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**From “naked country” to “sheltering ice”:  
Rudy Wiebe’s revisionist treatment of John  
Franklin’s first arctic narrative**

Over the last thirty-five years, the body of Canadian historical fiction has grown tremendously and the genre enjoys great popularity. Herb Wylie claims that “[t]he notion that historical discourse is essentially speculative rather than mimetic has certainly given novelists the elbow room to develop their own speculative fictions” (13): works that are self-reflexive and that complicate their relationship to sources, works that point up the fact that the past is envisioned through the context of the present. Rudy Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994) offers a revisionist construction of Franklin’s first expedition to find the North-West Passage, one that attempts to show the disparate views of the landscape held by the British explorers and the Yellowknife of the Coppermine region—one of the Dene peoples—and to sound a warning about the devastating effects of the arrogant will to dominate the environment. True to the conventions of historical fiction, Wiebe, makes Franklin, himself, a largely peripheral figure, choosing to focus on lesser known participants in the events of 1821. In keeping with the Canadian tradition of historiographic metafiction, Wiebe engages in the dialogic interweaving of sections of published accounts of the trip and his own narrative constructions. By inserting excerpts from the journals of Franklin, of expedition doctor John Richardson, of George Back and Robert Hood—both midshipmen and artists—into a novel that both examines the contact between British and Native North American cultures and portrays a strong and vital Native community, Wiebe dismantles the hierarchy and authority that Franklin and his officers wished to establish in the interests of the Empire. The efforts of Wiebe—a well-established white writer—to change non-Native readers’ perceptions of the far north

as a desolate and barren place are clear in his depiction of the “sheltering ice” (11) and the “life-giving cold” (317), as well as in his elevation of non-human animals in imaginative importance and his representation of Dene society.

Given that Franklin’s third expedition inspired so many search parties and so many books speculating on the fate of its members, Wiebe’s decision to write a fictional recreation of the first voyage is a key one. Christy Collis writes of Franklin’s final and fatal 1845 expedition and “the continuing need” on the part of “scientists, archaeologists, Canadian Armed Forces regiments, novelists, poets, literary critics, and cartographers” to “close this lost narrative of the North,” but Wiebe’s choice speaks of a desire to pursue the question *not* of what happened to Franklin, but of what happened to the Tetsot’ine (the Yellowknife), a people that had largely disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century. While the narrative remains within its purported nineteenth-century period, the connections to the general legacy of colonization for the First Peoples are clear.

Tales of danger, hardship, and heroism were part of the attraction of exploration narratives in 1823, and Franklin, who came to be called “the man who ate his boots,” was seen as a hero, and the published account of exploration, starvation, hypothermia, murder, and possible cannibalism was a bestseller. While subsequent assessments of Franklin have called his leadership decisions and expedition planning into question, Wiebe looks to the greater issues of cultural perception. While Franklin was certainly not responsible for the conflicts between the two fur-trading companies (the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company) and the fact that the promises of aid from these companies were often not fulfilled, Richard Davis asserts that the expedition was, in fact, “an ill-prepared undertaking,” and Franklin arguably brought some of the hardships upon his party because of his inflexibility and by his not giving proper credence to the advice and warnings of the First Nations people from whom he sought assistance but to whom he believed himself culturally and technologically superior.

In June 1821, the expedition set out for the Coppermine River and the Polar Sea. The inadequacy of birch-bark canoes in the rocky and icy terrain soon became evident, and after turning back at Point Turnagain in August, Franklin opted to return to Fort Enterprise via the Hood River, and the group ended up walking across the uncharted country of the Barren Lands. The canoes were broken by the time they reached the Coppermine River, and it was only thanks to one of the interpreters, St Germain, who fashioned a canoe using willow branches and canvas, that they were able to make the crossing. It is striking how after Franklin's account of days spent walking, charting, and naming landscape features after Britons of note (such as members of the Admiralty and his own mentor Matthew Flinders) in August 1821, Franklin's focus suddenly narrows to a recording of the availability of food and fuel. Reduced to eating *tripe de roche*—lichen—and bits of old leather, the men's hunger, growing debility and flagging hope are the main concerns of the narrative of the journey across the Barrens, which Franklin calls "this naked country" (393). The following entry, dated Sept. 3, 1821, clearly illustrates their privation:

As we had nothing to eat, and were destitute of the means of making a fire, we remained in our beds all the day; but the covering of our blankets was insufficient to prevent us from feeling the severity of the frost, and suffering inconvenience from the drifting of the snow into our tents. There was no abatement of the storm next day; our tents were completely frozen, and the snow had drifted around them to a depth of three feet, and even in the inside there was a covering of several inches on our blankets. Our suffering from cold, in a comfortless canvass tent in such weather, with the temperature at 20°, and without fire, will be easily be imagined; it was, however, less than that which we felt from hunger. (401)

The group splinters as some are unable to continue and others are sent to find lost men or to seek help. Hood is shot, apparently by Michel Terohaute, a Mohawk voyageur whom Richardson in his

journal accuses of cannibalism as well as murder and treachery—and whom the doctor takes it upon himself to execute. Torn by gales, frozen on a treacherous and shelterless expanse, weakened physically and mentally by starvation, Franklin and his remaining men become hardened survivors of a what is represented as a barren and hostile land. They are saved only by the fact that when they return to Fort Enterprise to find it deserted, Back sets out to find members of the Dene community that had helped them and returns with aid and food. All but five of the group of thirteen voyageurs and interpreters perish. Captain Robert Hood is the only officer to die. Astoundingly, Franklin still maintains a degree of cultural superiority as he writes of the care provided by the Dene: “The Indians prepared our encampment, cooked for us, and fed us as if we had been children; evincing humanity that would have done honour to the most civilized people” (471).

The title of Wiebe’s novel in its ambiguity marks the beginning of the revisionist process. As critics such as Wylie point out,

The programmed response is to read the “discovery” as the customary, active pursuit of the explorer. Here, however, the use of ‘strangers’ suggests that it is the explorers themselves who are discovered, in this case by the Tetsot’ine or Dene. The title’s inversion of the trajectory of colonial exploration mirrors the general inversion of the narrative as a whole, which focuses largely on the reaction of the Tetsot’ine to the coming of the whites. (38)

The Dene culture is one that privileges memory, local knowledge, and a healthy respect for the land, and the main Dene characters in the novel repeatedly point up the practices and traits of the British that will disrupt the delicate balance of life in the north, bringing death and disease—in the short term for the expedition and in the long term for the Dene.

Wiebe’s first chapter from the point of view of “The Animals in This Country” (the title of the chapter), the caribou and wolf, in particular, gives primacy to the non-human animals. The chapter

title also echoes Margaret Atwood's poem entitled "The Animals in That Country" in which Atwood distinguishes between animals in "that country" and "this country." The distinction reflects the imaginative importance of animals in what might be termed the "Old World" legends and mythologies and the relative anonymity of non-human animals in a place like Canada. Atwood writes,

In that country the animals  
have the faces of people:

the ceremonial  
cats possessing the streets

the fox run  
politely to earth...

In this country the animals  
have the faces of  
animals.

Their eyes  
flash once in car headlights  
and are gone.

Their deaths are not elegant.

They have the faces of  
no-one.

Wiebe reminds readers that the animals in this country, the country of his story are unconcerned with the perceptions of white explorers: they have their own cycles of life and story into which they allow the Native peoples some entry and import. The following excerpt from the opening story of a caribou cow and her yearling calf on the journey to the calving grounds shows an interrelationship of human and non-human animals far from the

hierarchical one established in Genesis or the source of imaginative significance in Atwood's poem:

The caribou cow with three tines on each of her antlers lay curled, bedded, and at momentary rest with her calf in the lee of her body. She had once been a woman; in fact, she has already been born a woman twice. But she has never liked that very much, and each time she is born that way she lives human only until her dreams are strong enough to call her innumerable caribou family, and they come for her. (3)

The opening paragraph of the novel begins with the non-human animals and anticipates the end of the British expedition and the failure of its members to adapt to the landscape:

The land is so long, and the people travelling in it so few, the curious animals barely notice them from one lifetime to the next. The human beings whose name is Tetsot'ine live here with great care, their feet travelling year after year those paths where the animals can easily avoid them if they want to, or follow, or circle back ahead to watch them with little danger. Therefore, when the first one or two Whites appeared in this country, an animal would have had to search for four lifetimes to find them being paddled about, or walking, or bent and staggering, somewhere on the inexorable land. (1)

The Dene live "with great care" in balance with the landscape and the seasonal movements of the caribou. The land is its own force, one that demands respect, and as the adjective "inexorable" suggests, one that will not yield to, or indulge the imperialist demands, expectations, or control of a few. The intrusion or invasion of the Whites—the strangers here—disrupts the balance of Tetsot'ine society. The caribou are only a natural resource to be exploited and over-hunted, for the British have no connection to them through story and tradition. Their method of killing—with guns and from a distance—when adopted by the Tetsot'ine begins

to sever the connection between hunter and the animal that the Tetsot'ine say gives its life.

Wiebe's portrait of past events within this contact zone is very much coloured by his research and the scholarship on the place of exploration literature within imperialist discourses. The list of acknowledgements following the narrative speaks volumes about the research in which Wiebe engaged and about his desire to speculate not just on the Dene peoples' lives but on their interpretation of British culture. The influence of source texts, such as Kerry Abel's *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* is felt throughout Wiebe's portrayal of the Tetsot'ine. Abel asserts that "Dene morality and philosophy were ... highly practical ..." As Abel explains it,

One's goal was to make life as comfortable as possible while minimizing one's demands on others. The Dene did not share the Christian belief in the sinful nature of humankind. Nor did they separate the universe into sacred and profane or natural and supernatural spheres. People were meant to live as a part of the universe and not to attempt to dominate over it or to change it. In a complex system of interrelationships in the universe, the Dene found a sophisticated and practical means to deal with the problems of life. Flexibility, adaptability, individual initiative, and social responsibility were interwoven in a society that coped remarkably successfully in an environment that outsiders were later to describe as hostile and barren. (42)

These qualities and abilities inform the construction of Keskarrah, Birdseye, Greenstockings, and Greywing, the tightly-knit Dene family who provide many of the insights into Dene culture and the critical views of the British expedition. Diametrically opposed to the Dene way of being in the world in Wiebe's novel are the social and political hierarchies of the expedition's members, the enormous demands the officers placed on the Dene—and on the natural resources of the area—and the relative resistance to the changes in practice that might have kept more of the men alive. A

key difference between cultural groups lies in the perception of the landscape and humans' place within the delicate balance of the environment.

Keskarrah, who was a guide and map-maker for the Franklin expedition, becomes one of the most vocal critics of the British in Wiebe's novel. He expresses his distrust of and contempt for the officers' actions and arrogance in a number of areas, including the naming and mapping of the land. In relation to Inuit mapping, Renée Fossett has explained, "European observers [often] failed to understand the link between on-the-ground representations and verbal instruction and the primacy of the oral component" in Inuit mapping. As well, "[d]istance was indicated by means that did not accord with European linear measures; travel time was taken into account (119). Keskarrah scoffs at the arbitrariness of the names the officers choose, saying: "These English. Who also tried to name every lake and river with whatever sound slips from their mouths: Singing Lake and Aurora and Grizzle Bear and Snare lakes...—it is truly difficult for a few men who glance at it once to name an entire country" (22). The importance of local knowledge and story are evident in the following passage:

Of course, every place already was its true and exact name. Birdseye and Keskarrah between them knew the land, each name a story complete in their heads. Keskarrah could see, there, in the shape and turn of an eddy, the broken brush at the last edge of the trees, the rocks of every place where he waited for caribou, or had been given to know and dream; and Birdseye had walked everywhere—under packs, or paddled, following or leading him, looking at each place where the fell of soft caribou and thick marten or fox turned continually into clothing for People in her hands: in their lifetime of ceaseless travel and thought, the way any Tetsot'ine must if they would live the life of this land. (24)

Of the officers' insistence on traveling the land without adequate knowledge or supplies and in spite of warnings, Keskarrah thinks, "It seemed they had heard only their one telling, as told to

themselves” (15). “Whitemuds,” he says, “hear only what they want to hear” (131). The Dene elder also cannot fathom why they endeavour to fix with their instruments and records that which is always changing.

European cartography has been discussed by many critics in terms of the charting, claiming, and possessing of lands previously unmapped—by Europeans. As Graham Huggan has argued “cartography symbolized the colonial desire for a systematic organization of space grounded in a mimetic, logocentric relation between the map and the mapped...[P]ostcolonial texts deploy cartographic tropes to expose and deconstruct the imposition of colonial perception” (Wyile 40). The notion of the land as palimpsest is common in the works by Canadian authors such as Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch, and Al Purdy, and *A Discovery of Strangers* explores alternative and equally valid methods of mapping space.

Robert Hood the “primary surveyor and draughtsman” (Houston) on Franklin’s first expedition is one of two members of the expedition whom Wiebe constructs with some openness to the Dene culture and some ability to see beyond the framework of their social and military—and in Hood’s case artistic—training. (The other is John Hepburn.) Both artistic representations of the landscape and maps of the topography were integral parts of the report on this search for a North-West Passage. Ian MacLaren, one of the scholars Wiebe acknowledges, has written extensively on how British landscape aesthetics shaped the views of the northern landscape, as the explorers looked to frame their written and pictorial descriptions within the conventions of the picturesque. The officers were on occasion surprised to find a scene worthy of William Gilpin’s attention, such as that of Wilberforce Falls on the Hood River in what is now Nunavut. Franklin describes “[t]he river [that] precipitates itself into it over a rock, forming two magnificent and picturesque falls close to each other” and names the “magnificent cascades” Wilberforce Falls “as a tribute of [his] respect for that distinguished philanthropist and Christian” (398). In this instance, Franklin is able to have both artists frame the

scene for the British reading and viewing public in a conventional style and to distinguish it with a revered Christian name.

However, a letter from Richardson to Back (spring 1821) expresses the more common disappointment in the landscape and its failure to inspire aesthetic praise:

[William] Gilpin himself, that celebrated picturesque hunter, would have made a fruitless journey had he come with us. We followed the lakes and low grounds, which, after leaving Martin Lake, were so deeply covered with snow that it was impossible to distinguish lake from moor... The only variety that we had was in crossing two extensive ridges of land which lie at the distance of seven or eight miles from each other, and nearly half way to the river... nowhere did I see anything worthy of your pencil. So much for the country. It is a barren subject, and deserves to be thus briefly dismissed. (qtd. in Maclaren 78)

Richardson may be writing of a specific region, but in general, according to MacLaren, “where the picturesque cannot be found, [Richardson’s] interest in the landscape wanes”; however, MacLaren asserts that letter “shows more than disgust with the land: the confusion over topographical distinctions between water and land demonstrates that not only is his taxonomy of landscape description inappropriate, but his mode of perceiving the external world is unavailing” (78).

Hood’s growing awareness in Wiebe’s novel of the limitations of the aesthetic frames of reference extends from landscape to people. The following passage depicts the artist’s frustration and implies a subtle transformation:

In the last canoe, Robert Hood had been trying all morning to capture once more, on a small piece of paper, a coherent quadrant of the world through which he was being carried. But even after an exhausting year of continuously widening vistas, he was tempted to look sideways, tugged towards a periphery in the corner of his eye, that, when he yielded, was

still never there. Riding motionless in the canoe on this usual lake, he felt his body slowly tighten, twist; as if it were forming into a gradual spiral that might turn his head off at the neck. Like one of those pathetic little trees, enduring forever a relentless side wind so that it could only twist itself upwards year after year by eighth-of-an-inching; or like the owl in the story that turned its head in a circle, staring with intense fixity, trying to discover all around itself that perfect sphere of unbordered sameness and, at the moment of discovery that the continuous world was, nevertheless, not at all or anywhere ever the same, it had completed its own strangulation. . . .

But his sketch must stop, must have frame!

... [A] tall tree on either side—that was still a possible frame, if he drew them foreground enough.

But he had drawn that so often! Scribbling in trees where none could exist... (61-62)

Through the use of simile, Wiebe connects Hood to the native trees (perhaps a nod to Al Purdy's poem "Trees at the Arctic Circle") and to the owl that recognizes the ever-changing nature of the world only as it dies. Hood is no longer satisfied with his conventional manufacturing of landscapes. Soon after, Hood is at a loss about how to depict a scene of Dene grief: "It seemed to him he was praying—for a revelation. How could they have existed here ages before they were known of? How would he draw a sorrow he could barely hear" (68). This culture is beyond Hood's ken and his representational abilities.

But it is Hood's desire to sketch Greenstockings—Keskarrah and Birdseye's daughter—that draws him into their "endlessly warm lodge" (227) and into the circle of Greenstockings' "everlasting arms" (230). Greenstockings is as critical as her father is of the expedition members as she sees first hand the danger of too many men and a lack of balance in her world; however, she embraces Hood and later bears their child. Their happiness is brief and Hood's parallel experience in Greenstockings'

lodge and an expedition tent on the Barrens take on allegorical dimensions.

In Greenstockings lodge, the lovers feed each other and Greenstockings sings a traditional song celebrating the caribou who eat the lichen and in turn nourish the Dene. Later in a tent that Wiebe deems “the labyrinth of their disaster” (220), Hepburn feeds Hood “the horrible *tripe de roche* [lichen] that scours [his] mouth and throat bloody” (220). In the lodge, Greenstockings tells Hood that starving people may depend on ravens and “the compassionate wolves,” their “sisters and brothers” to guide them to food (173). In spite of the language barrier, Hood understands her on some level, for his thoughts echo her words during in his starvation-induced delirium on the Barrens. Nevertheless, his debilitated state prevents him from acting on her advice—and he is forced to eat what Michel offers as wolf meat but which may be human. Whether the meat be wolf or human, the act of eating is an act of cannibalism.

Ultimately, Hood is neither strong enough nor influential enough to effect any change in Franklin’s plans or their dealing with the Dene. His death in the novel and the extremity of the expedition’s circumstances appear self-inflicted, as the parodic inversions of the early scenes of harmony and wisdom result from the failure to adapt to and respect the land and its Native peoples. Communion becomes cannibalism. Hood becomes the owl who dies at the moment of revelation. Historical events and the painful legacy of colonization in Canada do not allow Wiebe to indulge readers by giving them a happy ending. By fleshing out the character of Robert Hood, however, he does attempt to offer the possibility of a connection between British and Native cultures. Hood, though, dies on the Barrens. Hope, it seems, is always qualified or compromised or killed.

Wiebe’s work of historiographic metafiction depicts the landscape and peoples of the arctic and sub-arctic regions forever changed by the “brutal hiss and clangour” (2) and the “strange and various sicknesses” (315) that are the destructive signs of European invasion. The final pages look to the period when George Back returns to map more of the country, when disease

and war with the Dogrib people have killed so many of the Tetsot'ine. The Tetsot'ine way of life is irrevocably changed because "it is of course so much more manly and exciting to use guns to steal food and wives and clothing and dogs and territory from enemies than to work for them in the slow, considerate ways of the living land. ... [S]ickness and the men's unrelenting aggression ... destroy Greenstockings' People" (315-16). Wiebe offers his answer to the question of what happened to the Tetsot'ine, but this answer is tied to the on-going legacy of the will to dominate that still poses the greatest threat to the north.

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