

WHITE ROCK BAY

Here's a rave about Canada, and ecology, and art, and Townsville, viewed from the perspective of White Rock Bay.

White Rock Bay, where the rusty, fragmented skeleton of an ancient paddle-steamer shares the shallow, murky waters with egrets, gulls and the occasional pelican. Where you can find oysters, and seashells, and where, one evening early last year, you could have found two novice bushwalkers, Alan Carle and me.

Me beatific. Sunstoned in the sand alongside the fuzzy oyster rocks. Oblivious of the incoming tide (threatening to extinguish Alan's brown-rice-and-soya-beans fire). Oblivious of Alan, the birds and the steamer. Eyebeams heliotrope, horizon-hitched.

Alan scientific. Poking along the beach with his test-tubes (or whatever) in hand. Jackknifing sporadically to imprison some luminous jellylife for his store of "samples".

Alan and me. Cape Cleveland.

Tick-tock goes the celestial clock. Sungod's chariot gets yanked down behind the hills. Is replaced by a scattered line of lights ten miles away.

Me, beach, Alan, steamer silhouette, water, mangroves. Mangroves you can still see and mangroves you can't. Mangroves stretching all the way from White Rock Bay to a scattered line of lights. Alan and me, together in spirit, sharing a moment of pure hatred for a scattered line of lights.

Hey Alan, I'm bugged. Fetch us a bottle of Southern Comfort to lighten your pack. (Alan doesn't "put poisons into his system." We had traded packs for the day, and his was laden with first-year reference books.) Hey Alan, did you ever know a Yankee kid called Bill King? (But Alan is rapt in his samples again).

Bill King belongs to another campfire (pine and balsam) nearly half my life ago. I was canoe trip guide for a Y.M.C.A. camp in Muskoka. That was before they chopped down the forests of Ontario to make Kleenex. Anyhow, Bill was a big, good-natured kid, strong as a moose when he cared to exert himself,

but lazy and a bit of a whinger. He was only two years younger than me, but I was "staff" and he was "camper", and I guess I had to teach him a lesson. The night before our trip went out I loaded up his pack with cans – ninety pounds it was on the infirmary weighscale. Next day there were seven portages on the way down the Musquosh River to Georgian Bay. Bill left first and arrived last on every one of them. I'd jog past with my canoe over my head, quietly splitting my sides at his curses. When he complained about the weight of his pack I'd just say its standard. I remember thinking at the time: that'd be a good story for me to put in the Great Canadian Novel.

Me sitting in the sand at White Rock Bay with unaccustomed muscles aching, feeling my first twinge of remorse for poor old Bill King.

Scattered line of lights. Hey Alan, dumb Yank, how many tons of fossil fuel to keep *Bonanza* on television for an hour in Townsville? Hey Alan, will Aitkenvale vote Aikens? Is the Queen of the Port a virgin? Did the Vice-Chancellor's wife overbid her hand at the Club last Tuesday? Hey Alan, whatyasay we "control burn" Townsville?

Alan poking away at the beach in the dark. He's mad. The other day on the way out to the lighthouse he found six dead sharks on Long Beach. Hey Gordon, look here. (Putrid, decaying, filthy, rotten, dead sharks.) Hold on a minute, Gordon. And then Alan selects the putriddest, decayingest, filthiest, rottenest, deadest shark of the lot, gets out his dissecting kit, and goes to work. Hey Gordon, this must be the liver. (Yuk).

Mad like Whitman. Embraces the universe. No, not quite that, either. Wouldn't embrace the grease on the mechanic's rough hands, because the grease on the mechanic's rough hands isn't biodegradable. Embraces only the biodegradable universe. He'd probably eat turds if you could prove to him that they were healthy, one hundred percent biodegradable turds. Guru's turds. Hey Alan, would you eat guru's turds? Really though, Alan is an old-fashioned, clean-living, optimistic Yankee individualist. No wonder he's in exile.

Me? I'm the Great Canadian Novel writer in exile.

When we rounded the curve in the river below Big Eddy (where the whirlpool is) Bill, who was bowsman in the lead canoe, sang out something about tractors. I think he just wanted a rest after the last portage. But no way we were going on without checking out those tractors. I'd been down the Musquosh half a dozen times before and never seen the like. Three big Caterpillar tractors slashing a hundred-yard swathe through the wilderness. To us at the time (we were all muscle-building and thrill-seeking, and couldn't give a stuff about "Nature") it was an exciting diversion, compared with which shooting rapids was old hat. After admiring the slaughter of the trees for an appropriate time, and ascertaining from the workmen that this, indeed, was to be the new highway north from Toronto, we had lunch on the spot. When we had finished (note this carefully, Alan, for a remarkable quirk of adolescent psychology) . . . when we had finished I calmly and deliberately scattered the luncheon debris --cans, papers, the lot-- over the place where we stood. The campers, who knew me to be of the burn, bash and bury school, were astonished. I remember explaining smugly that now we were "the first to litter the new highway." Perhaps I thought that would be a good line for the Great Canadian Novel.

If you'd only listen to me, Alan, I'd outline a strange anomaly in that last story you didn't listen to. How is it that we, who didn't give a stuff about nature, always meticulously burned, bashed and buried? Well that's just the way it was. We burned, bashed and buried as a matter of course, just as we always left a pile of dry firewood for the next guy at the campsite. But if any poofter (spelled "er" on the end -- betcha didn't know that, Alan, ya fairy) . . . I say if any poofter nature lover had tried to tell us about "ecology", we'd have tossed him in the drink.

Why is it that nature's code always goes by the board when the bulldozers move in?

Alan and me on Cape Cleveland. Laboriously swotting up the names of common flora and fauna from Alan's reference books. Experimenting with unfamiliar woods to see which make the best campfire. Having to go the long way around beaches because we haven't taken the tides into consideration. Back in our respective homes, you know, there wasn't much anybody could tell us about bushwacking. But back home doesn't exist anymore. They chopped it all down to make Kleenex.

Tick-tock

Stupid lights. Why did we have to camp on this side, Alan? We should have stayed on Ticklebelly Bay, where we saw the rock wallaby. Wouldn't the surf be something over there tonight, though?

On Georgian Bay the breakers were coming in like shooting stars. The campers were pulling themselves in their tents (or more likely talking about the rattlesnake Bill saw on Sandy Gray portage), and I was exercising the guide's prerogative: a cigarette, crushed and soggy, and the juice of a teabag, which would be left on a rock for re-use in the morning. But the breakers --they were something you could write about. Big, long, dark swells angling to the shore. Shore end cracks, explodes (BANG!) and a line of white seethes along the length. One explosion after another. And the stars boring holes in the blackness overhead (no need to sleep under the canoe tonight).

What's wrong with the constellations down here, Alan? There's Orion, but he's backwards. The rest don't make any sense; you can't tell one from the other. Big, bright stars everywhere, but shapeless. If only they had the Big Dipper.

If only the guys on the staff were here now. Roger Lewis rapping on. He could scare hell out of the campers with stories he made up as he went along. Big Jim Kroll. Jim was six-foot-six in his socks with a donger so long the rest of us were ashamed to skinny-dip with him. Chuck Cline. Do you remember the night Chuck sneaked home a case of beer from Bala, and tied the bottles to the anchor rope of the Camp Director's dinghy? Might have found a few down there the next night if he hadn't told everybody in camp. "Soupy" Campbell "Soupy" Campbell and several others whose names I haven't forgot. Do you think we'd get so misty-eyed after the jokes and the kidding and everything . . . do you think we'd get so misty-eyed we'd end up singing that campfire song we adapted from "Road to the Isles?" I haven't forgot it either.

It's the far northland that's a-calling me away
As I set forth with my pack and take the road,
It's the call sounding from the forest and the glen.
So off I go with sunlight for my load.
Where the campfire will be burning I'm returning once
again,
Where you see the loon and hear his plaintive wail,

If you're thinking in your inner heart there's swagger
in my step
You've never been along the campfire trail.

It's the flash of paddle blades a-gleaming in the sun
Of canoes so swiftly skimming by the shore,
It's the tang of pine and balsam coming on the breeze
That takes me to the waterways once more,
Where the campfire will be burning I'm returning once
again,
Where you see the loon and hear his plaintive wail,
If you're thinking in your inner heart there's swagger
in my step
You've never been along the campfire trail.

That piece of doggerel means more to me now than anything
in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Bad art, doubtless, but
art nonetheless, stopping up a vacuum and doing art's job --
reminding us of what we have lost. Canada, my Canada, is
lost. A greed machine has turned my forests into Kleenex.

Me sitting in the sand at White Rock Bay empathising with
Bill King again. This afternoon we had to cross a bloody
creek in the mangroves. Thick, oozy mud up to your jock-
strap on either side. No telling how deep it was, or what was
in it (Alligator Creek they called it on the map:).

Alan and me standing there scowling apprehensively at the
mud and the creek. Then the old canoe-trip guide mentality
surges up in me, and down I slog, as nonchalantly as it is
possible to slog nonchalantly, to the water's edge. Black,
soupy water -- you couldn't see a thing under the surface.
One foot into it, sinking deeper and deeper into the slime.
Hey Gordon, look out for the taipan. Shut up Alan, you prick.
Now I'm in so deep the bottom of my pack almost touches the
water. And then, all of a sudden, something bites my leg clean
off at the thigh! Key-rist, do I get out of there in record
time. But when I get back to Alan he's splitting his sides.
Mudskippers, he says, and to complete my ignominy saunters
down, breezes through the water and up the other bank. After
the second step the bottom is as firm as the tiles in the shal-
low end of Tobruk Pool.

Poor old Bill King. You should have seen him run when the
old Mississaga rattled at him on the Sandy Gray. We split
our sides. Couldn't help it. He must have set a world's sprint
record. With a ninety pound pack on his back!

Tick-tock. Hullo Chaste Huntress. Pity to stain your innocence on a scattered line of lights. That noise, Alan. Could that be a dingo?

One night on the way back from Honey Harbour the wolves howled. Did you see *Doctor Zhivago*? They howled like the wolves in *Doctor Zhivago*. The dead of night it was, Alan, and I was catapulted out of a REM-phase sleep by a chorus of wolves I'll never forget. When I rolled out from under the canoe, there was a full moon with a ring of luminous haze around it. And the wolves howled and howled. That was when we were camped on the lake below Flat Rock Falls. Next morning we ran into a doe and her fawn swimming the river above the falls. Paddled right up beside them. (And this morning, Alan, you and I saw two real kangaroos hopping through the spear-grass, one red and one grey.)

Another lesson for novices. Brown-rice-and-soya-bean fires do not thrive on salt water. You'd think we'd have known enough by now to build it higher up the beach. Why can't I write the Great Canadian Novel, Alan?

Right-o, I admit it. I'm lazy and a bit of a whinger. To write the Great Canadian Novel you need self-reverence, self-control and whatever that other self is that Tennyson says you need to write the Great Canadian Novel. Clearly I lack these virtues, or I would have written it by now.

On the other hand, I'm not bad when I care to exert myself. I ran a three-mile portage non-stop once. I plugged away at exams until I got a Ph.D. I work my ass off fighting pollution. I've even got a letter of reference from the Comstock Construction Company which says I'm a punctual, diligent, reliable pick-and-shovel man. Why, then, can't I write the Great Canadian Novel?

Could it have something to do with those infernal lights over there?

Tick-tock. That must be Phoenix.

No, not the lights. That's where the libraries are, and the University. That's culture. Whatever else you say against civilization, you have to admit that it fosters the arts. Don't you?

Honey Harbour was always the climax of the Georgian Bay trip. On the morning we got ready to cruise into Honey Harbour our mothers and aunts would have been proud to acknowledge us. Items which had been hidden away in rucksacks for days made their reappearance. Combs. Underpants. Wallets. Someone said something about Bill King having a packet of frenchies, but there was a hint of false bravado in the way he admitted it.

Honey Harbour. Winter population 50; thousands now. Speedboats. Movie theatre. Pin-ball machines. Juke-boxes. Girls (some of them in daring new two-piece swimsuits). Honey Harbour, you don't know what's about to hit you. Here we come: three canoes, nine freshly scrubbed Y.M.C.A. lads, single-blade paddles and Brylcreemed crewcuts gleaming in the sun stroking in perfect time past the wharf and up the slip to the marina.

But now, lying here in the sand on White Rock Bay watching Orion tilt upside down over Townsville, now I have a clue about what went wrong. I can't write the Great Canadian Novel because there were three big Caterpillar tractors bashing down trees on the Musquosh. Because a speedboat's wake broke up our paddling formation. Because the girls were as phoney as the pin-ball machines. Because the tunes on the juke boxes were the same extravagant drivel which a false, commercialized greed machine tries to foist on us again nowadays in the name of nostalgia. Because Rock Hudson and Doris Day are full of bullshit. Because when we left Honey Harbour that evening with hearts and wallets empty, we were secretly glad to be going back to the wilderness.

Honey Harbour was a false climax. I sensed it at the time, but I'm only admitting it now, nearly half my life later, on White Rock Bay. Honey Harbour didn't belong on that trip. And a scattered line of lights doesn't belong on this stretch of coastline.

Let's build a proper campfire, Alan, up above the highwater mark.

Civilization fosters art, I know. Without civilization the highest I could aim would be Great Canadian Cave Grunter. The best civilizations have produced the best art, I know.

But there is a corollary. Corrupt, stinking rotten civilizations produce corrupt, stinking rotten art. There are no great Canadian novels today. There are no great novels anywhere. There is no great art. Great art is the flower of great civilizations, and that's why we haven't any.

Stupid lights. I know you, Townsville, you're festering disease. You start out as a tiny virus-patch of lights on an empty coastline, and then you spread your infection everywhere. You'd like to come down here to the Cape, wouldn't you? Well bugger off, I won't let you, I'm not as green as you think. I've been around for centuries; watching you creep towards my campfire. You're the deserts of Mesopotamia, the sands of the Sahara; you're the filth in the Tiber, the starving millions in India, the Oklahoma Dustbowl. You're the fool who craps on about "current resources crisis" when what we've always had is a decency-and-moderation crisis. Bugger off, I say, I know you.

When a civilization starts to crumble, any decent art it produces comes from outside the Establishment, and takes the form of an attack on Establishment values. Lawrence. The Angry Young Men. The minority protest writers in America. Solznitsn. These writers will never rank with the very best, because most of their energies are syphoned off into preaching. But at least they have balls. They are the best that a corrupt civilization can produce, because they attack corruption instead of exploiting it. They will be remembered long after the writers of westerns and spy-thrillers and science-fiction and TV scripts have been consigned to just oblivion. If their efforts fail, and if civilization continued to deteriorate, then artists must forsake civilization and seek inspiration in the wilderness.

Canada, my Canada, does not exist anymore. A greed machine has chopped down all the trees to make Kleenex. Has fouled with its effluents the lakes and rivers where once I canoed. Has obliterated the wildlife. Has turned its idealistic young people sour, and sent its artists into exile.

And so (I muse whimsically while Alan builds the fire up high with driftwood -- you can't go wrong with driftwood) this is the place where I must find Canada again. Here I shall be one of a new breed of pioneers, bringing darkness back to a continent where already too many lights are shining. Where once

there were motor cars, I shall plant gum trees. Where jack-hammers hammered, I shall rear jabirus. If it shoots, I shall move it; if it chops things down, I shall do it in.

And some day (I conclude while Alan pours me a cup of evil-smelling healthfood brew and Phoenix ticks his way up to the zenith over White Rock Bay) . . . some day the Great Canadian Novel will get written. In Australia.

GORDON SPEIRS

SIGNALS FROM SIERRE LEONNE

Here he comes, alive, aloud,
Burning up the earth with his enraged grief.
A radiant jetness, this new wild dream,
Born, explodes, into a creation danse,
His feet signal a self, leaping high above.
His is no puddle-vision nation, no view in a cracked pond,
But a music combing today with beyond.
His chains dissolve into liquid coloured robes
Bleeding, blending, into red, yellow, gold, and green.
Overthrow, overthrow, his feet pound,
Burying his simmering frustrations into the ground.
Snakes leap from his heels,
Round and round go his terrible toes,
Forward he reels and reels.
Danse he must, backwards his river flows,
On into the purity fire he goes
Into the mouth of the ashes.
Whirling, writhing, sailing, rattling,
Up the ladder of smoke he dashes.
O the rhymns in his eyes
O the raging inarticulate sighs,
The spasmodic interpretations, buried calculations
And silky ejaculations,
Signaling the birth of new nations.

DIANE CASTLEMAINE