Tales of the Wilderness: the Canadian Animal Story

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To paraphrase the standard explanation of mountain-climbing, one can say that Canadians write about animals because they are there. Crossing the American plains in 1805, members of the Lewis and Clark expedition noted "great numbers of buffalow, Elk, Deer, antilope, beaver, porcupines and water fowls - such as Geese, ducks of dift. kinds, and a fiew Swan." To the north there was even greater variety. Lakes, streams, and forests teemed with fur-bearing animals, skies were darkened by the flight of birds, and the earth trembled when herds of buffalo passed over the prairies. Even today the tourist driving through the Rockies can see herds of caribou, elk, mountain goats, and sheep grazing beside the highway. Families of black bear hang about the public campsites and across the lake the summer cottagers can hear the howl of a coyote or the miao of a cougar.

From the beginning, the wilderness was regarded ambivalently by the newly-arrived white men. For the fur-trader, it was the basis of the economy. For the settler, it was part of the hostile environment against which he had to struggle unceasingly, a place where

> I have seen red eyes
> on my throat from behind
> every bush and waterfall
> greedy for blood.[1]

Though a place of danger, the wilderness was also a source of food, clothing, and other necessities. As an English gentlewoman, Mrs. Catharine Parr Traill, commented in *The Canadian Settler's Guide*:

> When the Backwoodsman first beholds the dense mass of dark forest which his hands must clear from the face of the ground, he sees in it nothing more than a wilderness of vegetation which it is his lot to destroy: he does not know then how much that is essential to the comfort of his household is contained in the wild forest.[2]

Need and economic motivation brought the animal and human worlds together with animals paying the price for human suvival.

At the same time, the pastoral myth which the eminent Canadian critic, Northrop Frye, sees at the heart of all social mythology,[3] produced an attitude of idealization. Though the Canadian forests were not depicted as Edens, they were the milieux in which animals seemed to exhibit the courage, co-operation, freedom, inventiveness, and endurance that marked the pioneer spirit at its best.

Out of these differing contexts was produced the realistic animal story, the one original genre which Canada has contributed to world literature. It is perhaps not surprising that, with few exceptions, our most perceptive writers about animals have come from Britain or the United States, countries which have traditionally regarded Canada, in a romantic way, as the last frontier. As Margaret Atwood puts it in "Further Arrivals,"

Whether the wilderness is
real or not
depends on who lives there.[4]

The originators of the realistic animal story, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton, were products of the nineteenth century interest in biology and of the Darwinian concept of evolution. Though their contemporary, Bliss Carman, might adopt a Wordsworthian view - "*It is a religious feeling, this special love of the* natural world"[5] - Roberts and Seton claimed to be objective in their approach. In the woods of New Brunswick and Ontario, "nature red in tooth and claw" engaged in the struggle for survival. It was a desire to describe this struggle from the animal's point of view that prompted their efforts. Their animals were not to be disguised human types, as were the characters of Beatrix Potter and Kenneth Grahame. The chief problem lay in arousing interest without imposing human personalities, while at the same time creating an impression of individual character. As Roberts put it,

> the exciting adventure lies in the effort to "get under the skins," so to speak, of these shy and elusive beings, to discern their motives, to uncover and chart their simple mental processes . . . for I am absolutely convinced that within their widely varied yet strictly set limitations, the more advanced of the furred and feathered folk do reason.[6]

In his Prefatory Note to *Red Fox*, Roberts says that his animal hero is typical of the species, "both in his characteristics and in the experiences that befall him, in spite of the fact that he is stronger and cleverer than the average run of foxes."

Sometimes the world of nature is used to criticize the world of man, at other times the animals live out their lives independently, though Roberts is constantly aware of the precariousness of both worlds. In "On the Roof of the World," for example, the polar bear crawls noiselessly towards the air-hole of the seals while on the other side the equally hungry man readies his spear for a conflict that will involve all three species. Killing for food was seen by Roberts as a law of nature. A character in *The Heart of the Ancient Wood* explains,

> They've all got to eat meat, sometimes, for nature don't stand much foolin' with her laws! . . . Oftentimes it's seemed to me all life was just like a few butterflies flitterin' over a graveyard.

The quotation illustrates another characteristic of Roberts, his ability to paint pictures with words and to evoke, through his images, an appropriate mood. Some of his best animal stories are to be found in *The Kindred of the Wild* (1902), *The Watchers of the Trail* (1904), *Thirteen Bears* (1947), and *King of Beasts* (1967). *Red Fox* (1905), described by David McCord as "one of the two finest wild animal stories ever written in English", was re-issued in 1972.

Like Roberts, Ernest Thompson Seton insisted on the realism of his animal characters. Criticized in the United States for writing "sham natural history" and for giving his heroes powers of reasoning and feeling that were too much like man's, he retorted, "We and the beasts are kin - the animals are creatures with wants and feelings differing in degree only from our own." He attributed the tragic destinies of these creatures to the fact that his stories were true. "The life of a wild animal

always has a tragic end."[7] When the vixen heroine of "The Springfield Fox" makes the desperate decision to kill her last surviving offspring rather than to leave him chained in the farmer's yard, she is exhibiting "the stamp of heroism and personality" which Seton perceived in the lives of the hunted. It is she who engages our sympathy rather than the farmer who, after all, has killed the foxes because they are robbing him of the chickens on which his livelihood depends. Similarly, it is with Lobo, Bingo, the Mustang, and Redruff that we identify for they are realised much more graphically and sympathetically than are the humans against whom they contend. In all, Seton wrote more than thirty nature books, including *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898), *The Trail of the Sandhill Stag* (1899), *The Biography of a Grizzly* (1900) and *Lives of the Hunted* (1901). The author's line drawings of animals, tracks, and details of habitat add to the interest these books have for children.

While such books as W.A. Fraser's *Mooswa and Others of the Boundaries* (1906) or Archibald McKishnie's *Dwellers of the Marsh Realm* (1937) are obviously sentimental, most Canadian authors have followed Seton and Roberts in trying to depict animal characters with scientific accuracy. In *The Winter of the Fisher* (1971), Cameron Langford handles the animal biography optimistically. His hero possesses both the fierce tenacity of his species and the powers of reasoning and recollection that help him to withstand forest fires, fellow predators, the long and bitter Ontario winter, and the unrelenting stratagems of the trapper. Unlike the stories of Roberts and Seton, this account ends jubilantly, with a reaffirmation of life symbolized by the finding of a mate and the acceptance of a truce:

> He sat back on his haunches, unconsciously posed to create an almost perfect picture, his sensitive powerful head in profile, his coat gleaming, the saddle of silver fur a regal mantle across his shoulders. He was the only thing the trapper saw when he shipped his paddle and looked back to print the serene beauty of the lake on his memory.

Roderick Haig-Brown, one of Canada's best known authorities on fly-fishing and conservation, goes even further than Seton in justifying acceptance of violence in animal biographies. In the preface to *Panther* (1946), the story of a West Coast cougar, he asserts that

> When Ki-yu killed, he did so, as do all animals, for one or other of three reasons - because he was hungry, because he was in fear of his life, or because his right to a female was challenged. The question of cruelty did not enter into the matter at all.

Stalked and killed by a professional panther hunter, the animal loses out to man in the struggle for survival, but not before he has killed the hounds, with whom we can also sympathise. Among very recent biographies written in the Roberts-Seton tradition are R.D. Lawrence's *Cry Wild: The Story of a Canadian Timber Wolf* (1970), Erik Munsterhjelm's *A Dog Named Wolf* (1972), and David Smith's *Sharptooth: A Year of the Beaver* (1974).

Hunting stories are of particular interest to older children. It should be noted that even when the story is told from the hunter's point of view, the reader's sympathy is generally engaged by the animal-victim. *The*

Greatest Hunt in the World (1924 reissued 1969) is George Allan England's account of the Newfoundland seal hunt which he witnessed in 1922. To the young American, it seemed an "annual carnival" when the normally kind fishermen "mad with bloodlust" reenacted a ritual slaughter that might be compared with the sacrifice of a scapegoat by a primitive tribe. The bonds with magic are strengthened as the sealers tear out the pulsing seal hearts to hang them at their belts. As Julian Huxley points out in *Kingdom of the Beasts*, seals are appealingly human. Nevertheless, this is an exciting account which manages to combine pity for the seal victims with admiration for the hunters, themselves victims of poverty and a harsh environment.

A more recent book is *The Long Hunt* (1969) in which Fred Bruemmer describes a 1200 mile hunting trip by dog team (not snowmobile!) which the author undertook in the company of two Grise Ford Eskimos. The author's photographs provide an effective supplement to the text--touchingly expressive faces of people torn between two ways of life, a row of Arctic hares lying on the snow after being eviscerated by Sam Willy, a husky charged by an enraged polar bear that in the next picture is shown stretched out as if in the relaxation of sleep while the hunters haul him away on a sleigh, and finally musk oxen looking "as placid as contented cows."

An important character in many Canadian stories is the wolf whom folklore and fable have generally treated demonically. "The Wolves' Triumph", Seton's portrait of a northern wolf pack eating a human body, was part of the Canadian art exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, probably because it conformed to the American view of the Canadian North. Farley Mowat in *Never Cry Wolf* (1963) came to the defence of the much aligned species, asserting that the wolf is a domestic paragon, an agent of conservation, and a victim of man's ruthless indulgence in the pleasures of hunting from a plane. R.D. Lawrence's *Cry Wild: The Story of a Canadian Timber Wolf* (1970) is also an apologia, written to banish the myth of fear "with which civilized man has been indoctrinated since pre-medieval times." The life cycle of Silverfeet is sympathetically traced from conception and birth through the expected variations of the survival theme. James Houston's Eskimo tale, *Wolf Run* (1971), treats the wolf mythically. Two wolves, the spirits of grandparents who have been called up by tribal incantations, save an Eskimo boy from starvation by killing a caribou for him.

Another type of hunting story should be mentioned since it reflects the northern educator's realisation that native children should be provided with reading materials relevant to their own experience instead of being forced to cope with Dick-and-Jane-type readers devised for the children of white, urban, middle-class America. *Normie's Goose Hunt* and *Normie's Moose Hunt*, written and illustrated by Vi Cowell and the children of the Moosonee Education Centre, depict an Indian family's tent house near a river, their outboard-motor-powered canoe which carries them to James Bay, and the successful hunt which enable them to fill their canoe with meat. The illustrations, reproducing the crayon-drawings of primary students, record with scrupulous attention to detail the child's impression of his own environment. A similar

motivation lies behind the sixteen books in the Arctic Reading Series (1968) devised by Brian W. Lewis for use in the schools of the Northwest Territories. Real-life experiences such as a walrus hunt or caribou hunt alternate with a rich variety of Indian and Eskimo myths and folktales--illustrated by photographs, line drawings, or coloured prints.

Increasingly, Canadian animal stories are showing a concern with conservation. The tragic effects of "overkill" are revealed in Fred Bodsworth's *The Last of the Curlews* (1955), a poignant indictment of man's wastefulness and greed. Against a background of extracts from scientific journals concerned with the Eskimo curlew, which once had migrated "in millions that darkened the sky," the author develops the biography of the last pair. They move from the "dark jungle riverbottom of the Guianas or Venezuela" towards the Arctic nesting grounds illumined by the aurora borealis - "minute specks of earthbound flesh challenging an eternity of sea and sky." But the female is senselessly killed by a farmer. The male goes on alone. As if on canvas the northern setting is recreated - the bright colours of the tundra's brief summer, the shrouding mists on the horizon, the greening lichens. The male frenziedly searches for a mate. Despite the author's comment that "it was a blessing of their rudimentary brains that they couldn't see themselves in the stark perspective of reality," the last of the curlews conveys a sense of his isolation and doom. A similar concern with conservation is apparent in Bruce S. Wright's *Black Duck Spring* (1966) which weaves into the life cycle of the central character, accounts of the whale-killing walrus, the fresh-water seals of Ungava, the grey seals of the St. Lawrence, the white whales, and the now extinct great auk and sea-mink.

A recent development on the Canadian scene is an increased appreciation of native cultural traditions. The desire of developers to exploit the north's natural resources is going hand in hand with the desire of social scientists to protect more ancient patterns of life. At the same time the economic profit to be derived from Eskimo sculptures and prints of Indian beadwork and totem poles has aroused interest in the myths and legends that provided the inspiration for native artists. Many of these tales, translated into English and illustrated in the traditional styles of petroglyph, boldly-coloured print, or stylised Haida art, are suitable for children.

In the introduction to *Son of Raven, Son of Deer* (1967), George Clutesi says that the myths of the Tse-Shaht which he records were handed on orally so that the young might be taught that there was "a place in the sun for all living things." The Indians and Eskimos not only appreciated the rights of animals to co-existence; they attributed to them powers man himself did not possess - shape-shifting, control of natural phenomena, and the mythic role of benefactor. A deer is the Tse-Shaht's fire-giver. An Arctic hare makes day alternate with the fox's darkness for the Central Eskimo. On the West Coast, the Raven provides light. Between man and animals there was such sympathetic intimacy that the Indian would show remorse and do penance whenever he killed an animal for meat. As mythical ancestors enshrined on totem poles, animals had personalities and souls - and powers of vengeance if

the proper rituals were not performed. These motifs recur in many folktale collections, for example, Frances Fraser's *The Bear Who Stole the Chinook* (1959), Christie Harris's *Once Upon A Totem* (1963), Robert Ayre's *Sketco the Raven* (1961), H.T. Schwarz's *Windigo and Other Tales of the Ojibway* (1969), Helen Caswell's *Shadows from the Singing House* (1968), and the B.C. Indian Arts Society's *Tales from the Longhouse* (1973).

About Eskimo tales, Father Maurice Metayer says that they amount to advice for future generations about how to live a life to best advantage.[8] In fact, the proud wolf, the cunning Arctic Fox, and the angry owl encountered in *Tales from the Igloo* seem to display the same kind of expedient behaviour as do the animals in Aesop's fables. The intensity of the struggle for food in the far north is illustrated by the story of the deceitful raven who danced in the snow of a sheltering cliff so that the igloos below would be buried under an avalanche. When melting snows of spring exposed human bodies, raven "amused himself by emptying the eye sockets of those who had innocently followed his direction" to build their igloos in that spot. Because a view of life that places survival at any cost above all other human values seems of questionable validity, some teachers in Arctic communities have been reluctant to use *Tales from the Igloo* in their classrooms; they prefer such books as Ronald Melzak's *The Day Tuk Became a Hunter and Other Eskimo Stories* (1967) or James Houston's numerous publications which provide exemplary models suitable for children.

One of Canada's two founding peoples, the French, has contributed the golden phoenixes, prophetic white owls; talking cats, and werewolves of their European heritage. Incongruously, some of these motifs turn up in the folklore of the Woodlands Indians who came into contact with the French in Eastern Canada. Recommended collections include Marius Barbeau's *The Golden Phoenix and other French-Canadian fairy tales* (1958), Claude Aubry's *Le Loup de Noel* (1962), Hazel Boswell's *Legends of Quebec* (1966), and Mary M. Green's *André et le Loup-Garou* (1971).

Myths and legends aside, Canadians have not been particularly successful in writing fantasy. Perhaps the wilderness still presses too insistently upon our consciousness. However, two books that make suitable Christmas gifts for younger readers are *Honky the Christmas Goose* (1972) by Chip Young and *Johann's Gift to Christmas* (1972) by Jack Richards. And, a gift for any occasion would by Dennis Lee's *Alligator Pie* (1974), across whose pages romp whales and snails and rattlesnakes and purple-headed dragons.

Not least important among the varieties of animal stories are those about pets. An early best seller, Marshall Saunder's *Beautiful Joe* (1894), was a canine imitation of *Black Beauty*. Especially suitable for children are Farley Mowat's affectionate and humorous recollections of his childhood pets, *The Dog Who Wouldn't Be* (1957) and *Owls in the Family* (1961). Purchased for four cents during the Depression, Mutt is a Saskatoon Snoopy for, like the Peanuts character, he thinks he is a person. He climbs ladders, goes sailing on the river, and rides around town in the family car, a pair of dark glasses on his nose. In spite of an

unpromising appearance, he turns out to be a famous hunting dog, even retrieving in the closed season from the window of Ashbridge's Hardware a ruffed grouse - already stuffed.

Sheila Burnford's *The Incredible Journey* (1960) is well known as a best-seller and a movie. The journey of a labrador, a Siamese cat, and a bull terrier through the wilderness of Northern Ontario is no less danger-studded than the voyages of Ulysses and is similarly motivated by a desire for home and family. People encountered on the way are judged in terms of their response to the animals - the Finnish homesteaders and the MacKenzies "good", and the water-tossing farmer "bad." Sheila Egoff criticises the book for being sentimental and "incredible," adding "despite its undoubted emotional impact, the book is not entirely honest."[9] Yet Mrs. Burnford is convinced through observation of her own pets, on whom the characters were based, that animals develop through close association the ability to communicate with one another and so to help one another.

The theme of animal heroism frequently takes the form of salvation where the actual survival of the human depends on the loyalty, courage, strength, and devotion of the beast. Horses and dogs are particularly favoured for this role in Frances Dickie's *Husky of the Mounties* (1967) and Richard Hobson Jr's. *Grass Beyond the Mountains* (1951).

In wilderness area, wild animals can often be tamed to fill the role of household pets. As early as 1832 a young immigrant to Ontario wrote a friend in Dublin about his pet bear, Mocaunse:

> She runs about the house like a dog, and is invited to the drawing-room when any visitor arrives who wishes to make her acquaintance.[10]

Probably the most famous pets are Grey Owl's beavers - McGinnis, McGinty, Jelly Roll, and Rawhide--whose adventures are told in *Pilgrims of the Wild* (1935)--and Chikanee and Chilawee, the pet beavers in *The Adventures of Sajo and Her Beaver People* (1935). Actually an Englishman, Archie Belaney passed himself off as a half-breed trapper and guide. The adoption of a pair of baby beavers turned him into a conservationist and author who at the height of his fame was invited to lecture at Buckingham Palace on Canadian wildlife. Perhaps no-one has better described the bonds that can develop between the two worlds. He is speaking of "the Queen" who, for the sake of company one winter, recreated in Grey Owl's cabin her beaverhouse on the lake:

> . . . this sociable and home-loving beast, playful, industrious and articulate, fulfilled my yearning for companionship as no other creature save man, of my own kind especially, could have done. . . . This creature comported herself as a person, of a kind, and she busied herself at tasks that I could, without loss of dignity, have occupied myself at, she made camp, procured and carried supplies, could lay plans and carry them out and stood robustly and resolutely on her own hind legs, metaphorically and actually, and had an independence of spirit that measured up well with my own, seeming to look on me as a contemporary, accepting me as an equal and no more.[11]

That loneliness and isolation encourage the development of mutual aid and comfort is illustrated more simply in Ann Blades' picture book story of *Mary of Mile 18* (1971). The young Mennonite child living in a remote area of British Columbia is finally allowed to adopt a wolf pup after it has proven its value by defending the family chickens from a marauding coyote. The full page "paintings"--leafless poplars, snowy fields, outhouses, woodpiles, and kerosene lamps--vividly record the daily life of those who live in the north.

What values do animal stories have for child readers? Obviously, the excitement and suspense of conflict and the opportunity of identifying emotionally with the animal world make these stories good entertainment. When I asked my young son why he liked reading animal stories - he was engrossed in Seton's *The Biography of a Grizzly* at the time - he replied, "The animals are the goodies - and it's interesting reading about what they eat - and stuff like that." Hardly a literate response but a good critical judgment just the same. As in the fairy tale, the combatants tend to be presented in terms of black and white, with man often cast in the villain's role. For some reason, children find that situation morally satisfying.

The native myths and legends and the realistic animal stories present a philosophical or even a religious view of life. Just as his own first experience of death is often the loss of a pet, so through the animal story the child may learn to accept death as necessary to life. In the stories of Roberts, for example, death is seen to be part of nature's law, a necessary part of regeneration. While accepting the necessity of killing for food, the child learns to condemn the mindless destruction of animal life because of fear, economic "necessity", the self-indulgent pursuit of pleasure, or carelessness in the use of oil and pesticides. Is the violence in the animal story any worse for him than the violence on the TV screen? Roderick Haig-Brown insists that

> nothing in nature, so long as it is honestly observed and honestly described, can harm the mind of a child. Almost all the ills of the human race may be traced to the fact that it has strayed too far from nature and knows too little of the natural order of things. Conceal from children, if you will, the baseness of man. But let them read and understand the ways of animals and birds, of water and wind and earth, for these things are pure and true and unspoiled. [12]

Even though his home may be in a high-rise at the heart of a large city, the child must live imaginatively in the wilderness. For, as Henry Thoreau realised more than a hundred years ago, "we need the tonic of wildness."

1 John Newlove, "Good Company, Fine Houses" in *The Broken Ark*, ed. Michael Ondaatje (Toronto, 1971).

2 Catharine Parr Traill, *A Canadian Settler's Guide*, New Canadian Library (Toronto, 1855 reissued 1969), p. 46.

3 Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto, 1971), p. 238.

4 Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto, 1970).

5 Bliss Carman, *The Kinship of Nature* (Boston, 1903), p. 36.

6 Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, *Eyes of the Wilderness*, p. 5-6, cited by W.J. Keith in *Charles G.D. Roberts* (Toronto, 1969), p. 89.

7 Preface to *Wild Animals I Have Known* (New York, 1898 reprinted 1966).

8 Foreword to *Tales from the Igloo*, ed. and trans. Father Maurice Metayer (Edmonton, 1972), p. 6.

9 Sheila Egoff, *The Republic of Childhood* (Toronto, 1967), p. 126.

10 *Authentic Letters from Upper Canada, Including an account of Canadian Field Sports by Thomas William Magrath*, ed. the Rev. Thomas Radcliff (Dublin, 1833 reissued 1953), p. 160.

11 A.L. Belaney (Grey Owl), *Pilgrims of the Wild* (1935 reissued 1968), p. 198.

12 Roderick Haig-Brown, *Panther* (London, 1946), p. 9.

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