak" (and variously "Veskak" and "Wesquak").<sup>19</sup> A French Acadian population settled in the area in the last decades of the seventeenth century, farming the marshland and producing hay and cattle. By 1754 there were 64 permanent inhabitants and a further nineteen families of refugee Acadians fleeing from other parts of Nova Scotia. When British troops destroyed the Acadian settlement in 1755 following the capture of the French fort of Beausejour across the bay, a hundred buildings were claimed to have been destroyed, half of which were said to be residences.<sup>20</sup> In 1761 Westcock became the site for the town plot of the new settlement of Sackville established for a group of New England colonists granted free land by the governor of Nova Scotia. The settlement failed to prosper on the site, however, and with the bridging of the Tantramar River in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the focus of settlement activity shifted to the location of present-day Sackville, five kilometres northeast of Westcock. In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, Westcock had a successful rural economy based on shipbuilding, lumbering and marsh agriculture. Increasingly through the early twentieth century, its economic functions became based on industrial employment in Sackville, especially with improved transport links and manufacturing employment in the expanding foundries.<sup>21</sup> The decline of small-scale shipbuilding in the region by the 1890s, the increased scale and mechanization of lumbering in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the relative stagnation of marshland agriculture contributed to Westcock residents becoming progressively more dependent on Sackville. Similarly, improved mobility fostered an increasing concentration of services, education

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<sup>19</sup> See W. Hamilton, *At the Crossroads: A History of Sackville, New Brunswick* (Wolfville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2004), 34.

<sup>20</sup> See Andrew Hill Clark, *Acadia: The Geography of Early Nova Scotia to 1760* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 100 and 121, as well as Robert Summerby-Murray, "Interpreting Cultural Landscapes: A Historical Geography of Human Settlement on the Tantramar Marshes, New Brunswick," in *Themes and Issues of Canadian Geography III*, Vol. 34, ed. Christophe Stadel (Salzburg: Institute of Geography and Geoinformation, 1999), 157–74.

<sup>21</sup> See Robert Summerby-Murray, "Interpreting Deindustrialised Landscapes of Atlantic Canada: Memory and Industrial Heritage in Sackville, New Brunswick," *The Canadian Geographer* 46.1 (2002): 48–62.

and retailing in Sackville, leaving the Westcock population on the periphery. Many other small settlements on the edge of the Tantramar marshes (and throughout Maritime Canada) underwent similar transitions, losing population and becoming almost ephemeral in the late twentieth century. Some of these remain today as names on maps (such as Fairfield and Cherry Burton), but others have left only cleared fields and local memories. For example, the similarly-named neighbouring community of Second Westcock, the setting for Roberts' 1896 "Lou's Clarionet" story, once boasted a church and a collection of houses; today it is a blueberry field on a rough track.<sup>22</sup>

Although subject to similar economic changes, including improved accessibility and an increasing role as a dormitory community for Sackville, Westcock maintains its sense of identity and continues to have a resident population that creates its sense of place. Although the following discussion sets aside the largely economic patterns in order to focus on the role of Roberts' writings as an agent in maintaining the Westcock sense of place, it is clear that these economic factors provide much of the imperative for the appropriation of Roberts' work and the aesthetic or moral high ground it grants to Westcock residents.

The analysis that follows is based on the transcripts of 28 contributors to the St. Ann's Church oral history project, the database for which (including transcripts and aural recordings) is now housed in the Mount Allison University Archives. Contributors were aged between their late-50s and mid-90s. All contributors were interviewed in June and July 1997 using a loosely-structured set of questions covering schooling, employment, transport, the role of St. Ann's and their views on Westcock in relation to Sackville. Most interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and all were recorded and transcribed.<sup>23</sup> Thirteen of the contributors (46 per cent) made explicit and unprompted reference to Roberts' works to aid them in their own story-telling, while others clearly drew upon Roberts' writing even without acknowledging it as a source for their memory.

#### TEXT: FACT OR FICTION IN THE WRITING OF SIR CHARLES G.D. ROBERTS

The text in this example is made up of those works of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts that make explicit reference to Westcock and the wider Tantramar re-

<sup>22</sup> See Robert Summerby-Murray, "The Fantastic Black Panther in the Writing of Charles G.D. Roberts: Forging Canadian National Identity from Primeval Nature" (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>23</sup> See Robert Summerby-Murray and Susan Coombs, "The St. Ann's Oral History Project: Transcript of Recorded Interviews," Volumes I and II (unpublished, 1997).

gion. As one of Canada's celebrated late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century writers, Roberts' life and works have been well documented and subjected to considerable scholarly attention.<sup>24</sup> Roberts' father was the rector of St. Ann's Anglican Church between 1860 and 1874, moving to Westcock in the year of his son's birth. Although he left Westcock at fourteen, Roberts makes frequent reference to the Westcock and Tantramar landscape in his work. W.J. Keith refers to these fourteen years in Westcock as the most influential period of Roberts' life, while David Bentley analyzes the role of the Tantramar landscape as a referential point for much of his poetry and semi-fictional writing.<sup>25</sup> Shauna McCabe points to the commodification of Roberts' work as part of a tourism strategy for the Sackville area, and demonstrates how the factual realities of his Westcock origins are downplayed in favour of the tourist interests of adjacent Sackville, presumably with the assumption that Westcock's fictional identity has become largely subsumed within Sackville.<sup>26</sup> My analysis of community place-making through oral history argues against that assumption.

Significant aspects of Roberts' work are grounded in the landscapes of Westcock and the Tantramar region and contribute to the situating of these places within a national iconography. His poetry and prose, with its evocation of a rough-hewn landscape of sea and forest, is hailed inevitably as one of the first steps towards the creation of a distinctive Canadian national literature. Many of his novels, however, are simply predictable melodramas of varying

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<sup>24</sup> See for example the wide range of biographical and interpretive analysis in James Cappon, *Charles G.D. Roberts and the Influence of His Times* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1932); Elsie M. Pomeroy, *Sir Charles G.D. Roberts* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1943); W.J. Keith, *Charles G.D. Roberts* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969); James Polk, *Wilderness Writers: Ernest Thompson Seton, Charles G.D. Roberts, Grey Owl* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1972); *The Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium*, ed. Glen Clever (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1984); L. Boone, "Organizing Bohemia: The Letters of Charles G.D. Roberts," in *Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium*, 15–25; *The Proceedings of the Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium*, ed. Carrie MacMillan (Halifax, NS: Nimbus, 1984); *The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts: A Critical Edition*, ed. D. Pacey (Wolfville, NS: Wombat Press, 1985); John Caldwell Adams, *Sir Charles God Damn: The Life of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986); Thomas Hodd, "Charles G.D. Roberts' Cosmic Animals: Aspects of 'Mythicism' in *Earth's Enigmas*," in *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*, ed. Janice Fiamengo (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007), 184–205; and Janice Fiamengo, "Looking at Animals, Encountering Mystery: The Wild Animal Stories of Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G.D. Roberts," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 44.1 (Winter 2010): 36–59. See also further secondary sources at [http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/nble/r/roberts\\_g\\_d.html](http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/nble/r/roberts_g_d.html)

<sup>25</sup> Keith, *Charles G.D. Roberts*; David Bentley, "The Poetics of Roberts' Tantramar Space," in *Proceedings of the Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium*, 17–41.

<sup>26</sup> McCabe, "Contesting Home."

quality, albeit with passages of masterful writing. For Westcock residents, the major works that continue to provide reference points (and within which we see frictions between fact and fiction) are his poems “Tantramar Revisited” (1883), “The Salt Flats” (1891), “The Pea Fields” (1891), “Ave” (1892) and “Westcock Hill” (1929)—a tender memorial to his father—and his romantic novel from 1906, *The Heart that Knows*. Although the 1906 novel is described by John Moss as “just short of dreadful, though not so bad as some of Roberts’ other full-length fictions,” it contains excellent descriptions of the village of Westcock at the time of Roberts’ boyhood.<sup>27</sup> It is this descriptive element that has made the novel so easily appropriated as a text for proclaiming a distinctive Westcock identity—and for blurring the lines between fact and fiction for members of the local community.

#### A DISCOURSE OF PLACE: THE ST. ANN’S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT AND THE ROLE OF ROBERTS’ WORK

Roberts’ writing on the Westcock and Tantramar area contains many elements identified as characteristic of the regional novel. His descriptions of the land and its inhabitants are well developed and physically accurate, his word-painting is vibrant, and his sense of the region’s significance to the broad structures of Canada’s history and economy is clear. The theme of survival, which eventually was to play a key role in the evolution of a distinctive Canadian literature, is apparent in the idea of wresting a living from the sea, the marsh and the forest.<sup>28</sup> The forest itself holds a mythical place for Roberts. Not just a setting for his various animal stories, it becomes the arena for a Conradian struggle between good and evil. The immediacy of the forest and marsh landscape provides a central associative feature for today’s readers. From Westcock Hill one can still observe the ebb and flow of tide, the changes in light, movement and season captured in “Tantramar Revisited,” “The Pea Fields” and *The Heart that Knows*. The enduring agricultural practices on the Westcock marshes continue to suggest connections to Roberts’ writing, while St. Ann’s church and other built features in the landscape are described so as to be instantly recognizable to today’s Westcock residents.

Similar to Darby’s contention that Hardy renamed physical places to suit his purposes, Roberts manipulated the human landscape of Westcock.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> John Moss, “Writing to the Reader: The Novels of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts,” in *Proceedings of the Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Simpson-Housley and Norcliffe, *A Few Acres of Snow*, preface.

<sup>29</sup> Brosseau, “Geography’s Literature,” 336.

In *The Heart that Knows*, for example, there are numerous oblique references to real people, the degree of disguise inversely proportional to their goodness. Thus, the Reverend Goodridge is clearly Roberts' father, good in more than name. As respondents in the oral history project demonstrate, it becomes difficult to separate Roberts' fictional account of characters, places and events from the respondents' own; indeed, they become intertwined. Roberts' Westcock operates both as source and confirmation of elements held in collective memory. For many of those interviewed, Roberts' fiction was entirely non-fictional in terms of the place geography it created and in its characterization of local individuals. In the following oral history excerpt, *The Heart that Knows*, the most widely-quoted of Roberts' works by those interviewed, represents a text that offers social legitimation, factual certainty and moral superiority.<sup>30</sup>

[Interviewer]: Do you remember a store down on the corner? *Oh, that was way back in Charles Roberts' days. Nobody living would remember that.... Who operated it? In that book The Heart that Knows Luella Warden's uncle... anyway, she went to live with her uncle and he run the store and the book says she used to sit in the window and look down on the bideau*<sup>31</sup>.... *I forget the name of that fellow that run that store but it's in that book The Heart that Knows [Campbell, 40–41].*<sup>32</sup>

... *did you read that book The Heart that Knows? Well, the girl in that story, the main girl in that story was living in that house and they talked about apple trees in that book*

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<sup>30</sup> Charles G.D. Roberts, *The Heart that Knows* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1906; repub. Halifax: Formac Publishing, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> "Bideau" is a local corruption of "aboideau" or "aboiteau," the Acadian French term for a uni-directional valve set in a boxed culvert within a dyke that allows freshwater to drain off the enclosed land or out of a stream system but prevents inundation by sea water at high tide. For considerably more detail on this important technology, see J. Sherman Bleakney, *Sods, Soil and Spades: The Acadians at Grand Pré and their Dykeland Legacy* (Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004); Karl Butzer, "French Wetland Agriculture in Atlantic Canada and its European Roots: Different Avenues to Historical Diffusion," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92.3 (2002): 451–70; Matthew Hatvany, "The Origins of the Acadian Aboiteau: An Environmental-historical Geography of the Northeast," *Historical Geography* 30 (2002): 121–37; and Kevin Leonard, "The Origin and Dispersal of Dykeland Technology," *Les Cahiers de la Société historique Acadienne* 22.1 (1991): 31–59.

<sup>32</sup> Citations enclosed in square brackets refer to interview transcripts and page numbers found in Summerby-Murray and Coombs, "The St. Ann's Oral History Project."

*and that's where our home was ... I can't remember that—I'm just going by that book The Heart that Knows. [McLeod, 207]*

*... That Roberts' book The Heart that Knows really got me interested. It's just like being there. You can picture everything he describes. [Murray, 227]*

In these cases, fallible memory is affirmed by fiction. The novel works reflexively as both description of place and source for memory of place—even when such memory is beyond the living memory of the person interviewed. This, of course, begs the question of whether respondents are providing memory of place or memory of some distant reading of the text. The final result is the same, however: a created place that is constantly being remade by memory.

The following example compares the same event, first using excerpts from Roberts' text and then narrated by a respondent:

*It happened that very late one night, when the barquentine was still on the stocks in Purdy's shipyard, the rector was jogging slowly homeward .... The next instant he vaulted the fence and ran as fast as he could across the field toward the ship, shouting 'Fire! Fire! Fire!' .... By the time the shipcarpenters came running, half-awake from the big house far at the other side of the yard, the rector had the fire well in hand .... But as a result of that night's adventure the name of the barquentine ... was changed at the eleventh hour to the G.G. Goodridge.... (Roberts, 1906, *The Heart that Knows*. Reprint 1984, 6–7).*

*The Purdy shipyard was right down on the shore of the river and this G.G. Roberts was the father of this Charles G.D. Roberts and he was the rector of the St. Ann's Church for quite a few years. So while he was driving by there one evening on his horse and the men who were working on the vessel had quit for the day and he noticed smoke coming up from the back part of the vessel. So he went into the house and alerted the men in the house the vessel was on fire and of course put the fire out and they named the schooner G.G. Roberts for him [Campbell, O. 62].*

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<sup>33</sup> Brosseau, "Geography's Literature," 348.

The novel then serves to reinforce reality and vice versa and, as a text, “generates another type of geography” of place, even one that contains a friction between fact and fiction.<sup>33</sup> This is not simply ignorance, duplicity or naiveté; at least one respondent argued: “You can’t go by Charles G.D. Roberts’ writings either because we all know what authors do. They add fiction” [Carter, 88]. But it is clear that most readers interpreted *The Heart that Knows* as an accurate account of the Westcock landscape and thus a direct source for confirming, informing or creating their hazy memory.

A further element of the traditional regional novel is the mythologizing of some past age in which social relationships were believed to be more harmonious, simpler and honest, and in which material progress brought prosperity. An example of this comes from the frequent references to Roberts’ work in association with the height of shipbuilding and sailing activity affecting Westcock residents. As well as a shipbuilding industry, Westcock, as with neighbouring Sackville, had a number of seafaring families, members of which were part of North American, Caribbean, South American and Asian trading operations, in most cases operating out of Saint John, Boston and New York, but also serving coastal trade along the eastern seaboard.<sup>34</sup> Many respondents referred to this ship-building and sea-faring past as a source of employment for their forebears and as a means of linking Westcock to a wider, somewhat romanticized world of international tall ships. This romanticized world is exactly that portrayed by Roberts in *The Heart that Knows*, in which the male character travels to Asia, as far distant as possible in order to experience the self-discovery process that allows for a purified return to Westcock and an eventual wedding in the “old grey church in the woods,” St. Ann’s.

The discourse of the text continues in the attitude shown towards Roberts by respondents. While Roberts perhaps has suffered a lack of public recognition as a poet and writer, for Westcock residents he has attained the stature of local hero.<sup>35</sup> In the oral history project, respondents generally lionized him, although this was based less on their perception of his literary talent than on some familiar connection. Some respondents displayed deference in the use of his title or recounted Roberts-related stories that legitimated the teller by association:

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Ennals, “‘Business for Ships is Miserable Dull’: A New Brunswick Mariner Confronts the Waning Days of Sail,” *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du Nord* 9.1 (1999): 23–29.

<sup>35</sup> McCabe, “Contesting Home,” 237.

*... Of course everyone in Westcock, the seniors especially, all seemed to think that Sir Charles G.D. Roberts was like their son [Campbell, 62];*

*... Sir Charles G.D. Roberts' father preached here according to that book. [McLeod, 208];*

*... and she told us the story that they had a young troubadour that came down and serenaded the girls. He was 14 or 15 and they couldn't stand him so to show their displeasure they one night apparently emptied their collective chamber pots out the window. That stopped the troubadour who lived up the road.... He became better known as Sir Charles G.D. Roberts. So those Milner girls got even but they didn't turn him off women. The rest of his life he was quite enamoured with many women .... [Fisher, 131–32];*

*... Mr. Fred Cole was telling me one time Sir Charles G.D. Roberts' father, the minister, he used to drive him to church. So he said 'it was very cold.' Mr. Roberts said, 'Oh it's cold. I've got something to keep us warm'. He pulled out a bottle of rum. [Oulton, 248]*

Of great significance for the oral history respondents is the central role that Roberts assigns to St. Ann's in the Westcock community and landscape. Both the church and the persona of his parson father provide all that is good in *The Heart that Knows*. The oral history participants were keenly aware of the church's historical significance and its role in the community. This history is interpreted and articulated collectively in the support shown for the church's maintenance, and in assessments of the relationship between St. Ann's in Westcock and the other parish church, St. Paul's in Sackville. Established in 1817, St. Ann's is one of two largely unaltered examples of late-Georgian classical church architecture in the Diocese of Fredericton.<sup>36</sup> As the first church in the parish (established in the Diocese of Nova Scotia prior to the formation of the Diocese of Fredericton, which now encompasses all of New Brunswick), members of St. Ann's see it as the mother church. One of the earliest Anglican churches in the diocese, its Loyalist origins are clear, both in its architecture and in its method of establishment. Its construction

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<sup>36</sup> Gregg Finley and Lynn Wigginton, *On Earth as it is in Heaven: Gothic Revival Churches of Victorian New Brunswick* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 1995), 124.

was financed in part by the Botsford family, prominent Loyalists who arrived in Westcock in 1790 from New England via the Saint John River valley. The Botsfords had a large land-holding in Westcock, most of it centred on Westcock House, a substantial manor house overlooking the marshes and from which the Botsfords conducted their legal and political business. Amos Botsford was at one time Speaker of the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly and other family members remained prominent in provincial political and judicial circles well into the nineteenth century. In the same way that Roberts' writing provides a source for a romanticized Westcock landscape, St. Ann's is the foundation of true Loyalist Anglicanism in the Parish of Sackville, connected to the political success of the Botsfords.

Despite its congregation being much smaller and remaining essentially "the old grey church in the wood" described by Roberts in *Westcock Hill*, some respondents viewed St. Ann's in a form of competition with St. Paul's in Sackville, or "uptown," as they referred to the larger settlement. There is a sense of the moral purity of the underdog in these comments, but they reflect fierce pride as well as concern over the economic changes that Westcock has experienced. "Uptown" suggests a more sophisticated, expansive place beyond St. Ann's and Westcock, and many respondents used the phrase as shorthand for St. Paul's and Sackville. To this extent, St. Paul's—and, by association, Sackville—become the focus of social and cultural resistance for the Westcock community. This resistance is sanctioned by the authority of Roberts' texts (particularly *The Heart that Knows*), which provide a legitimizing source of identity for Westcock residents, politicizing the tension between fact and fiction.

... For 50 years the Sackville people came down here and the Dorchester people.... This was the first church. [Campbell, 51]

... We used to go uptown, we used to go up to St. Paul's for our Christmas concerts. [Campbell, 52]

... Were people in Westcock very dependent on Sackville? Well the ones that did work worked at the foundries or at the stores. Probably no more than Sackville depended on them to go do the work. But they always said that this area was supposed to be the main town but whatever happened to make them start going to Sackville, I don't know. [Johnson, 45]

... The stage coach stopped where? Right down, the next

*house down.... That's how important Westcock was then.*  
[Campbell, Johnson, 47]

*... Whatever became of the chandelier [in St. Ann's], I don't know. Probably St. Paul's took it. Well they'd have had electric lights long before we would.* [Campbell, Johnson, 51]

*... I wouldn't go uptown to church.... I mean, I like St. Paul's*  
... [Johnson, 59]

Respondents clearly viewed St. Ann's as vital to the identity of Westcock and made many references to the church's role in Roberts' writing. Community interest in the church's history is also illustrated by various events that highlighted aspects of past Westcock life. For example, the 1997 celebration of St. Ann's 180th anniversary included a nineteenth-century-style soiree featuring readings of Roberts' poetry by noted Canadian poet, Douglas Lochhead (through his own poetry a guardian of Tantramar's regional identity). The event also featured an analysis of the state of missionary Anglicanism in the upper Bay of Fundy just prior to St. Ann's founding, as well as slides of aspects of Westcock's historical geography. Former and present parish rectors are keen historians and have encouraged the re-enactment of St. Ann's 1823 consecration and a dramatic production of one of Roberts' stories.<sup>37</sup> More recently there has been something of a renaissance of interest in Roberts' work. Several publications have addressed its significance to the Westcock (and wider Tantramar) area. Shauna McCabe's 1998 critique was followed by Charles Scobie's *Roberts Country*.<sup>38</sup> Scobie was also instrumental in the campaign to locate a new National Historic Sites and Monuments Board plaque commemorating Roberts adjacent to St. Ann's, further reinforcing for Westcock residents the author's national significance, and providing a granite and bronze fact to support the representation of this community and landscape in fiction.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> R. McConnell, "Christmas Carols and Pageant for the Parish of Sackville Based on the Story by Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, 'Lou's Clarinet'," unpublished script (1994).

<sup>38</sup> McCabe, "Contesting Home"; Charles Scobie, *Roberts Country: Sir Charles G.D. Roberts and the Tantramar* (Sackville, NB: Tantramar Heritage Trust, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Along with Scobie, I was a member of the Tantramar Historic Sites Committee that lobbied for the commemorative plaque. This process was complicated by a National Historic Sites and Monument Board policy that an individual can be commemorated only on one monument. Roberts is commemorated on a plaque in Fredericton, along with fellow Confederation writers Bliss Carmen and Francis Sherman. A successful case was made for the Westcock plaque on the grounds of Roberts' significance to the particular region and community.

In referring back to Roberts and his family, respondents in the oral history archive appropriate, largely unconsciously, Roberts' romanticized perspective on their own Westcock and Tantram landscape. They also connect themselves to the wider literary world that Roberts represents. For the respondents, the era of Roberts' writing was Westcock's golden age, a time when young Westcock men set sail to foreign ports and returned as successful seamen and merchants. Moreover, if Roberts was part of a movement that established a national iconography and constructed an emblematic Canadian wilderness through poetry and prose, then Westcock is very much part of that. In this way, Westcock is more than a small village on the upper Bay of Fundy and is instead, as Ian McKay has argued, the quintessentially Canadian village of folk tradition. In appropriating Roberts' work, Westcock residents can connect themselves and their place identity to national iconography in a manner that transcends those forces of economic centralization and their negative consequences on the small community.

The underlying competition with Sackville is thus decided—Pyrrhically perhaps—in Westcock's favour. The Roberts connection provides Westcock residents with an almost sacred victory, a role as a hearth and source for some spiritual form of Canadian identity. In doing so, community and place are strengthened, and Westcock residents are armed with a form of moral and aesthetic resistance to the pressures of extra-local economic forces. Fiction wins out over fact, creating an understanding of the local landscape that is in a constant form of slippage or friction. This process constitutes the real discourse at work in this study and which figures so largely in the words of the respondents.

## CONCLUSIONS

On at least one level, Roberts' texts (primarily *The Heart that Knows*, but also poems such as "Westcock Hill") function in the manner of the regional novel, using vivid and generally factually-accurate descriptive writing to create word pictures of place, and articulating social relationships and economic practices that bear a close resemblance to contemporary realities. Beyond this, however, the evidence from the oral history respondents suggests that Roberts' various texts also function as part of a discourse across time between the author and the present-day Westcock population, seeking always to recreate place and imbue it with associative identity. In large measure, this reflects a language and politics of resistance as West-

cock residents face the forces of economic centralization that threaten local community. Explaining why Roberts' work resonates so clearly within this oral history archive requires an understanding of the attractiveness of anti-modernism. In one sense, the discourse presented here is built around a politics of resistance: resistance to economic specialization, centralization, declining local economies, declining community status and the host of homogenizing elements of late-twentieth-century modernist culture. Resistance has involved appropriating something of fictional, artistic and implicit high moral character, developing a language that is made sacred and given higher symbolic stature than the processes of economic change that have altered the Westcock community. Against this, however, one must consider McKay's argument that anti-modernism becomes a strategy for avoiding the very real issues of class, exploitation, gender and inequality within a community, "... a systematic exclusion of those aspects of the past that would help people think historically about alternative outcomes, or about patterns of power and privilege in society, or about themselves as agents and victims of history."<sup>40</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest that members of this community, as reflected in the oral history respondents, are naive or ignorant in their understanding of Roberts' fictional works, but there is sufficient tension between fact and fiction, sufficient ambiguity that blurs the boundaries, such that the factual and the fictional become mutually reinforcing in popular understanding. The fictional has been co-opted into a politics of resistance, perhaps beyond the facts of place. It remains to be seen whether the appropriation of Roberts' work by Westcock residents also reflects a sense of disengagement that may ultimately and paradoxically create an irrelevant place identity and further fragment the community. All current evidence suggests that this intersection of fact and fiction in Roberts' work has actually empowered local understanding of a sense of place, real and imagined.

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<sup>40</sup> McKay, *The Quest of the Folk*, 40.