

Telling the Stories, Branding the Land: Examining Regional
Narratives and Texts in Northern Alberta

by

Jay Rawding

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Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis:

External Examiner	Dr Pamela Banting Professor, University of Calgary
Supervisor	Dr Winfried Siemerling Professor, University of Waterloo
Internal Member(s)	Dr Andrew McMurry Professor, University of Waterloo Dr Chad Wriglesworth Professor, University of Waterloo
Internal/External Member	Dr Imre Szeman Professor, University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This ecocritical study analyzes literary works and narratives related to northern Alberta. It establishes correlations between the way the land, history, and culture have been represented in these buried texts and the master narrative of resource development that continues to dominate this highly contested region. Using an interdisciplinary approach to this understudied content, this investigation combines rhetorical and discourse analysis with ecocritical close readings.

The dissertation initially explores recurring themes in northern Alberta's literature and then examines specific narratives concerning three men who have remained popular in the region: A.M. Bezanson, "Twelve Foot" Davis, and "Peace River Jim" Cornwall. While their legacies have endured, the thesis addresses the fact that other important texts that were written by women – such as Mary Lawrence, Katherine Hughes, Dorothy Dahlgren, and Alvena Strasbourg – have become scarce and obscure. After comparing the gendered perspectives contained in these texts, the discussion turns to authors who have been affiliated with fossil fuel development, including petroleum pioneer Sidney Ells, investigative trailblazer Larry Pratt, and industry ally J. Joseph Fitzgerald, who each helped rhetorically define, confront, or embrace local infrastructure projects. Next there is an analysis of three novels that engage with stock genres in order to present their stories, including a northern Alberta-based thriller written in 1980 by best-selling author Alistair MacLean.

The thesis concludes by examining two influential local newspaper editors who, through their popular books, became self-appointed gatekeepers of the region's voices.

This example of authorial control over northern Alberta's published texts speaks to an urgent need to recover, reproduce, and republicize neglected local stories and texts in order to challenge broader hegemonic forces and to better understand this region and its people. This dissertation intervenes to offer a critical starting point in recognizing, reading, and disseminating these vital voices now and in the future.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Mary (Nana) Boyd and Dorothy (Nana) Hatt.

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Telling the Stories, Branding the Land: Examining Regional Narratives and Texts in Northern Alberta

Introduction

For years, resource development in western Canada has proceeded at an accelerated pace. Intense scrutiny and debate have accompanied projects that rely upon the extraction of fossil fuels. The bitumen sands¹ in particular remain a regular subject in the news: from pipeline proposals to public hearings; from treaty disputes to prospective job numbers; from project announcements to environmental violations. Some media sources focus on potentially destructive outcomes,² while others present the region as already naturally flawed, and in need of “tidying up” through industrial intervention.³ Despite the perception that extraction projects have slowed in recent years, in mid-2017 energy companies were issued twice as many drilling licenses as had been issued in all of 2016, and almost 3000 new wells had already been completed (Southwick).

Currently, bitumen sands projects span the northern half of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Large operations have been located north of populated areas such as Lloydminster and Edmonton, east of cities of the Peace River region, and just west of central Saskatchewan. The area within this span represents a formidable amount of geographical space. A decade ago, almost 25 per cent of Alberta’s landmass was being

¹ The term “bitumen sands” will be used herewith in order to avoid the historically established term “tar sands,” as that designation has been perceived as inflammatory among unconventional fossil fuel development supporters. “Bitumen sands” is also used herewith in order to avoid using the industry-coined, similarly problematic term “oil sands” (for a detailed overview, see Nikiforuk, “It Ain’t Oil,” *Tar Sands* 11-16; see also Kidner). Original source material references, however, will retain each author’s choices.

² See CBC, “Nexen Pipeline”; CBC, “2nd Largest”; CBC, “Oilsands Reclamation.”

³ A common refrain in Alberta is that the bitumen sands “are Mother Nature’s biggest spill. We’re just cleaning it up and making a buck” (*Calgary Sun*, “Leo DiCaprio”).

developed by industry, and Alberta Energy reported the area under development was the geographical equivalent of one Florida, two New Brunswicks, four Vancouver Islands, or twenty-six Prince Edward Islands (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 21).⁴ As might be expected, many people who work in this vast region – and the executives who benefit from industrial expansion – have defended the extraction and development of unconventional fossil fuels,⁵ as well as associated infrastructure projects.

At the same time, a significant number of people in Fort McMurray, Cold Lake, and Peace River reside in the area on a temporary basis.⁶ Many stay for a few weeks or months, and then return to other Canadian towns and provinces once their short-term employment has concluded. The consequence of this “fly-in, fly-out” way of life is that the opportunity for residents to forge permanent connections to the land, community, and bioregion are stifled or short-lived; while there are a few exceptions, temporary workers usually avoid staying in these regions any longer than is required (*Tar Sands* 42).

Additionally, these temporary employee contracts and short-term projects have been accompanied by a shortage of sources of local, national and international news as well as a general dearth of basic, public knowledge about the area’s history – particularly among workers. Rarely are visiting labourers and executives exposed to the regional narratives that have previously characterized the land, the people, and even the wildlife. The books that have originated from northern Alberta in particular – many of which

⁴ See maps at end of dissertation, Appendix G and H.

⁵ Unconventional fossil fuels require more energy in order to arrive at the conventional state of oil and gas as might traditionally be found in the ground. “Extreme energy” is also a more expensive process. See Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* (3, 15-16, 25, 118-120); also see Gardner.

⁶ The population of Fort McMurray may have changed in May 2016 due to a major forest fire (Jones).

reveal a variety of local stories and descriptive accounts – have received little attention beyond the local level, if at all.

As such, much of northern Alberta’s early literature remains difficult to access. Books with limited print runs have not been re-published, and Fort McMurray’s archival holdings are located at a historic site that is open only at select times.⁷ Extant early publications from northern Alberta receive little critical attention or analysis, and there has been equally little academic study of the local narratives and oral stories from the region. If some of these obscured narratives received more exposure, however, they could conceivably challenge, complement, or supplement the current master narrative that aims primarily to promote and endorse the development of the bitumen sands.

As industry announcements continue to proliferate, the voices of those who have resided in these regions for a significant period of time – particularly the historically marginalized, in the case of indigenous peoples⁸ and ethnic minorities – have become a focal point for outsiders. Increasingly, corporate executives and politicians have begun to recognize the importance of acknowledging regional voices, especially when these executives and politicians do not hail from the region themselves. Long-time residents have expressed mixed feelings about the abrupt transitions that have occurred inside this large space they intimately know (see Davidson and Shields); some have published their thoughts in the region’s only newspaper, while others have created personal websites and blogs.⁹ As we see in texts such as Robert Kroetsch’s *Alberta* or Aritha van Herk’s

⁷ General access to these archives has been limited ever since a flood in 2013.

⁸ For the purposes of this dissertation, the word “indigenous” will be used to describe native, aboriginal, or First Nations people. The word “Métis” will be used when differentiating between indigenous and Métis.

⁹ Some examples include “McMurray Musings” at www.mcmurraymusings.com (Wells), “Fort McMurray Adventures” at www.eighteighyone.blogspot.ca (Steele), and “The Adventures of Iron Pete” at www.theadventuresofironpete.wordpress.com (Knight). There are, however, real risks to blogging under

Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta, northern Albertans are proud, and they are also acutely aware that external narratives are frequently overlaid onto their region.

Broadly speaking, much of Canada's early literature was comprised of texts written by newcomers from elsewhere. Eventually, however, a self-produced body of work materialized and originated from Canadian-born writers. These developments prompted the beginnings of a "national literature," including the advent of regional literatures. Northern Alberta,¹⁰ however, is a curious anomaly: most early texts from – or concerning – northern Alberta originated from outsiders from elsewhere (as I discuss in Chapter Two).¹¹ Local voices rarely published literature of their own. Even today, many of northern Alberta's books are penned by authors who arrived in the region only recently.¹²

This shortage of literature originating from local voices also reflects the general sense that the voices of local residents are not being heard in other avenues. As Barbara Eckstein remarks, whenever city planners devise plans for urban spaces, it is crucial to hear the voices of the people who have lived on – and connected with – the land (Eckstein 15-16). The process of hearing from people from a particular place helps ensure that sensible, informed decisions are made. Local voices are at least as important as those who have *not* formed connections to it. Since northern Alberta has had very few self-representations in its literature, the region has remained a kind of palimpsest, sculpted by

one's real name. A man named Mike Thomas was fired by Suncor for posting about his experiences at a work camp (M. Thomas).

¹⁰ For the purposes of this dissertation, focus will be on the three bitumen sands cities of Fort McMurray, Cold Lake and Peace River and nearby communities such as Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay, and others. Accordingly, the blanket term "northern Alberta" will be used. With this generalization, I also acknowledge that bitumen mining projects exist in Saskatchewan, as well as in the United States.

¹¹ As the author of this dissertation, I acknowledge that I do not live in this region either. Although I have visited northern Alberta, I have never resided there.

¹² e.g. Isabella Michelle [Trempe]'s *Mr. Complicated: Love or Lust* (2015); Leanne Shirliffe's *Saving Thunder the Great* (2016); Roddy Cross's *Dead Cold* (2012); see Appendix A for list of authors and works.

outsiders. A closer examination of extant local narratives, texts, and literature, however, reflects a number of themes and ideas concerning ecological, postcolonial, and ethical principles that often differ from the narratives that presently dominate the region.

Excavating the Resource: An Examination of Northern Alberta's Texts

Prior to my critical analyses of specific texts, the **first chapter** of this dissertation addresses some of the recurring themes that persist in northern Alberta's literature. This thematic content is foregrounded because these literary recurrences and patterns contextualize ongoing real-world perceptions and stereotypes about the region and its people. For instance, northern Alberta's sprawling size and its correspondingly large industrial footprint occupies a virtual and psychological space in the minds of residents, but also numerous references to *bigness* and large-scale objects, spaces or phenomena have long been embedded in the region's literature – even before Big Oil's arrival. Similarly, northern Albertans – and the whole province for that matter – have long had reputations as *mavericks* and have shared a long-standing affinity for defiance and non-conformity; this theme also permeates the region's literature. The identification of recurring subjects like maverickhood or bigness in local texts helps demonstrate that writers who emphasized such themes believed themselves to be reflecting prevailing regional impressions, perceptions and attitudes while simultaneously reproducing or reinforcing them. Crucially, in most cases the underlying ideological dimensions of certain key themes and subjects were introduced to the region externally, from places like the United States and the United Kingdom – thematic imports, if you will. Equally important is the imaginary space occupied by these shared themes; to extend Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," many northern Albertans "will never

meet, or even know the names of more than a handful” of their fellow citizens – if only by virtue of the area’s temporary or provisional jobs and short-term residencies (Anderson 26). Thematic recurrences occupy and fill an imaginative space while also providing a kind of shared vocabulary.¹³ I elaborate on these and other themes in more detail in Chapter One; generally, however, my goal is to identify and emphasize the consistent, recurring presence of such specific themes in northern Alberta’s literature and how these themes provide additional insight as to how the region is represented now as well as in the past.

In the **second chapter** of this dissertation, the legacies and impacts of three prominent men are examined. Ansel Maynard Bezanson’s *Sodbusters Invade the Peace* (1954) is a fusion of travel literature and traditional adventure narratives. Bezanson attempted to create a new town but was not successful. Despite this failure, the author’s legacy remains important for locals. Bezanson’s first book, *The Peace River Trail* (1907), was a feat of strategic marketing and sold very well. Yet the author was an outsider; Bezanson was born in Nova Scotia and grew up in the United States. In other words, two of the most popular texts about the region were written by a non-local. Similarly, James G. MacGregor’s *The Land of Twelve Foot Davis* (1952) examines the legend of Henry Fuller Davis – a man who was born in Vermont, and who left an enduring mark on the region thanks to a particularly shrewd land claim. Although the details of Davis’s life and death occupy only a portion of the book, MacGregor’s account of the people from the Peace River region, as well as the author’s diction and rhetorical language, are

¹³ In her discussion of “speech communities,” Mary Louise Pratt points out the phenomena of “self-defined, coherent entities that are held together by a homogeneous competence or grammar shared identically or equally among the members” (M. L. Pratt 37).

nevertheless challenging and illuminating. The final text examined in Chapter Two is L.V. Kelly's *North with Peace River Jim* (1972), which chronicles a 1910 expedition comprised of politicians and businessmen. The excursion was helmed by Jim Cornwall, a man who, like Bezanson and Davis, was not Albertan but whose patriarchal legacy in the region has lingered to this day. The historical narratives of A.M. Bezanson, "Twelve Foot" Davis, and "Peace River Jim" Cornwall influenced the region immeasurably, and their unspoken place in the collective conscious of locals often has helped to supplant or marginalize other narratives, stories, and values from the area.

Specifically, before major and international fossil fuel companies came to the region, the fundamental principles of collaboration and communal networking were both valued and prioritized more than capital and money (as Patricia McCormack establishes in *The Uncovered Past*). While Bezanson, Davis and Cornwall promoted a vision of themselves as dominant, masculine heroes over the dominated, passive land, some of Northern Alberta's less prominent texts offer alternative historical insights concerning the area. The **third chapter** of this dissertation examines some of these lesser known texts in detail. With Mary Lawrence's *Wilderness Outpost* (2008), readers are introduced to a married couple who stayed in the region from 1898 to 1907, and ultimately decided to return to the United States again after a number of obstacles and extenuating factors. While Lawrence's account of her time in the region provides significant local background and key details, her depictions of local indigenous people in particular are problematic. With Katherine Hughes' *In the Promised Land of Alberta's North* (2006), readers are provided access to a rare, first-hand account of Hughes's 1909 expedition through rugged, as-yet-undeveloped terrain. Although the author incorporates facts and figures

into her account, it is Hughes's spirited, independent voice as a woman that resonates strongest. In *Tales of the Tar Sands* (1975), Dorothy Dahlgren acknowledges prominent narratives of industry development, but the author prioritizes individual stories from the community. In Alvena Strasbourg's *Memories of a Métis Woman* (1998), readers witness a tale of courage and determination as presented through the eyes of a Métis woman who endured an abusive marriage and transitioned to significant leadership roles first at major industrial corporations and later with social justice organizations. In their texts, Strasbourg and Dahlgren focus primarily on neighbours and family; by contrast, much of the region's current literature tends to be concerned with resource development, industry and progress.

The **fourth chapter** of this dissertation investigates three industry-related works from the region: Sidney Clarke Ells's *Northland Trails*, Larry Pratt's *The Tar Sands: Syncrude and the Politics of Oil*, and J. Joseph Fitzgerald's *Black Gold with Grit*. I begin with a close reading of *Northland Trails* (1938; reprinted in 1956), which is a compilation of poems, stories and illustrations written and drawn by a popular bitumen sands pioneer. While Sidney Ells was conducting outdoor tests and experiments, he paid close attention to the nature that surrounded him – as well as the local residents who inhabited the region – and he transferred these personal encounters onto the page. Additionally, some of Ells's poems and stories also praise bitumen sands innovators and fossil fuel pioneers. As a result, *Northland Trails* reads like a kind of hybrid text that balances ecological and indigenous subject matter with industrial and capitalist subject matter. A few decades later, Larry Pratt would publish his controversial 1976 book *The Tar Sands*. The text proved to be a canary in the coal mine in nearly every sense, as it

predicted many problems that characterize accelerated bitumen sands development today. *The Tar Sands* was relatively popular when it was first published; however, despite its strong sources and exhaustive research, the book has not received further critical analysis in subsequent years – perhaps because of its incendiary findings and underlying subject matter. Following the Pratt analysis, Chapter Four concludes with an examination of J. Joseph Fitzgerald’s *Black Gold with Grit* (1978), one of the first greenwashing texts¹⁴ in the region. This state-sponsored book alternates between presenting the bitumen sands as heaven, hell, and biblical battleground, and demonstrates an unsettling impatience toward indigenous peoples. There are also key depictions of the founding fathers of bitumen sands development, including Count Alfred Von Hammerstein and Robert Fitzsimmons.

The **fifth chapter** is devoted to three examples of fiction originating from northern Alberta. Alistair MacLean (*Athabasca*), Roddy Cross (*Dead Cold*), and Randy S. Burton (*The Mystery of Glass Island*) rely heavily on popular genres and familiar tropes in order to tell their tales. *Athabasca* (1980) is a whodunnit murder mystery that takes place in northern Alberta and Alaska. Remarkably, Alistair MacLean explores the prospective sabotage of a bitumen sands pipelines (the book’s existential threat) and devotes considerable textual space to the mechanics of how such an act might be achieved. As such, it is not surprising that this once-popular work of fiction has received little subsequent exposure or academic attention. *Dead Cold* (2012) is a self-published novel about a zombie apocalypse in Fort McMurray, and author Roddy Cross uses his

¹⁴ The term “greenwashing” was first coined by Jay Westerveld in 1986. Westerveld had encountered a hotel sign that urged customers to “Save our planet” by reusing towels instead of allowing the staff to wash them. He wrote an essay about this experience, and pointed out that the hotel was likely pocketing the money it saved on cleaning costs at the expense of redirecting the money to environmental initiatives (Sullivan). The term “greenwashing” is a variant of “whitewashing,” and has since come to signify dishonest or phony campaigns by companies and corporations in order to give the impression they are environmentally responsible.

experience as a local resident and bitumen sands worker to reinforce as well as challenge contemporary stereotypes about the region. In a similar vein, *The Mystery of Glass Island* (2013) is a self-published novel about two *Hardy Boys*-like brothers who stumble onto a treasure heist. The book is written by Randy S. Burton, a safety specialist for a fossil fuel company in Fort McMurray, and its main emphasis is the importance of the treasure and the stability that wealth provides. This thematic insight into the region and its values seems particularly salient in light of the book's ostensible target audience of young, white male readers.

As a means of tying together all of the previous content, in the **final chapter** of this dissertation I discuss Irwin Huberman and Frances K. Jean, who are among the few local, contemporary authors who have used their platform to relay some of the tales, stories, and narratives from the region. Their texts can be found for sale at the local hospital or the Heritage Shipyard.¹⁵ Locally, their books are among the only titles that are readily accessible; earlier texts about, or from, northern Alberta have otherwise remained out of print. As some of the only print sources that chronicle local stories, people, and events, these texts also represent a separate set of complications unto themselves. While the Huberman and Jean books describe prominent personalities and folklore, they also have ideological underpinnings that cannot be dismissed. Since Huberman's explicit ties to the fossil fuel industry are rather overt, these connections influence how past events are presented in the book, and the reader is left to wonder how regional narratives might otherwise have been presented impartially or objectively. Instead, many of the stories in Huberman's book, *The Place We Call Home* (2001), continually refer back to the

¹⁵ Huberman's *The Place We Call Home* (2001) and Jean's *More than Oil* (2012) respectively.

development of the bitumen sands – even when such connections are tenuous at best. Likewise, Frances K. Jean’s subjective text includes a number of local stories and personalities, but is haunted by a number of innate biases and authorial conflicts of interest that will be addressed further in Chapter Six. Even the title of Jean’s book – *More than Oil* (2012) – reflects the sheer discursive weight that fossil fuels exert over the region, and underscores the formidable challenge of presenting local narratives without also intrinsically linking them to the bitumen sands.¹⁶ Generally speaking, the Huberman and Jean texts reflect a calculated tendency in recent years to arbitrarily yoke the region’s pre-fossil fuel identity with its current identity as a self-proclaimed hub of unconventional fossil fuel development.¹⁷

Processing the Resource: Context and Application of this Research

Many events that are relevant in this context have taken place since the research for this dissertation first began: Alberta encountered province-wide floods in 2013 (*Maclean’s*); numerous fossil fuel spills occurred;¹⁸ a crude oil-laden train derailed in Lac Mégantic, Quebec on July 6, 2013; studies emerged revealing industry’s impacts on the Athabasca

¹⁶ Authors like Huberman and Jean provide literary space for the narrative voices of contemporary local citizens, while simultaneously supplanting or obscuring the few books and texts from local inhabitants – that preceded them (i.e. Lawrence, Hughes, Dahlgren, Strasbourg).

¹⁷ Although works of poetry are beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is worth noting that one of the most popular texts concerning this region is in fact a compilation of poems concerning a bitumen sands pipeline. *The EnPipe Line* (2012) was initially conceived as a collaboration-based continuous line of poetry that stretched 1,170 kilometres in order to parallel the length of the Northern Gateway pipeline that had been proposed by Enbridge. *The EnPipe Line* represents the antithesis of many of the texts analyzed in this dissertation, because it is: 1) the product of dozens of submissions; 2) polyphonic and not monophonic; 3) crafted by women and men as well as anonymous writers; 4) comprised of poetry and not prose; 5) collaborative; and 6) motivated by social, political, environmental, and democratic factors, rather than pre-existing genres and forms.

¹⁸ For instance, Zama City, Alberta in June 2013 (VanderKlippe, “Toxic Waste Spill”), Cold Lake, Alberta from May to September of 2013 (Paperny and Young), Whitecourt, Alberta in January 2014 (Tucker), North Smoky Caribou Range, Alberta in June 2016 (The Canadian Press, “Alberta Pipeline Leak”), and the North Saskatchewan River in July 2016 (CBC, “200K Litres”), among others.

River;¹⁹ climate change rallies and pipeline protests ignited across Canada (CBC, “Climate Change Rallies”); Neil Young held a concert in support of the Fort Chipewyan people (Walker); actor Leonardo DiCaprio and South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu visited northern Alberta (Peritz; Weber “Canadians”); and the onset of unseasonably warm temperatures generated humid and dry forest conditions, helping to fan a large forest fire that triggered the evacuation of Fort McMurray in May 2016 (Ha). In light of these events, many people now give pause before reflexively defending increased or additional development of the bitumen sands, while others continue to argue that industrial development of the sands is as essential to the region now as it ever has been.

In my research, I have observed that northern Alberta’s early texts share common ground with a number of present-day industry-based narratives. To some, the existence of these links may not seem overt or particularly relevant; however, one of the goals of this dissertation is to make these connections more visible and apparent. In a similar vein, there are a number of striking differences between earlier texts and newer, contemporary ones that impose different values, ethics and priorities through their diction, content and subject matter. The identification of these commonalities and differences are productive ways to expand our present-day knowledge of the region’s history and narratives, while also suggesting some potential ways forward with respect to planning and development.

In some respects, critical and ecocritical engagements with these northern texts invite the question of the intention, purpose or desired effect expected from such analyses. Wojciech Małecki (2012)²⁰ suggests that such interventions at the academic

¹⁹ See organizations such as the Athabasca River Basin Research Institute; see Semeniuk.

²⁰ In his article “Save the Planet on Your Own Time? Ecocriticism and Political Practice,” Wojciech Małecki (2012) urges scholars and researchers to expand their efforts beyond academics and academic

level often serve only to magnify the presumed disconnection between academia and what occurs in the “real world.” Peer-reviewed articles, which are written by presumably objective authors, sometimes become sites of struggle when academics attempt to share results and data with policy-makers. Rather than publishing papers or (as is the case here) dissertations, Małecki favours directly influencing other academics or students, especially if the goal is to relay important ecocritical messages. Academic papers are unlikely to be read by a corporate CEO, argues Małecki, and dissertations may not be the ideal form of text for the desired impact. If an academic wishes to persuade an intended reader to embrace environmentally-based research, the argument should be neither theoretical nor abstract because such an approach might be unlikely to succeed or convince.

Rather than using strictly academic forms, Małecki pragmatically encourages academics to strategically employ and expose *narrative(s)*. When literary texts engage in “environmental imagination,”²¹ readers become exposed to detailed descriptions of the pain, experience, and suffering of their fellow humans (and nonhumans). The act of sharing environmentally imaginative narratives invites readers to consider alternative future outcomes and potential ecological trajectories – which, in turn, reduces the likelihood that intended readers would perceive their surroundings as disposable (Małecki 52). In the case of Northern Alberta, the literary texts – including works that expose the pain, experience, or suffering of those who have been impacted by industrial projects – are less well-known or have been eclipsed by more powerful narratives promoted by the state or by industry. Yet as will be demonstrated, a number of environmentally

publications. Literary criticism in particular can have limited reach. Małecki believes that authors must engage in non-academic literary and authorial undertakings in order to effect change.

²¹ See Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995).

imaginative narratives do exist, and their existence invites contemporary readers to reconsider how the region behaves and is treated now and in the future.

Challenging an Axiom: The Myth of Unfettered Growth

A prominent myth supported by northern Alberta's industrial sector is the belief that bitumen sands extraction operations can continue to grow and expand indefinitely. For years, the publicly stated intention has been to triple the size of existing bitumen extraction projects (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 23); however, the consensus of climate scientists, environmental professionals, and economic experts has been that the pace of development must be slowed. A major percentage of the planet's remaining fossil fuels – including Alberta's bitumen – must stay in the ground in order to meet global carbon emission targets.²²

This idea of halting or slowing fossil fuel extraction has caused significant friction, due in part to how growth is perceived. "Growth" has been a pervasive appellation, frequently adopted by industry and politicians as a synonym for "good" or "positive" (i.e. to grow the economy, to grow resource development, to grow profit margins). When invoked in public discourse, growth is framed as self-explanatorily affirmative, innately good, and inherently productive. Yet if growth were framed within an ecological context, it would not be sustainable. For instance, if "a growth" was left to increase indefinitely, theoretically it would continue to grow to the point of potential catastrophe.

²² See NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies director James Hansen's "Game Over for the Climate," Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (pp. 467-470), Bill McKibben's "Why We Need to Keep 80% of Fossil Fuels in the Ground" and Greenpeace's "Keep It In the Ground."

In *The Myth of Progress* (2006), Tom Wessels explains that every system within nature stops growing at some point. He further argues that humans should perceive economies and financial systems likewise – that is, in the same way as the biological and ecological limits of growth. If this theoretical change in perception occurred, the tenuous but popular idea of limitless economic growth might potentially lose traction. The fallacy that living beings or man-made systems are able to grow indefinitely emerged at the onset of classical economic theory, when influential thinkers like Adam Smith framed the natural world and its resources as unlimited, capable of growing endlessly, and free from unfortunate consequences. Structurally, the founding characteristics of this classical economic theory have remained to this day (Wessels 32-33).

In reality, however, no single thing on the planet continues to grow indefinitely, and all natural systems and beings eventually reach a state of equilibrium after growing has ceased. Indeed, a system that continues to grow without limitation inevitably suffers consequences. For instance, if a population exceeds its carrying capacity, the population of the organism degrades – including the ecosystem it attempts to support – and excessive negative feedback inevitably leads to the organism’s downfall (Wessels 24). Despite these limits to growth, however, humans allow their understanding of constructed, non-natural systems – the economy, for instance – to be based on Smith’s fallacious concept of unlimited growth. To use an example that aligns with this dissertation, plans to triple bitumen sands development run contrary to the natural limits of growth principles, and to the limitations of a system’s carrying capacity.

Canada’s publicly stated position has been to allow science to determine the way to proceed with respect to energy projects (Government of Canada, “Environment”).

However, if this stance is to be enforced, then a different way of perceiving Canada's resources would be necessary because the indefinite extraction of fossil fuels – or unfettered growth in general – runs contrary to scientific realities. Nevertheless, a region like northern Alberta promotes a narrative of success that is intrinsically linked to the concept of unlimited growth, especially with respect to resource development.

Accordingly, the bitumen sands have been presented in commercials, advertisements, job fairs, touring events, corporate communiqués, and political speeches as an industry that can easily continue to grow.²³ However, to echo Wessels' warnings, the accelerated pace of expansion has had consequences. For countless bitumen sands workers the high living costs, increased incidents of crime, and erratic hiring cycles are examples of how growth can be destabilizing too. Just like popular advertisements from the days of the gold rush, the "bitumen boom" has disappointed many hopeful workers and prompted them to leave the region when promise and hope fell short.²⁴

In northern Alberta's literature, there are competing representations concerning the limits of growth. Many early texts provide examples of how indigenous peoples lived sustainably off the land for generations prior to the arrival of settlers and fur traders (and, eventually, bitumen sands entrepreneurs). These literary precedents for regional sustainability are corroborated by anecdotes, testimony, and academic study (see

²³ For instance, see *Reuters*. The Canadian Press has also reported that the energy sector explicitly told Alberta politicians they wanted to see "a doubling of the industry's growth rate" by 2020 ("Oil Industry"). In actuality, Alberta's deficits – not its revenues – have grown. Potential royalties were lost through NAFTA rules, which forced Canada "to maintain a proportional export to the United States," and, in an emergency situation, the United States would be prioritized with respect to Canada's oil (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 114).

²⁴ Instances of workers abandoning the region are common. According to William Marsden, up to 95% of the people who come to northern Alberta inevitably "cash in and leave" when they retire from the bitumen sands. Temporary residents earn sufficient income, then leave without forming a permanent connection to the place (Marsden 142). Andrew Nikiforuk believes the percentage to be even higher: he writes that 98% of residents say they are happy to retire anywhere other than northern Alberta (*Tar Sands* 42).

McCormack's *The Uncovered Past*). Other pre-industry texts, however, demonstrate early inclinations toward the overuse or abuse of the region's resources (as revealed in Chapter Two). Incredibly, some government and industry-produced texts have even proclaimed bitumen sands projects to be sustainable²⁵ – an assertion not shared by the majority of scientific, economic, and environmental experts.²⁶

As an overriding master narrative for northern Alberta, the continued growth of the bitumen sands is a crucial mantra for residents, industry, and politicians. At the same time, climate change continues to remain a major concern, and Canadians have begun to think about bitumen extraction more consciously. The acts of mining, refining, and burning unconventional fossil fuels are no longer uniformly, tacitly accepted as harmless and non-malignant. To borrow a phrase from W.H. New, the bitumen sands – highly contested geographically and politically – might now be perceived as a “site of challenge to the accustomed borders of power” (New 6).²⁷ As fossil fuel companies vie to operate within different areas of the sands, or seek to obtain the social license to build pipelines, they do so because there has been a disruption to the previously assumed, “accustomed borders of power.” In the years and decades to come, decisions concerning northern Alberta's boreal forest and the bitumen within are not as “clearcut” as they used to be.

²⁵ Until June 2016, for instance, the Alberta Government website used the phrases “environmentally sustainable ways to extract energy” and “the environmentally sustainable development of the oil sands.” Accessed June 2016, <http://oilsands.alberta.ca/cleanenergystory.html> has since been taken down.

²⁶ “Bitumen development will never be sustainable,” writes Andrew Nikiforuk. Forecasts in 2008 were that expansion projects would “destroy or industrialize a forest the size of Florida and diminish the biological diversity and hydrology of the region forever” (*Tar Sands* 4).

²⁷ Promotional material from Alberta and Ottawa declares unconventional fossil fuels to be an “abundant resource.” Without a national energy plan, however, much of Canada's resources already have been committed for export outside of Canada. As W.H. New might ask: on a general level, for whom does a given space represent, and who owns a given space and its resources (5, 79)? With respect to the bitumen sands, multinational interests and corporations hold unprecedented power and authority in decisions concerning planning, economy, and conservation.

The sands reflect how land can be both stable and unstable, yet also an agent of change. Now that the continued extraction of bitumen has been linked to harmful climate consequences, the space can no longer be assumed to be unilaterally passive, or intended solely for extractive ends.²⁸ As decisions are made with respect to how the land is used, its presumed passive status has moved into a more foregrounded, explicit role.

Similarly, when the content in northern Alberta's literature is foregrounded and made more explicit, there is a sense that some of the voices have the potential to be agents of change, and that general assumptions could be challenged. Over the last few decades, many local voices and narratives have dimmed, while narratives favouring industrial growth have assumed prominence. This narrative transition – or takeover – has helped facilitate the popular perception that unconventional fossil fuel extraction is both beneficial to, and the defining feature of, this region. A re-examination of local writing, however, serves as a reminder that there are many alternate ways to conceive of this space, the people, the animals, and the biosphere itself.

My close readings of northern Alberta's literary works have revealed many unexpected contradictions as well as a number of intriguing confirmations. Broadly speaking, while the influence of industry has lingered over many regional texts, that influence has not necessarily defined the people, the history, and the narratives beyond repair. In Chapter One, I will examine some of the themes and topics that recur in the literature and discourse surrounding northern Alberta.

²⁸ As New remarks, assumptions about land as passive are true only “because they have been so wholly absorbed.” Unfortunately, only rarely are these assumptions examined consciously or deliberately (New 5).

Chapter One

Prominent Themes in Northern Alberta's Literature

Although northern Alberta's literary output is modest, some recurring themes have persisted. Before looking at some of the region's foundational texts, it is helpful to outline a few of these general, overarching themes because they contextualize how some local people see this region and themselves. Some of these prominent themes include:

- *bigness*, and how the constant presence of large-scale things affects this area; likewise, smallness and convenient minimalism are recurrent themes;
- *maverickhood*, and how residents have a long-standing affinity for defiance and non-conformity;
- *Dominionism, Christianity, Creationism*, and how these beliefs influence the way citizens engage with the environment and species in the region;
- *counter-counter-discourses*, and how industry supporters increasingly present themselves as underdogs or martyrs in the wake of opposition to large-scale fossil fuel development;
- *the language of technology*, and how this discourse occupies a master narrative status over other perspectives and viewpoints;
- *deliberate omissions of failures*, and how bitumen sands development is framed as a success story;
- *naming, name changes and strategic re-wording*, and how these alterations help to efface past figures or personalities who did not have industrial ties; in addition, men of dubious accomplishments are commemorated through place

names, while a number of prominent women have yet to be recognized, much less commemorated, to the same extent;

- *Eden and utopia*, and how this lore has sustained the image of a land of bounty and also helped to justify industrial expansion;
- *the myth of reclamation*, and how the illusory success of reclamation is crucial if resource extraction projects wish to continue.

Certainly, this list of common themes is not exhaustive; however, many of these subjects are often found in the books, short stories, and poems concerning the area, and are especially found in print and digital media articles.

As I discuss these identified themes, I engage with this content with a mindful and critical awareness of northern Alberta's concurrent master narrative of bitumen extraction and development. For years, these themes have fed or folded into this dominant petro-narrative to the extent that their ubiquitous presence in the region has become inviolable. Their rise in frequency and prominence helped cement a specific history and identity.

Within the context of Canadian literature, I recognize that thematic criticism, as well as aspects of region-based criticism, are sometimes considered to have limitations compared to other theoretical approaches.²⁹ Some contextualization for the use of these methodologies may be helpful. As Louis MacKendrick remarked, early thematic criticism presumed that writing in Canada inherently "had distinctly national characteristics," when in fact such a supposition was fanciful at best (MacKendrick 277). This claim by MacKendrick was perhaps best exemplified in Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972), wherein the author grouped together Canadian texts by topic, subject or theme, and

²⁹ See Davey 1-12; Brown (1978); Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 134; Murray (1985); MacKendrick (1992); Brown (2001).

correlated them back again to a larger national culture and identity.³⁰ While texts from/about northern Alberta seldom comment on Canada writ large, there are unmistakable common concerns and preoccupations that underpin the texts. These recurring themes bind these admittedly subliterary texts and should be identified – if for no other reason than to illustrate the sheer persistence of these themes, how these topics have influenced subsequent generations of writers, and how citizens have adopted, incorporated, embraced, or refuted these familiar tropes.

Thematic analysis is also an applicable critical approach when one considers that much of northern Alberta's literature – as we will see in subsequent chapters – has remained in a kind of stasis or lethargy. Unlike other regions in Canada and even Alberta (Melnyk xix; van Herk 338-340), where the literature has graduated to a kind of maturity (Frye, *Divisions* 70; Hutcheon 129),³¹ northern Alberta's books and texts by comparison have replicated more traditional or archaic literary styles and have not adopted more contemporary or modern influences or methodologies. As George Melnyk and Donna Coates note, from the earliest explorer texts to the more recent postcolonial and postmodern works of fiction and metafiction, Alberta writing has evolved into a literary canon unto itself, replete with “a specific hierarchy of important writers and work” (Melnyk and Coates, *Writing Alberta* 2). The same cannot be said, however, of *northern* Alberta writing, which has remained almost exclusively non-fictional and has not adopted any of the genres, forms, or literary styles that are so evident elsewhere in the province's

³⁰ Atwood's rationale and methodology are clearly defined at the outset. If a country wishes to become an “aware society,” it “needs to hear its own voices” (Atwood 12). An effective method for embarking upon such a project is to look at “those patterns of theme, image and attitude” that bind the texts together (18).

³¹ A trajectory of increasingly complex literary works can be observed, for example, in the way that early writers like Ralph Connor paved the way for pioneering writers like W.O. Mitchell and Henry Kreisel and then later for even more experimental writers like Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch.

literature. Absent signs of more experimentation, as a critical methodology that inherently focuses on basic patterns, thematic analysis can yield relevant insights.

The predominantly non-fictional works from/about northern Alberta are also highly conducive to ecocritical analysis because they often gravitate toward nature writing, ecological reflections, bioregional ways of thinking, and the issue of energy development and production. Additionally, while many stretches of non-fiction are relatively straightforward and didactic, some passages employ unexpectedly creative and imaginative diction. Cumulatively, these various elements necessitate a critical approach that draws on the combined resources of thematic, regional, bioregional, ecocritical, petrocultural, and discourse-analytical methodologies as the context warrants.

Lastly, with respect to regional criticism, Herb Wyile has pointed out that in earlier times Canadian regions were sometimes presented as homogeneous and distinct, when in retrospect they were likely to have been “heterogeneous, unstable, even internally divided” (Wyile 8; also see Banting 731). Although a region-based critical approach to northern communities runs a similar risk of painting the entire area as uniformly cohesive, there are simply fewer examples of division or overt signals of instability – whether in early works of non-fiction or in later, more industry-centred texts. Further, unlike the sometimes-imprecise term “the Prairies,” the bitumen sands comprise a specific geographical area, and many residents within this space share like-minded imaginative and ideological perspectives; similarly, when the bitumen sands are mentioned to many Canadians, they can picture a specific region – even if they are not as familiar with its history or its texts. This commonly understood ground provides a basic starting point for critically engaging with this area’s texts and its residents.

“Bigness” and Its Large Psychic Imprint

Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the most common themes in northern Alberta texts is “bigness” – a term Paul Chastko uses to describe the fossil fuel giant Syncrude (Chastko 168).³² The predilection for “bigness” in this region is understandable, given the significant stretches of northern Alberta that are covered by boreal forest and the well-publicized, copious bitumen stored therein. Yet bigness permeates many other unexpected areas, and a number of authors – such as Chastko, Andrew Nikiforuk, William Marsden, and others – have pointed out some of these patterns and instances.

Of course, this preoccupation with bigness is not limited to northern Alberta’s literature – there are countless examples that extend to Canadian literature in general.³³ Some notable writers include Ralph Connor, Frederick Philip Grove, and the poet E.J. Pratt. According to W.H. New, Pratt in particular had a “poetic fascination with giantism” (100), and perceived sprawling land and landscape as “a manifestation of size in North America.” Size signified power, and once it was no longer viewed “as hardship,” size was linked to concepts like mastery and ownership. In such concepts, Pratt “turned size into a metaphor of challenge,” and he connected hierarchy and authority to notions of masculinity “manhood” (104).³⁴ Such descriptions of Pratt’s

³² By the end of the 1970s, the fossil fuel corporation Syncrude had initiated what Chastko slyly calls a “drift to ‘bigness’” (Chastko 168).

³³ Canada, with its large and sprawling land mass, constitutes various provinces and regions that seem destined to be pitted against each other. As they vie to distinguish themselves and their identities, regions boast of their own, unique “big things”: Ontario has the giant Sudbury Nickel; New Brunswick’s tourists flock to the Hopewell Rocks; the Rockies in the west are “bigness” exemplified. A number of intriguing examples can be accessed at bigthings.ca, a website devoted to “the world’s biggest and strangest ... roadside attractions of Canada” (*Big Things of Canada*). As with these other regions, northern Alberta emphasizes its prominent physical landmarks, including in the literature, and focuses on the region’s largeness and grandiosity – perhaps more so than other comparable regions.

³⁴ For Pratt, Connor and Grove, the land represented a test of heroism, faith, will, individuality, and endurance (New 104).

subjects, themes and preoccupations are comparable to the large-scale scope and plans for northern Alberta's bitumen sands.

Although writers like Pratt and others have remarked upon Canada's size, there are few critical analyses of the preoccupation with large size from a literary perspective. In a chapter titled "A Little Essay on Big: Towards a History of Canada's Size," Alan MacEachern corroborates this dearth of "big" criticism. He observes that, "despite a long national tradition of historical geography and a developing one in environmental history, there is no literature on Canada's size." In fact, MacEachern cannot recall even "a single historical work that focuses directly on Canada's size" (6). At the same time, the author notes that size has remained "a constant theme, if not an outright fixation, of Canadian scholarship and thought" (7).

The rhetorical heft of bigness helps to reinforce the idea of size as a moral quality or attribute. For the vast geographical space north of Edmonton, bigness becomes a means of connecting people through a kind of shared ethos. In "The Spatial Distribution of Hope In and Beyond Fort McMurray," for example, researchers Sara Dorow and Goze Dogu analyse an advertisement that was produced by the municipality of Wood Buffalo. The flyer equated lofty and ambitious hopes for future bitumen sands projects with the region's "big spirit." In the ad, northern Alberta's potentially untapped resources were framed as "infinite in scale," not only because of the seemingly endless land area, but because of the "massive" initiatives that had been undertaken by industry. Although many fossil-fuel related projects tend to be large in size and scope, the flyer declared that "nothing in the region can compare to the enormity of our indomitable spirit" (Dorow and

Dogu 273). Such expressions of “big” and “indomitable” spirits allow citizens to feel connected to each other amidst size and sprawl that might often seem overwhelming.

As noted by writers like Robert Kroetsch, this shared “big spirit” ethos in northern Alberta’s quasi-garrisoned communities often applies to Albertans in general. In his 1968 book *Alberta*, Kroetsch describes how bigness has shaped and influenced the imaginations and mettles of the province’s residents. Nature inevitably thrusts bigness onto human beings, Kroetsch notes, and Alberta’s forests, droughts, and erratic weather have all “urged” upon Albertans “a sense of the immensity of what is and what might be.” For “timid” citizens, immensity generates caution and alarm; for “brave” citizens, immensity offers a new and thrilling sense of independence and possibility (7). In Kroetsch’s binary, Albertans are simplified into those who are timid and therefore ill-equipped to cope with the size of the province, and those who are brave and therefore willing to heroically face the unpredictable aspects of Alberta’s “immensity.” By and large, northern Albertans consider themselves firmly planted in the camp of the latter.

Even before the province was officially formed, Alberta has long had to contend with bigness on an existential level. Prior to 1905, policy-makers attempted to finalize the prospective dimensions of Alberta in order to determine provincehood, and they were eager to preserve its large land area. Instead, Alberta’s size was trimmed from initially larger expectations. For many, this geographical castration wounded the province’s psyche, and left an undercurrent of anger in the decades that followed (van Herk 218).

Yet despite the initial disappointment beneath Alberta’s formally truncated borders, the province’s resources – fossil fuels in particular – have remained vast and plentiful. In terms of sheer size, the bitumen sands span one-fifth of Alberta, or almost 150,000 square

kilometres (Marsden 5).³⁵ Dozens of extraction projects and operations have been approved by the province, and, according to Andrew Nikiforuk, bitumen development has become “the largest energy project in the world, bar none.” The resource continues to be “exploited” at exponential levels and, with almost 175 billion barrels in proven reserves, the region represents the *biggest* trove of hydrocarbons on the planet, Saudi Arabia excluded (*Tar Sands* 21). Even the amalgamated region of Wood Buffalo alone – that is, the municipality and its surrounding area – spans an area equal to the size of Ireland, or twice the size of Belgium (Marsden 137). As a phenomenon within that space, the bitumen sands are even ranked alongside the Seven Wonders of the World: in 2006, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper remarked that Alberta’s sands were “an enterprise of epic proportions, akin to the building of the pyramids or China’s Great Wall. Only bigger” (Laxer, “It’s Time”).

Indeed, the size of ongoing projects in the bitumen sands nearly defy visualization or imagination. For instance, Shell’s Athabasca Oil Sands Project employs 6000 workers, and “occupies a piece of the boreal forest the size of 33,702 NHL hockey rinks” (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 24). The project requires approximately 1000 miles of pipe; Andrew Nikiforuk calls the project a “boreal-destroying enterprise,” and notes that the power required for the project could light up the city of Burlington, Ontario (pop. 136,000). At the site, the mine has consumed thousands of kilometres of steel cable and has used enough concrete to build 34 Calgary Towers (25).

³⁵ Similarly, development of the bitumen sands affects 23% of Alberta (Sierra Club Canada).

Such large initiatives are accompanied by equally large expenses.³⁶ As will be seen in Chapter Four, exorbitant costs and “big” expenses have been commonplace in bitumen sands development since the very beginning.³⁷ During the 1950s and 1960s, large-scale extraction plans necessitated large-scale investment. When the Great Canadian Oil Sands (GCOS, now Suncor) officially opened in 1967, the project’s cost and scope “exceeded anything that had been undertaken in Canada to date” (Huberman 164).³⁸ Prior to the launch, GCOS placed an order for two large “bucketwheels” to be shipped from Germany. Tagged at more than \$4 million, these bucketwheels measured over one hundred feet tall, and had to be transported across the country using a forty-car-long train. When the various pieces finally arrived in northern Alberta, hundreds of workers had to be engaged just to help assemble and reassemble the massive pieces (Huberman 178).

To this day, similarly elaborate processes are required for the transportation of various pieces of equipment, and the logistics of their arrival cause corresponding disruptions that are now routine for northern Albertans. In Fort McMurray, traffic is

³⁶ According to Alberta Energy Research Institute spokesman Dr. Eddy Isaacs, “the amount of energy required to produce a barrel of synthetic crude oil is about a third of the energy in a barrel of bitumen” (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 15). In 2008, the daily infrastructure costs for the complex, energy-intensive process of unconventional oil extraction averaged \$110,000, which could hardly compare with the conventional oil extraction average of \$1,000 (25). In more recent years, industry has argued that it has improved its conversion costs and energy requirements; at the same time, a number of companies have left the region, presumably because conversion costs have remained unprofitable (Pineault and Hussey).

³⁷ Going further back in time, northern Alberta’s historic steamboats also exemplified bigness. The *S.S. D. A. Thomas*, for instance, was essentially “a floating hotel” (Kroetsch, *Alberta* 175). I provide additional analysis of steamboats in Chapter Two.

³⁸ Bigness did not guarantee success for GCOS. In the 1960s, when former Sun Oil president J. Howard Pew and his workers built an upgrader and mine on the Athabasca River’s banks, the undertaking was heralded as “the largest private development ever built in Canada.” Contrary to Suncor’s present-day reputation as a historical success, however, GCOS lost an exorbitant amount of money during its first two decades, and its petroleum output was considered the costliest to produce in the world (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 18). All of these years of losses – often at the expense of taxpayer money – are conveniently minimized or omitted in favour of a smooth, or unproblematic history. Larry Pratt (see Chapter Four) outlined the many ways by which Suncor (GCOS) lost tens of millions of dollars in its first seven years (45-46) and proved to be a significant “burden to the taxpayer” (47). Pratt also analysed Syncrude’s problematic past in meticulous detail too.

interrupted regularly whenever wide load transports need to use the highway (*Fort McMurray Today*, “Super”). Like the earlier bucketwheels, these transports often carry large parts of machines or vehicles that must be brought up individually (Marsden 12). In instances when a “super wide load” is destined for Fort McMurray, the transports occupy both highway lanes and even the shoulder, thereby causing significant delays for local drivers. On such occasions, industry owns the right of way.³⁹

As large-scale pieces of equipment came to the region, large-scale harm followed. Bitumen extraction projects have necessitated massive tailings ponds which constitute the second biggest dam system on the planet (Marsden 168). Across the province, Alberta has drilled more than 400,000 wells for the purpose of bitumen, oil and gas extraction (Hartshorn et al),⁴⁰ but more than 170,000 wells have been abandoned, 90,000 inactive wells have not been properly sealed, and tens of thousands of wells – some stranded since 1964 – have still not been plugged or cleaned up. In 2017, the Alberta Energy Regulator estimated that at least 17,000 abandoned wells in rural areas were leaking, and 3,400 of these wells were leaking at levels that posed risks to residents who lived nearby (Nikiforuk, “Alberta Failing”). The shocking size of these numbers reflect a pronounced correlation between *big* growth and *big* consequences.

In addition to large-scale consequences, the province has had to contend with a number of substantial natural disasters, which have occurred frequently throughout

³⁹ Another example of bigness within the transportation sector can be seen with Fort McMurray’s expanded airport, which re-opened in 2014 and was *five times* larger than the previous building. The province funded most of the new airport’s \$258 million in costs, while the municipality provided land and a generous tax break. Expected to accommodate 1.5 million passengers annually, the airport spanned more than two dozen football fields (McDermott, “New Airport”).

⁴⁰ To put this number in context, a total of just 37,000 wells had been drilled between 1915 and 1970 (Sharpe 110).

Alberta's past and continue in the present.⁴¹ In northern Alberta specifically, fires have previously levelled industrial plants and entire towns, such as Abasand and Bitumont (see page 291-292 below). More recently, the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire and the 2020 Fort McMurray floods caused at least \$9 billion and \$522 million in damage respectively (Snowdon, "Fort McMurray"; Malbeuf).

Catastrophes and bucketwheels aside, fossil fuel projects do not hold a monopoly on bigness; the province has also pursued renewable energy on a large scale. Wind turbines, for instance, have been on the rise. The company BHE Canada recently announced it will spend an impressive \$200 million to build a new wind farm in Alberta (Canadian Press, "Warren").⁴² Elsewhere in the province, the community of Okotoks redesigned itself to capitalize on solar energy; the town has also proactive placed a hard cap on the town's population, so in effect Okotoks has taken the principles of the limits of growth to heart (Murphy 40; see also Tom Wessels, Introduction). Despite BHE's investment in wind power investment and Okotoks's solar power initiatives and population caps represent a deviation from dominant fossil fuel narratives, as a general rule any narratives that endorse alternative industries are minimized and the master narrative of extreme energy is prioritized.

⁴¹ In recent years, the Insurance Bureau of Canada reported that the 2013 floods in southern Alberta were "the costliest natural disaster in Canadian history," with property damage exceeding \$1.7 billion (Canadian Press, "Alberta Floods"). This record cost estimation was soon eclipsed by the Fort McMurray fire of 2016. During the flood, local hospitals and health care centres could not stay open. The damage costs from the flood were comparable to the amount of subsidies granted annually to fossil fuel companies; federal and provincial support to the fossil fuel industry during the 2013-2014 fiscal year was an estimated \$3.6 billion Canadian (McDiarmid, "G20 Countries"). The amount of federal subsidies totalled approximately \$1.6 billion US (*The Guardian*). Ideally, the allocation of such funds would have been redirected to offset flood recovery costs. Such a re-allocation of petroleum subsidies might even be considered appropriate, since severe flooding is a common symptom of anthropogenic climate change – which is exacerbated by fossil fuel extraction.

⁴² As Tim Murphy remarks, the "rule in the wind industry, as with most things in Alberta, seems to be 'go big or go home'" (Murphy 25).

Although the southern Alberta community of Okotoks applied limits to its population size, northern Alberta communities like Fort McMurray have conversely experienced dramatic increases in population. At the turn of the 20th century, only a few hundred people lived in Fort McMurray. Decade by decade, the numbers rose; the population only once spiked briefly during the Second World War, when an “invasion” of approximately 5000 soldiers from the United States came to the region (Huberman 120). By the end of the century, Wood Buffalo’s population had skyrocketed from 34,000 in 1994 to 64,031 by 2006. In 2012, the city’s population grew to 77,000, and the municipal population – which included the ongoing, temporary work population – was 116,000 (Thompson). This large population influx also corresponded to large salaries. In 2013, the average family income in Fort McMurray was \$186,782 – the highest in Canada (The Canadian Press, “Wealthiest 1%”).⁴³ In this region, even poverty itself seems to be defined in large-scale terms: in 2006, the poverty line was determined to be \$60,000 for any northern Albertan couple or less than \$93,000 for a family (Marsden 142).⁴⁴

The presence of bigness – in vast stretches of boreal forest, in over-sized pieces of industrial equipment, in catastrophic acts of nature, or in exponential growths of population – recurs throughout northern Alberta’s literature, especially its non-fiction. Told and retold and retransmitted, its thematic ubiquity has become a tacitly accepted fact for both longstanding and new residents alike. It could be argued that this subconscious connection to bigness has impacted the way the province interacts with the rest of the country: the perennial rumours of the province potentially cutting ties to the rest of

⁴³ According to the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, the figure has since been revised to \$189,458 (Regional Municipality, “Cost of Living”).

⁴⁴ In 2011, the \$93,000 family income figure was lowered to \$82,000 (*Fort McMurray Today*, “KD Gala”).

Canada, for instance, often stems from a perceived lack of appreciation for Alberta’s “big” contributions in terms of employment opportunities, and from how residents perceive the province’s contributions to the federal equalization program.⁴⁵ In many cases, to think like an Albertan is to think big; for northern Albertans in particular, this mindset is practically mandatory.

The Convenient Minimalism of Smallness

Yet even as large-scale aspects are pervasive, “bigness” is sometimes minimized when desired. Certainly one aspect of bitumen sands development that is continually minimized is its disruptive footprint. Although the National Energy Board has confirmed that industry plans to triple bitumen sands production (Fekete), the percentage of land that has been reclaimed or rehabilitated remains miniscule (CBC, “Oilsands Reclamation”). Reclamation’s high costs have been a challenge for fossil fuel companies. At one point, the province of Alberta’s website misleadingly classified reclamation efforts as “accelerating.” In recent years, however, approximately 67 to 82 square kilometres have been listed as “under active reclamation,” but not yet officially certified.⁴⁶ Of the 896 square kilometres of land that have been disturbed by mining in the bitumen sands, only 1.04 square kilometre is certified as reclaimed – or, only 0.15% of the area.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ The program, which has existed since 1957, tends to be a popular talking point for Alberta’s politicians; however, the program is controlled federally, and technically provincial governments do not pay equalization to other provinces (CBC, “Bringing Clarity”).

⁴⁶ According to the Pembina Institute, 65 square kilometres have “unofficially” been reclaimed by bitumen sands companies, but even that number is “self-reported.” Consequently, this low figure has not been corroborated because of “a lack of regulated standards and transparency” (Pembina Institute, “Reclamation”). According to the province of Alberta, the total area of reclaimed land in 2012 was 77 square kilometres; in 2014, the provincial website listed 82 square kilometres as “under active reclamation.” By 2016, the province reduced the number “under active reclamation” to 67 square kilometres (Province of Alberta, “Reclamation Reporting” and “Reclamation”). See also Pembina Institute, “0.2% Reclaimed in 41 Years.”

⁴⁷ In 2010, Suncor confirmed that only 0.2% of the disturbed area was certified reclaimed, but the company was quick to clarify that “[t]he underwhelming statistic of ‘0.2% of disturbed land certified as reclaimed’

Equally small is the number of times that industry has actively attempted to rectify environmental problems. In 2013, according to a 677-page peer-reviewed report, fewer than 1% of the thousands of environmental infractions committed in the bitumen sands received any enforcement by the province of Alberta. The low enforcement percentage may actually be even lower, because the files concerning the 9,262 infractions were written and spelled in such a way as to be impossible to organize into a database (Canadian Press, “Enforcement Lacking”).

In addition to the minimal action taken to address environmental infractions, the province’s fossil fuel corporations – many of which are multinational in origin – rely on the rhetoric of smallness to minimize the amount of greenhouse gas emissions created by Canada, especially when compared to the emissions that are generated by other nations. For instance, since China and the United States burn a great deal of coal, these countries are often invoked in order to justify emissions from northern Alberta’s bitumen sands operations as proportionally smaller and therefore somehow less significant (MEI; Mintz). Such equivalents circumvent the important issue of per capita responsibility (Baumert et al) and, by attempting to shift responsibility onto nations with a higher percentage of global emissions, those who advocate for an increase in fossil fuel development insist that any potential climate change action taken by Canada would be comparably inconsequential. This popular belief – that Alberta emits comparatively

implies that we and other operators have done nothing about the other 99.8%. In fact the ‘0.2%’ refers only to fully certified reclaimed land” (Suncor, “How Much”). To provide additional context: when I first researched this data, the province of Alberta listed a total 715 square kilometres, or 71,500 hectares, of disturbed land. Within a year, the provincial website increased the amount of affected land to 896 square kilometres and 85,592 hectares, yet the amount of certified reclaimed land stayed the same. The province also designated separate categories of “permanent reclamation” (5,447 hectares) and “temporary reclamation” (1,244 hectares). In time, some of these areas may qualify for reclamation certification.

smaller carbon emissions – remains a powerful and effective rhetorical strategy among pro-development supporters.

Another example of convenient minimalism is evident in the way that fossil fuel companies tend to retain large profits yet keep their royalty payouts to Alberta comparably small. In 2005, Canadian Oil Sands (Trust), paid only \$19.6 million in royalties to the province, even though the company declared \$2 billion in revenues and \$831 million in profit (Marsden 156). In 2006, royalty calculations for ongoing operations were re-evaluated, and an arbitrary formula was established for royalties to be no greater than 40% of market value. As a result of this change, at least ten bitumen sands companies in the region would pay only a third of the tax amount they normally would have had to pay elsewhere. Wood Buffalo in particular could have received three times the tax revenue from large-scale resource development, but instead the municipality received comparably minimal revenue. In addition, pre-existing provincial tax laws that were formulated in the 1980s were grandfathered in order to allow bitumen sands companies to remain the only businesses in northern Alberta that are not taxed on 100 per cent of their market value (Marsden 139-140).

These are just some of the ways by which the impacts of large-scale operations are downplayed when corresponding regulatory considerations threaten bottom lines. Ideally, low environmental infraction turnarounds, anemic reclamation figures, and cunning sidestepping of royalties would be catalysts toward appropriate and necessary wide-scale corrective action. Instead, the very mention of such issues often conversely invite large-scale pushback from northern Albertans, and as a result attempts to curb or regulate such imbalances have remained minimal.

Quite Contrarian: Alberta's Mavericks

As might be expected, if northern Albertans are continually influenced by the presence of bigness, there are likely to be psychological and behavioral impacts to consider. One particular side effect of Alberta's affinity for bigness has been its corresponding and long-standing spirit of rebelliousness. As Alberta resident and author Aritha van Herk observes, the province is populated by mavericks, and "people who step out of bounds" (van Herk 2). Rather than perceiving the maverick reputation as a sore point, Albertans often embrace the connotation with a sense of pride. By the same token, it is worth noting that the word "maverick" was originally formulated to describe unbranded baby calves who were separated from their mothers; such an image hardly gives the impression of noble defiance or derring-do.⁴⁸

The contrarian temperament of the proud maverick also partly helps to explain Alberta's reluctance in the past to put limits on resource extraction and carbon emissions.⁴⁹ After all, such limits and regulations – often imposed by external powers or bodies – represent restraint and containment, and contradict the maverick mindset.⁵⁰ Consequently, the idea of frugality in resource development is often opposed, since limits to continual growth require compliance with boundaries and acknowledgement of widely accepted scientific data that identifies minimum thresholds and urges restraint.

⁴⁸ A special thank you to Dr. Pamela Banting for drawing my attention to this important point.

⁴⁹ More recently, this reluctance has been weakening. When the provincial NDPs were in power (2015-2019), the province stated it was more amenable to limits, and industry endorsed limits and regulations (Haavardsrud).

⁵⁰ The fossil fuel industry in particular has demonstrated a pattern of disregarding federal rules that dates back at least a century. In 1920, Imperial Oil circumvented national regulations that required the company to be staffed with a majority of Canadian or British workers. The rules simply did not apply to Imperial, who was the dominant fossil fuel company in Canada at the time. The company then proceeded to purchase CPR and Hudson's Bay leases without difficulty (Chastko 11).

Strangely, despite the province's presumed rebellious character, it is precisely the iron-clad contracts and long-term obligations to industry that keep northern Alberta rather compliant. Whenever a major resource development agreement is formed with another nation, Canada's control over resource development is severely limited. For instance, in April 2005, PetroChina International Company – a state-owned subsidiary of China National Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Corp. – signed a memorandum of understanding with Enbridge to build a pipeline that would transport diluted bitumen from Edmonton to Kitimat, B.C. Yet even before any public hearings were held, construction on the pipeline was already underway (Clarke 142). With a signed agreement that locked the project into a presumed state of finality, PetroChina prematurely forced Canada's hand, and the rejection of the project was no longer even a viable option.⁵¹ Likewise, in January 2006 the United States and Canada promised to increase bitumen sands production to Texas five-fold by the year 2020; this promise stemmed from an agreement that was binding and un-alterable. Over the years, these kinds of contracts have left Canada with no recourse but to continue to extract bitumen indefinitely. By necessity, these quota-based contractual obligations also require environmental regulations and protections to become less-important considerations (143). Locked in to commitments for years and even decades at a stretch, an image of subservience or tethered obligation seems more apt than an image of maverickhood.

It should also be noted that the PetroChina deal and the Texas agreement positioned Canada as a *colonized* country, because its own goals became subservient to the industrial

⁵¹ Tony Clarke cites Enbridge's own website to underscore the significant forfeiture of control and power that characterized the memorandum of understanding (Clarke 142, 204). The Enbridge link (enbridge.com/gateway) has since been removed by the company. In 2007, Petrochina backed out of the project (The Canadian Press, "PetroChina").

needs of China and the United States. Tony Clarke remarks that, rather than becoming a major energy superpower, Canada “has become little more than an energy colony within the American empire” (147). Agreements and contracts continue to have a firm hold on the region; however, if Canada genuinely wishes to reduce its carbon footprint, such agreements and contracts would need to be re-visited, broken, or re-worded.⁵² To put it another way, Canada would have to behave like a maverick.

The forfeiture of Canada’s power in these contracts with international interests is generally obscured in favour of the attempt to depict the bitumen sands as *nation-building* and *all-Canadian*. This trope enjoys considerable traction for many across the country, and has become a prominent theme in northern Alberta’s more recent literature (see Wherry; Prentice; Krugel). In reality, many projects in the sands have been funded by foreign interests; therefore, with respect to resource ownership, these interests are not strictly “national” but international at least to some extent (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 19).⁵³ Some prominent examples of non-Canadian energy corporations in northern Alberta have included Abasands Oil Limited, which was launched by American engineer Max Ball; the Great Canadian Oil Sands Company (Suncor),⁵⁴ which was devised and owned by Sun Oil of Philadelphia; and Syncrude, which was owned by U.S. companies when it

⁵² Recently, the United States has considered revising or breaking NAFTA agreements. Released from such a contract, Canada might achieve a reduction in its carbon emissions; see Gordon Laxer, “How NAFTA.”

⁵³ For years, profits and ownership in the bitumen sands were predominantly foreign (*Postmedia*). More recently, international investment has plummeted. In hindsight, these departures seem rather prescient, given the industry’s recent struggles in Alberta; however, provincial politicians have portrayed this decline as a success story because it has resulted in a corresponding rise in domestic ownership (Varcoe). At present, twelve foreign companies continue to engage in bitumen sands production in Alberta, but they account for less than 20% of total production (Healing).

⁵⁴ From 1991 to 2012, the CEO of Suncor Energy, the flagship company of the bitumen sands, was Rick George, who was born in Colorado. George died in August 2017 of myeloid leukemia, but before his death he boasted to the *Financial Post*, “We will be producing oilsands for another 300 to 500 years” (Morgan). George also wrote a book, and one noteworthy passage can be connected to the aforementioned subject of “bigness”: “This has been a story of many things, almost all of them big – big bets, big expenditures, big developments and, especially, big challenges” (*Sun Rise* 255).

opened in the 1970s (Marsden 34). In 2004, CNOOC (Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation) paid \$4.18 billion to acquire PetroKazakhstan, a small company from Calgary (Marsden 61). There are many other examples of foreign interests in northern Alberta that influence or own what otherwise seems like a reputedly Canadian industry.

To further emphasize this perception of Canada as a colonized region and nation, most fossil fuels are exported to other countries; 60 per cent of Canada's oil and gas is exported to the United States (Marsden 74).⁵⁵ In fact, bitumen is often exported, refined elsewhere, and then returned to Canada again at a higher import price. William Marsden has noted that the Alberta Energy Corporation (which subsequently merged into EnCana)⁵⁶ sent Canada's raw bitumen, "which is owned by the people of Alberta," to the United States, along with the corresponding profits and jobs (56-57).

For years, as the bitumen sands have been developed, the boreal forest has been disrupted for the benefit of other nations. Canada has collected anemic royalties while international companies launched numerous projects in northern Alberta that exemplified industrial colonialism. Trade agreements and contracts used language that made Canada – subjugated and obeisant – helpless to dismantle this decidedly "colonial corporate economy" (Marsden 230). Since non-Canadian agents have dominated and held power for decades, the popular and evergreen trope of nation-building that so often is deployed by policy-makers belies the reality of who actually owns, controls, and decides the fate of northern Alberta's bitumen.

⁵⁵ Canada exports 3.3 million barrels of crude oil to the U.S. daily (Government of Canada, "Crude Oil").

⁵⁶ Initially, the provincial government owned half of the Alberta Energy Corporation / Encana before the enterprise was sold by Ralph Klein in 1993.

Lastly, an equally important aspect to consider with respect to maverickhood is the way that many Albertans perceive the environment, nature, and climate change. From an ecological perspective, in many ways a maverick mindset – unfettered and solipsistic – runs contrary to the fundamental tenets of altruism, humility, and selflessness that underpin biocentric concerns and considerations. As Suellen Campbell notes, ecology requires human beings to “pay attention not to the way things have meaning for us, but to the way the rest of the world – the nonhuman part – exists apart from us and our languages” (Campbell 133).

This call for a redirection of attention away from strictly a human vantage point is also a continuing focal point in discussions concerning the so-called age of the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). As Donna Haraway asserts, there is not a single species that “acts alone” (“Anthropocene” 159), and this shared interdependency necessitates an acknowledgment that the planet is home to both human and nonhuman refugees alike. Haraway favours the commingling and entanglement of all “intra-active entities-in-assemblages” including the inhuman, other-than-human, more-than-human, and human-as humus, and she subsequently proposes the unifying term “making kin” to emphasize that all of these entities-in-assemblages should work in tandem in order to effectively reconstitute and recuperate protective spaces and refuges (160, 161). Of course, the practice of “making kin” requires anthropocentric humans to adopt and embrace altruistic behaviour toward cross-species refugees.

Bruno Latour similarly calls for *agency* to be distributed across as many potential “Earthbound” *agents* as possible (Latour 14-16). The planet can no longer be perceived as simply an object without agency (or as “objective”) but as “fully articulated and

active” (5, 13), and as a veritable “agent of history” that reflects “our common geostory” (3).⁵⁷ In order for humans to continue to see themselves as subjects, they also need to be willing to expand this subjective space to include nonhuman subjects too. “To be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background,” Latour maintains, “but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy” (5).

This shift in perspective “away from dreams of mastery” (5) is crucial. For generations, many Albertans have become accustomed to seeing themselves as unique subjects. If maverickhood represents the solipsistic capacity for Albertans to sometimes come across as self-absorbed and “outwardly self-serving” (van Herk 5) – and if anthropocentrism is likewise a popular default mindset in northern Alberta that frequently supersedes ecological priorities – then maverickhood represents an antagonistic impediment to alternative ways of thinking or to the possibility of perceiving the region in a more wholistic manner. On a modest scale, we see examples of maverickhood in texts by self-publishing settler A.M. Bezanson (Chapter Two), Métis advocate and resource corporation appointee Alvena Strasbourg (Chapter Three), controversial industry researcher Larry Pratt (Chapter Four), and even in the title of a book about Alberta by Aritha van Herk (*Mavericks*, 2001).

The Long Shadow of Dominionism

It was not always this way, though. Initially, Albertans were comparably more humble in their interactions with nature. As human residents within this shared space, they behaved

⁵⁷ For Latour, such agency and activity blurs the line between existence and meaning; semiotics extend beyond discourse, language or text (12).

and acted as only one of many other species abiding within a larger ecosystem. Aritha van Herk refers to this earlier period as a time “of fearsome magic and unpredictable plenty” when Albertans “fitted themselves into the environment instead of trying to make the environment fit them” (73). Natural spaces – large and essentially uncontrollable – were left relatively undisturbed and undisrupted. Eventually, the Genesis-based doctrine commonly called Dominionism took hold, and it was popularly assumed that nature and its resources should be domesticated and subordinated to the needs of humans.

Dominionism has often been linked to Evangelical Christians who invoke the Book of Genesis “as a divine trump card against any thoughts about environmental protection or regulation” (Nelson). Also known as Christian Reconstructionism, or *theonomy*, Dominionism presumes that human beings were created in order to dominate over all other species; therefore, this mindset helps to justify the ecological and environmental consequences of extreme energy development. In addition to this idea of human supremacy over all other species, a Dominionist stance solidifies the hegemony of Christianity over all other systems of belief.⁵⁸

Part of the allure of Dominionism stems from the tacit belief that innovation and ingenuity have bested corporeal limitations that have been imposed by the natural world. According to Harold Fromm, humans have a tendency to “extol and mythify” their reasoning skills, because these skills seem to “transcend Nature” (38). As humans devised new ways to cope with often harsh environments, the historical division between nature and human rationalism deepened. Nature became “the enemy,” and people began

⁵⁸ For an extended literary example of the hegemony of Christianity taken to its extreme, see Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985); see Tenbus; see also Howells, who linked Atwood’s book to the present-day convergence of “widespread environmental catastrophe” and rising Christian, right-wing fundamentalism (162).

to gravitate toward constructed, human-made environments, while their encounters with authentic, natural environments decreased (39).⁵⁹ Over time, basic human connections to nature have continued to be “artfully concealed by modern technology” (41).⁶⁰

The foundations of Dominionist thinking are hardly new; early writers from the United States have long recognized that such subservient treatment of the natural world is tenuous.⁶¹ In Canada, the early settlers who cleared land and then parsed it into property believed the land-ownership system was sanctioned by God (New 76). This Dominionist presumption is also evoked in Northrop Frye’s observation that Canada’s urban residents are less inclined to live in tandem with nature, or adapt to its unpredictable temperament, than to dominate it. City dwellers assume they are entitled to rule nature; this sense of entitlement represents “the conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it” (“Conclusion” 224).⁶² In northern Albertan literature, the Dominionist mentality is most

⁵⁹ However, as ecocritics like William Cronon have pointed out, wilderness and civilization are not necessarily rigid binaries – although they are often perceived as such (Cronon, “The Trouble”). After all, as Carolyn Merchant notes, the traditional sentiment of nature as pristine and untouched is a fantasy, and humans cannot realistically expect to return to some undisrupted place in nature. As such, human beings can work with the planet’s resources, yet discover new and constructive methods of connecting and linking with nature (see White). When cultures view land primarily in terms of how it can serve to meet their desires (Cohen 9), tensions and boundaries emerge between those who engage with “not fixed” land for reasons of self-interest, and those who engage in authentic, productive relationships with “not fixed” land and develop new, unexpected encounters with it.

⁶⁰ As Thoreau muses, human inventions and technological innovations are “pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things” (Thoreau 144).

⁶¹ In 1867, John Muir was already touching on aspects of biocentric theory and Dominionism in “A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf.” Muir, who was abused as a boy and forced by his overbearing father to memorize the Bible, produced nature writing as an adult that often stood at odds with his religious upbringing. Specifically, Muir took issue with the anthropocentric belief that the earth exists strictly for the pleasure of humans: “The world, we are told, was made especially for man – a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God’s universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves” (*American Earth* 86-87). 150 years later, Muir’s reference to the importance of facts seems particularly apt in today’s “post-truth” world (Oxford Dictionary), and his critique of Dominionist ideology in the face of the fundamental tenets of biology, ecology, and evolution seems particularly prescient.

⁶² At the same time, Frye notes that Canada’s frigid winters and “bleak and comfortless” conditions are not easily conquered. The critic admires the way that Canadian poets incorporate into their works “a tone of deep terror in regard to nature.” Humans latch onto moral values, while “the vast unconsciousness of nature” that exists beyond the human perimeter “seems an unanswerable denial of those values” (“Conclusion” 225). Large, lonely, and often unpredictable, forests act as a kind of morality repellent. This

evident in the numerous industry-endorsing texts that promote bitumen development but neglect to stop to ask if there are other options beyond large-scale extraction.

The Comforts of Creationism and Evangelicalism

The prominence of Christianity and Christian values in Alberta has been well-documented (see van Herk;⁶³ McDonald; Nelson; Banack).⁶⁴ In 2011, more than 60% of Albertans identified as Christian (Statistics Canada). In addition to the problematic aspects of Dominionist ideology, the premise of Creationism – as well as those who believe its veracity – presents inherently unavoidable contradictions. Specifically, Alberta’s formidable paleontological history – and the well-documented existence of dinosaurs in the province millions of years ago – represents a significant tension between the fundamentals of Creationism and Evolution.⁶⁵ This tension remains particularly sensitive for many Albertans, including some authors, who believe the province came into existence approximately 6000 years ago as a result of a Great Flood.⁶⁶ A 2012 Angus

perspective helps explain in part how industry justifies damage to the space: the moral sphere of humans is at odds with the seemingly amoral quality of nature.

⁶³ In addition to the Christian trope, Aritha van Herk writes that a number of stereotypes concerning Alberta are “both true and false.” The author notes that Canada perpetually bestows the “first prize for bigotry” to “Redneck Alberta” because the province is perceived as “intolerant and racist, conservative and neo-Christian, suspicious of anything new, home of white supremacists, gun lovers, and not a few book-banning school boards” (341).

⁶⁴ Andrew Nikiforuk has outlined the alarming steps taken by evangelical organizations to oppose environmental groups (“Understanding”) and revealed the influence of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church and the Cornwall Alliance on former prime minister Stephen Harper; see also Todd.

⁶⁵ Dinosaurs, of course, represent another example of “bigness” in Alberta. Notably, one species of dinosaur has been named after the major city that is closest to the bitumen sands: in its day, *Edmontosaurus* weighed 4 tonnes and measured 12 metres in length (Kroetsch, *Alberta* 80). The namesake originated from Lawrence Lambe, who was a geologist and paleontologist from the Geological Survey of Canada. Meanwhile, the 1.5-tonned, 9-metred *Albertosaurus* was named after its province of origin. The fossils of the Tyrannosaur-like *Albertosaurus* were discovered near the Red Deer river in 1905 – the same year the province formally came into existence.

⁶⁶ Irwin Huberman’s popular compendium about the region, *The Place We Call Home*, opens with the declaration, “In the beginning, a Great Flood created the land, rivers and valleys that formed modern day Fort McMurray.” Huberman claims that this Great Flood occurred 9900 years ago (1). The author eventually left Wood Buffalo to become a rabbi at a Conservative-affiliated congregation in New York.

Reid Public Opinion poll revealed that only 48% of Albertans believe in evolution (Angus Reid Institute), and 35% agree with the statement, “God created human beings in their present form within the last 10,000 years” (QMI Agency).⁶⁷

Yet, in a way, a strictly biblical view of the region fails to account for Alberta’s primary industry today, which paradoxically and intrinsically depends upon the historical presence of dinosaurs.⁶⁸ With respect to bitumen sands projects, it is precisely the fossilized remains *of* prehistoric creatures that are excavated and burned up; as such, the scientific and evolutionary intrusion onto the Creationist timeline becomes epistemologically problematic. Further, while a Dominionist perspective privileges anthropocentric governance over nature, today’s extreme energy projects owe their existence to the evolution-based fact that the remains of prehistoric plants and animals comprise the very resource that “fuels” northern Alberta’s fuel industrial and economic ventures.⁶⁹ As Andrew Nikiforuk observes, many Canadians are now dependent upon “a half-baked fuel synthesized by plants and stored as chemical energy at a time when dinosaurs briefly ruled” (*Tar Sands* 12).

⁶⁷ The anti-evolution mindset has a long history in Alberta. In *Mavericks*, Aritha van Herk provides an insightful overview of William “Bible Bill” Aberhart (243-258), the evangelical Baptist and former premier who had been lobbied by fundamentalist organizations to stop evolution from being taught in Alberta schools. Aberhart wrote an anti-evolution tract that he insisted be placed into every textbook; however, the education minister G.F. McNally was able to change Aberhart’s mind by arguing that such a drastic action might trigger controversy (254). Although Aberhart was frequently skewered by the press and the province’s intellectuals, George Melnyk notes that Aberhart’s name “is now part of Albertans’ genetic code” (van Herk 255). Following in Aberhart’s footsteps, the former Canadian Alliance Party leader Stockwell Day once visited Red Deer College in 1977 and told the students that he believed that Earth was only 6000 years old and that humans lived with dinosaurs. Journalists called this belief the “Flintstones’ theory of evolution” (284).

⁶⁸ Likewise, the province is also home to a number of dinosaur museums, including the Royal Tyrrell Museum in Drumheller and the Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum in Wembley.

⁶⁹ The link between extreme energy and Creationism sometimes originates from industry spokespeople; for example, Greg Stringham, VP of Oil Sands at the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), insists that the bitumen sands are “about creation” (Helbig 183). Stringham’s choice of word extends beyond the realm of semantics and into the domain of strategy. Also of note is how the root of the word Creationism can be seen in the highly popular industry and government phrase “job *creation*.”

Despite the obvious links between energy extraction and the dinosaurs that became fossils, even in its earliest phases of development the industrialization of the region was likened to a Christian act or a Christian pursuit. At the first conference for bitumen sands development in 1951, former Minister of Mines Nathan Tanner⁷⁰ argued that development of the bitumen sands was crucial not only because of the significance of a new prospective source of fuel, but because the bitumen sands were Heaven's way of testing that a "Christian way of life" would survive (*Proceedings: Athabasca Oil Sands* 176). According to Paul Chastko, the enthusiastic Tanner urged his peers to "join with him in this battle," and considered the industrial development of the bitumen sands to be "tantamount to a crusade" (Chastko 89). Tanner's evocations of Christian values set the tone for early sands development contextualized through religious imagery; his remarks also signalled an early, large-scale collaboration between industry and government.

Although Christian ideology and values continue to influence Albertans, in recent decades there are also indications that their hegemonic heft is becoming diluted. Long populated by Christian denominations, northern Alberta in particular has experienced a change in demographic composition, and has become increasingly heterogeneous, multicultural, and pluralist. The local population has seen a rise in temporary foreign workers who come from an array of cultural and religious backgrounds. In a way, non-Canadian, non-Christian people who come to this ostensibly Christocentric region could be considered to be mavericks themselves.

Unfortunately, local residents have occasionally acted out against non-Christians in the form of vandalism, graffiti, and hate crimes. In Cold Lake (one of the three major

⁷⁰ Nathan Tanner was born in Salt Lake City, Utah. As a leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he was referred to as "N. Eldon Tanner." The politician died in Salt Lake City at the age of 84.

bitumen sands hubs of northern Alberta), a mosque was vandalized twice with spray paint and sustained a number of broken windows (Gerein; CBC, “Town Rallies”; J. Hughes; Wakefield).⁷¹ The incident was only one of many others; the province’s human rights commission has confirmed that there has been a marked increase in hate crimes toward Alberta’s Muslim community.⁷² Since Christianity is Alberta’s tacitly accepted, de facto religion, its widespread popularity may have been a contributing factor to these acts of intolerance. Yet in the case of the mosque vandalism in Cold Lake, Muslim residents surprised their fellow Albertans by proving a key tenet of Christianity – forgiveness – when they asked that the charges against the vandal be dropped altogether (Ip).

Since the beginning, Christian content has permeated northern Alberta’s literature. In some of the region’s early texts, including the ones examined in Chapters Two and Three, this content comes across as peripheral or supplementary. In more recent years, religious content has become more overt and explicit (i.e. Bruce Atchison, evangelical Christian author of three books; Dheena Subramanian, poet and inspirational author of four books; Joy Ellen Lalonde, author of *The Greatest Gift: Finding 100 Blessings from the Fort McMurray Wild Fire*) (see Appendix A for other authors).

Strategic Language and the Rise of Counter-Counter-Discourses

One recurring characteristic associated with much of the discourse about, and from, northern Alberta is the careful use of diction. The exploitation of the bitumen sands is framed as a national achievement through strategic language, either in industry

⁷¹ Alberta has also seen a steep increase in anti-Semitic vandalism and harassment (Maimann, “They”).

⁷² Robert Philp from the Alberta Human Rights Commission said that the province has been experiencing “an increase in hate crimes against Muslims in the last three years, including incidents of hate, prejudice and religious intolerance against Muslims in Alberta, such as Islamophobic graffiti in Calgary and Fort Saskatchewan and damage to a mosque in Cold Lake” (Philp).

promotions or in political talking points. For decades, words and phrases have been carefully selected to ensure neither Alberta nor Canada is perceived as unqualified or ill-prepared to handle large-scale energy production. Examples of such rephrasing can be observed in the language of *fossil fuel spills*, in the dissemination of the dubious claim that the bitumen sands were *always/already in need of repair*, in the deployment of corresponding *resolution narratives*, and in the attempt to frame bitumen extraction as *inherently noble*. In tandem with these constructed expressions, industry supporters are presented as underdogs in the wake of growing ecological and climatological concerns, all under the guise of *counter-counter-discourses*.

With respect to the language used to describe fossil fuel spills, industry and policy-makers have come to understand that, although spills are liable to continue and are likely to continue to receive unflattering media coverage, some semantic choices can help stem the reputational bleeding. In terms of toxic publicity and damage control, the urgency is understandable: in Alberta, thousands of fossil fuel spills have occurred in the last four decades (Young, “Crude Awakening”). In the aftermath of a number of large spills in the United States, such as the Deepwater Horizon BP oil spill in April 2010 and the Kalamazoo River spill of July 2010, Alberta’s spills have become a growing concern. Oil and bitumen spills, frequently perceived as negative, ugly, and garish, pose a threat to the image of benevolence of fossil fuels, and the perceived value they offer modern citizens. Accordingly, spills are often reworded by companies, governmental agencies, and the media. When pipelines rupture, the occurrences are referred to as “releases,” “discharges,” or “incidents,” rather than “spills” or “leaks.” In 2015, for example, TransCanada informed the National Energy Board of a significant spill near Drumheller,

Alberta. The Board called the event an “incident” two times and used the word “release.” Neither “spill” nor “leak” were used by the Board (National Energy Board). The ongoing attempts to build or expand pipelines rely at least partly on the ability to minimize the number of references to spills and leaks in the public sphere.

Another common alteration involves the suggestion that the land itself is somehow deficient, or at fault. This debatable assertion originated from the fact that bitumen has seeped unabated in some areas for a long time and allows industry supporters to justify continued bitumen extraction under the premise that nature spills itself and must be cleaned up, or that the land is not performing its intended function somehow. These claims are occasionally made explicit and, because of widespread belief in the magic bullet of reclamation, industry declares itself better suited to handle nature than nature handles itself. Former Syncrude president Jim Carter, for instance, once boasted that his company was “actually rendering the land ‘more productive than it was when we got here’” (Marsden 170).⁷³ Carter’s sentiment is repeated often in northern Alberta; apparently, industry’s efforts in reclamation have helped to restore the boreal forest and make the area better than it had been prior to the onset of development projects.⁷⁴ From this vantage point, extractive industries seemingly perform an intrinsic good, and go out of their way to improve the land and its condition. William Marsden, however, points out inherent flaws in Carter’s “pretension,” and notes that this assertion of the land becoming “more productive” suggests that Syncrude’s restoration efforts have somehow made the

⁷³ Jim Carter’s impact on the region did not go unnoticed. In 2009, Carter’s home in Fort McMurray burned down as a result of molotov cocktails (Christian; O’Neill). Six months later, the *Toronto Sun* discounted eco-terrorism as a cause (*Toronto Sun*, “Oil Exec”).

⁷⁴ On the organization’s website, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) claims that bitumen sands companies will “return the land including reclaiming tailings ponds – to a sustainable landscape that is equal to or better than how we found it” (Nikiforuk, “Scientists Doubt”).

land function in a “more than” equal capacity. One production adviser, Pete Duggan, insisted that each time Syncrude cleans “this dirty oil out of the oil sands,” his company is “doing nature a favour” (170). Although perhaps not expressed scientifically, these statements by Carter and Duggan reflect a position that has been adopted and re-transmitted among bitumen sands workers, politicians, and commentators. By framing the bitumen sands as *problem* and *broken*, the technological methods of harnessing and extracting this resource are correspondingly framed as *solution* and *success*. Such distortions are relatively common with the discourses of science and technology, where a challenging phenomenon – in this case, the bitumen sands – is depicted as a conundrum in need of intervention, repair, and human ingenuity. As the sociologist Ron Curtis argues, popular science tends to employ gratifying narratives of resolution whenever an innovation or discovery occurs. Steps are introduced which tend to follow a logical order. A standard, scientifically-rooted text, for example, might begin with a mystery of some kind that needs to be solved. Then, a series of potential explanations are introduced. Finally, the conclusion will involve a discovery or scientific innovation (Curtis). At the moment this discovery is introduced, the narrative becomes fully closed or, as Timothy Clark writes, the intended reader is “cast in the role of satisfied spectator” (Clark 144). Similarly, many recent publications in northern Alberta – including regional books that are manifestly influenced by development pursuits – have presented the bitumen sands as a problem that has been solved, or even cured, by human ingenuity, despite past obstacles, setbacks, and failures.

Such attempts to frame resource development as a narrative of resolution constitutes part of a larger goal of insulating the region from criticism by outside sources.

Imre Szeman has outlined some of the common strategies that have been used by petroleum supporters in order to suppress potential criticism. Specifically, Szeman invokes the helpful term *counter-counter-discourses* (“On the Energy Humanities”). The term can be described as follows: in cultures where predominant behaviour patterns depend on the consumption of fossil fuels, the predominant master discourse – in the media and elsewhere – tends to *favour* petroculture and its hegemonic status. Discourses that *oppose* the master narrative of fossil fuels and its hegemonic status are considered to be *counter-discourses*. Over time, industry supporters become increasingly irked by these counter-discursive threats to the overarching dominance of petroculture, and they believe that their opponents have appropriated a perceived position or platform of privilege. Consequently, fossil fuel supporters sanction a kind of discursive balance by attempting to manufacture or construct new, grassroots support to fight their opponents. This self-bestowed underdog position⁷⁵ seeks to restore and re-promote extractive practices as beneficent and can be classified as a tactic of *counter-counter-discourses* (Szeman 20).

In recent years, counter-counter-discourses have been increasing in number. For industry supporters, the rise of counter-counter-discourse activism is advantageous because it gives credence to the premise that their stories have not been told, and that

⁷⁵ J. Joseph Fitzgerald, who is discussed in Chapter Four, also assumed the underdog role of an ostracized fossil fuel worker who has been unfairly targeted by others. In *Black Gold with Grit*, Fitzgerald attempts to elicit sympathy from readers as a victim of prejudice for having worked in the area of unconventional fossil fuels, rather than the more socially acceptable area of conventional oil and gas. Fitzgerald recalls one occasion when he dined at the Calgary Petroleum Club and a man asked if he was “one of those guys from the tar sands” (182). Asked to produce his club membership, Fitzgerald had to provide “some evidence that I was better than a ‘tar sands miner.’” The “assailant” tells Fitzgerald that, as an unconventional fossil fueler, none of his “kind” would enjoy the perks of the Calgary Petroleum Club. Reflecting back on the incident, Fitzgerald was offended by his exclusion from “the oil fraternity” simply because his prior work and efforts did not fit into the domain of conventional energy. “The unknown is always a fearful threat,” the author laments (183).

their voices have not been heard.⁷⁶ The counter-counter-discourse movement steers arguments away from the social and environmental ramifications of industry, and redirects the focus to the merits or benefits of extraction projects. Further, many workers and supporters argue fossil fuels should not be blamed for meeting the needs of individuals,⁷⁷ and those who oppose the extraction of oil and gas must first stop consuming fossil fuels before being allowed to speak out against extraction projects.⁷⁸

This attempt to silence opponents under the guise of user-hypocrisy has gained traction and is symptomatic of recent efforts to shift climate initiatives away from government engagement and back onto individuals. As Timothy Clark has argued, however, when even concrete environmental action is passed on to individual citizens, responsibility is diverted away from corporations and policy-makers. When too much focus is placed on consumer behaviour and personal choices, there is a risk that the climate crisis is projected as merely the product “of bad shopping or lifestyle decisions.” The transferral of blame onto individual citizens evades or minimizes the urgent need to engage with federal and international economic structures, or with political bodies that are “ultimately more responsible” (Clark 136). This flawed strategy of blaming individual

⁷⁶ Counter-counter-discourse activists seek “to use social media to circulate counter-counter-discourses regarding oil sands developments like pipelines, and to ultimately garner public participation in that circulation”; they try to disrupt or destabilize counter-discourses circulated by environmental groups and Indigenous groups; and some groups, such as Ethical Oil, claim “that oppositional voices are privileged in mainstream media” and that the bitumen sands suffer from what they perceive to be “uneven debate” (Szeman 20). Szeman points out that this position of bias or unfairness is untenable, since modernity’s “dominant patterns of behaviour” already rely on fossil fuel consumption; therefore, the idea “that anti-fossil fuel, anti-oil sands discourses are privileged in mainstream media simply does not hold up when we consider the hegemony of petroculture” (20).

⁷⁷ As Marsden remarks, the language of abundance and resource development helps cast Alberta into the role of performing a “sacrifice” (Marsden 5) for the good of the nation and for the needs of the economy (i.e. Alberta reaps its fossil fuels so that others are energy-nourished).

⁷⁸ In a similar vein, industry supporters have also argued that those who wish to participate in energy discourse should first learn the technical language that underpins each newly proposed project and understand the specifics of project operations. These onerous requirements are evident at pipeline hearings, when the parameters for acceptable comments from the public are strict, specific, and narrow.

citizens is also criticized by Naomi Klein, who has methodically demonstrated that approaches to climate change which seek to place the responsibility on individuals are “doomed to fail” (*This Changes Everything* 117).

Bitumen sands workers and supporters have stumbled onto a powerful, enticing defense mechanism through the upsurge of counter-counter-discourses and the increasing castigation of opponents as invalid voices unless they abstain from fossil fuel use altogether. From their vantage point, fossil fuels simply help society meet its basic energy needs. Such messaging also helps distract citizens from paying close attention to industry whenever a transgression occurs, or whenever penalties for regulation infractions are watered down.⁷⁹ Meanwhile contentious subsidies for fossil fuel companies, which run into the billions (McDiarmid), continue to be granted – usually at the expense of taking greater steps to address climate change.

Science and Technology as Master Narrative

In conjunction with counter-counter-discursive attempts to stifle criticism, in recent years there have been concerted efforts to de-legitimize non-scientific voices as uninformed or unimportant. From a literary perspective, Alberta’s non-fiction texts have increasingly prioritized scientific and technological discourse over stories about the region and its people. As Timothy Clark notes, when science works in tandem with technology, it can be linked to imperialism and colonialism because groups or cultures who are less technologically aware or who have limited scientific vocabularies often face limited opportunities to participate in these discourses, including project proposals that are likely

⁷⁹ According to Leslie Young, less than 1% of bitumen sands environmental violations are enforced (Young, “Alberta”).

to affect them (Clark 163).⁸⁰ Groups or individuals who are not fully fluent in the language of technology are ill equipped to speak against the colonizer.

For better or worse, science has occupied a default hegemonic position in public policy. For decades, the Canadian government has often stated that it considers science to be an important factor when making decisions.⁸¹ Yet although science provides helpful information, the clinical and exclusionary aspects of its methodology often marginalize or suppress other important perspectives or mitigating factors that are worthy of consideration. A monolithic focus on scientific discourse potentially mutes or ignores other important voices, disciplines, and alternative perspectives – especially with respect to indigenous people, even though many traditional and contemporary practices and customs have variously been recognized as innovative, effective, or sustainable.⁸² Few places demonstrate this inclination toward science like northern Alberta, where development projects privilege technological expertise and the default question becomes *how* a project can proceed, rather than *whether* a project should proceed. Science, often presented as objective and neutral, occupies narrative space that displaces personal narrative space, which is often presented as subjective and problematic. Of course, in other circumstances endless lines of personal narratives could perhaps be equally problematic – particularly whenever anti-science and populism converge and ostensibly facilitate the legitimization of anti-intellectualism or ignorance, while basic facts and

⁸⁰ Colonialism and imperialism are also apt terms if one considers that scientific and technological advancements are predominantly deployed in English, and therefore are doubly alienating for those who belong to a culture where English is not the mother tongue.

⁸¹ A 2017 news release from the Prime Minister’s office, for example, declares that the Canadian government “is committed to strengthen science in government decision-making and to support scientists’ vital work” (Trudeau).

⁸² Among many examples, see Dialogues on Sustainability, “Acting on Climate Change: Indigenous Innovations” and Assembly of First Nations, “Honouring Earth.”

general common sense increasingly become questioned or quashed (i.e. vaccines, climate change). In northern Alberta, however, scientific and technological fossil fuel discourse is still broadly accepted, even if its complexities can only be effectively mastered by subject matter experts. For all other citizens, this specialized content or discourse is understood to be inherently impartial; this illusory quality helps lend additional authority and even a kind of beneficence to project proposals and especially project hearings.

The consequences of uncritically embracing this master narrative are obvious. As industrial development increases, and as technological innovation continues to dominate, there is a very real risk that, unless their voices are heard, the people and the land can be abstracted or treated as expendable.⁸³ In terms of northern Albertan literature that privileges scientific or technological discourse, many texts from the last few decades either have focused primarily on industry (e.g. Rick Ranson's *Bittersweet Sands: 24 Days in Fort McMurray*; Sanjay K. Patel's *The Future of Oil: A Straight Story of the Canadian Oil Sands*) or have incorporated industry into texts that might otherwise not be industry-dominant (see Ells, Chapter Four; Huberman and Jean, Chapter Six).

⁸³ According to William Marsden, once uncolonized land becomes charted and mapped, the concrete reality of that land turns into abstraction, and the newly created maps become symbols and signifiers of wealth accumulation. In the case of northern Alberta, for instance, seismic surveys allow mapmakers to abstract a particular place by prescribing or assigning financial values to the area. Petroleum companies survey Alberta – “the playground of the oil business” – and then convert it into “a checkerboard” consisting of small squares that measure one square mile (Marsden 80). Geophysicists, geologists, and engineers pore over section maps and attempt to pinpoint specific, small patches of land that might lead to eventual wealth. In fact, a common way to view and perceive land in northern Alberta is to scan for any rare pocket of land that has not yet been excavated or disturbed. After 100 years of digging, and after more than 300,000 gas and oil wells have already been drilled in Alberta, Marsden notes that these section maps “have become crowded with tiny black dots and stars” that represent older or existing wells” (80).

The Tendency to Downplay Failures and Disappointments

In order for the fossil fuel industry to project and maintain the impression that it is beneficent, positive, and necessary, its milestones and accomplishments tend to be emphasized, even though examples of failure can be commonly found in northern Alberta's literature. From unsuccessful inventions to aborted infrastructure projects, the region has historically been vexed by many breakdowns and unanticipated setbacks. These well-documented disappointments are rarely discussed today.

Yet copious literary evidence exists. Contrary to today's revisionist approach to northern Alberta's history, the region's early literature contains – and openly describes – past industrial failures with a sense of regret and disappointment. D.J. Comfort⁸⁴ touches on some of these setbacks in *Ribbon of Water and Steamboats North* (1974). In her historical account of northern Alberta's steamers, Comfort describes three ships that sank: the *Lilly*, which was known as “a steel-hulled monster” (*Ribbon* 119); the *Athabasca*, which was prematurely put into operation before it was ready;⁸⁵ and a third, unnamed ship that went down during the Saskatchewan river disaster (197). Although cautious citizens – including experts – pointed out that the rapids were too risky to travel, time and again their words repeatedly went unheeded (197-198).⁸⁶ Prior to the sinkings, the counter-reply was that nature was merely acting as an obstacle to human endeavours. Despite these disasters, Comfort valorizes the steamer captains and designers and

⁸⁴ Darlene J. Comfort wrote two other books about Fort McMurray, *Pass the McMurray Salt Please!* (1975) and *The Abasand Fiasco* (1980). An outsider, Comfort first came to the region in 1968.

⁸⁵ Comfort tacitly suggests the sinking of the *Athabasca* is blamed on the ship's head, a “gigantic half-breed” named Captain Shot (*Ribbon* 197). There are *Titanic*-like omens; for instance, the paddlewheel had only just been attached. The *J.M. Smith* also burned while it was still docked (121).

⁸⁶ In 1889, for instance, a man named Segers, who was captain of the *Grahame*, went “lunatic,” and pushed his crew to forge ahead in low waters. Consequently, a chase was initiated to try to apprehend Segers (Comfort, *Ribbon* 211).

provides extensive biographical information about these men, including James A. Grahame, a ship runner. Grahame was forced to resign his post because of his shady real estate dealings, yet his name has retained its legendary status (131); meanwhile, a prominent figure like Captain Joseph Favel, who was Métis, scarcely received the same degree of commemoration.

The popular tendency to downplay failures is particularly noticeable when one looks objectively at the history of bitumen experimentation and extraction. A number of northern Alberta's texts demonstrate that failures were commonplace, severe, and costly, as public money was continually spent on ill-fated development initiatives. One such example occurred with Max Ball's Abasand plant circa 1936/1937: breakdowns occurred regularly, operating funds were dire, and employees did not get paid (Huberman 103). Even after \$700,000 was invested into the plant, Ball asked the federal government to waive lease royalties for three years. Then in November 1941, a fire destroyed Ball's plant. Yet in spite of all these omens, Ottawa committed \$500,000 for plant upgrades, in order to transform the facility into a Canadian government holding (119). After the plant caught fire once again in 1945, it did not get rebuilt (131). By this point, however, an exorbitant amount of money had been spent on Abasand. The debacle echoed an earlier, similar scenario, when the Bitumount plant also encountered massive technical and financial setbacks (113).

Failures of this magnitude were not limited to lesser-known ventures either. Although Suncor is often touted as a success story in the region, in reality the company's early years – and especially its 1967 launch – were tumultuous. The official opening of Suncor (then Great Canadian Oil Sands or GCOS) did not lead to actual functioning

operations – cold November temperatures turned the plant into a block of ice. The plant did not resume full operation until the following summer (Huberman 192).⁸⁷

In addition, GCOS experienced massive employee turnovers as soon as operations were underway. In fact, every 2.7 months, the entire GCOS staff turned over.⁸⁸ Despite these large-scale personnel changes, the provincial Conservatives sought to increase the existing number of plants from one (which was operating erratically at best) to between ten and twenty plants (Chastko 143). Pressures to rapidly increase infrastructure superseded all other considerations, including the disturbing fact that nearly a decade would pass before baseline environmental data would even be collected by GCOS.⁸⁹

While the aforementioned industrial failures⁹⁰ lend themselves to occupying a role of necessary tribulations prior to the eventual success story (i.e. the bitumen sands as eventual solution), the scope and details of past failures are strategically minimized all the same. This tendency is unfortunate, since these particular anecdotes and accounts provide important learning opportunities – particularly when warnings went unheeded.

⁸⁷ Today, shutting down operations at a plant in the bitumen sands, even for a day, holds major repercussions. The 2016 wildfire required plant shutdowns that lasted weeks and cost hundreds of millions of dollars (Ferrerias).

⁸⁸ At the time, the company employed temporary foreign workers from Cuba, Britain, and Korea. Soon Alberta's royalty rates were cut from 16% to 8% and this reduction was to the financial benefit of external companies (Chastko 137).

⁸⁹ In fairness, environmental agencies and regulatory programs were not formed until 1971 - 1973 (Chastko 162).

⁹⁰ In addition to industrial failures, there are also examples of entire towns succumbing to failure. Such was the case with the town of Dunvegan. After a new ferry became operational in 1909, the assumption was that civilization had arrived to Dunvegan "with a vengeance" (MacGregor 223). Isolation was now "a thing of the past" (224), and a number of advertisements announced "Terms Easy" for securing acres of local farmable land. Real estate offices poached unsuspecting customers, who were shown maps of Dunvegan. Materials promoted a specific vision of the region; artists "spared neither paint nor imagination in their drawings of Dunvegan, as they depicted elevators, railways, wharfs, and steamboats, "puffing their way up and down the river" (227). With newfound confidence, Edmonton residents bought lots at this prospective "metropolis of the north." However, development in Dunvegan did not flourish, and when people travelled to the area to see their newly purchased properties for the first time, they departed "broken-hearted when they saw into what an empty wilderness they had poured their life savings" (227). Most people were "stung by the Dunvegan land-boom" and "abandoned all idea of making riches" out of their lots. The land soon returned to local districts, although a "few valiant or foolish souls" kept property and still pay taxes (229).

Naming, Name Changes, and Strategic Re-Wording

In *Land Sliding*, W.H. New remarks that the names of places can either reinforce or defy the status quo. Whenever a place or an area is *renamed*, the new appellation impacts both the newly arrived citizens and the pre-existing ones; it takes more time, however, to *redefine* a place, because such a process necessarily involves “unlearning as well as learning” (27). According to New, the dominant language that is used during the naming process simultaneously shapes impressions that deviate substantially from the initial names and languages used by pre-existing local cultures (28).

While it is common for names of particular places to change over time, in northern Alberta place names are often changed in order to better align with industrial projects and the men associated with them. Consequently, previous place names – many of which noteworthy for the people they represented – have become obsolete or forgotten. Originally, a number of place names were also connected to nature, indigenous traditions, or local stories, but were replaced by the proper names of individuals.⁹¹ These acts of renaming can also be traced back to the fact that cultures rooted in oral forms of communication assign different types of social power to the act of naming than written cultures. Oral cultures, linked to indigenous peoples, are dismissed as being comprised of

⁹¹ Some examples include Heart River / Rivière le Coeur, which was changed to Harmon River; Waterhole, which was changed to Fairview; and Little Lake, which was changed to Charlie Lake. Additionally, the area of Peace River was previously known in Beaver dialect as Unjaga. Some locals labelled the Mackenzie River the “River of Disappointment” – the moniker evolved out of ongoing frustrations from the failed business transactions that took place along the waterway. Another noteworthy name change was Boiler Rapids – previously Joe’s Rapid – which got its name from a boiler that dropped to the bottom of the water in the 1880s when Captain Smith tried to move it. Some large parts were salvaged; other sections were never recovered (Comfort, *Ribbon* 158-160).

“superstition and tale,” while written cultures, linked to Europeans, are granted “the authority of empirical evidence” (New 54).

Contemporary impressions about Alberta and the way it is perceived have depended upon the journals and accounts of early explorers. As New points out, these texts were neither objective nor transparent; however, they held great power in cultural terms, and impacted how land would be treated going forward. Explorers assigned names – or re-names – that were influenced by the current political climate, and in alignment with the church.⁹² Some names commemorated saints and were explicitly chosen to help “civilize the savage” (56). In northern Alberta, locals have been familiar with the town of Grouard; however, this area was previously known as Lesser Slave Lake, and was only renamed at the start of the 20th century to commemorate Father Émile Grouard (see page 120 below). Ever since their first arrival to the region, missionaries were quick to overlay Christian names onto places that previously went by indigenous names. Despite the imposition of a Christian name onto a particular place, however, the pre-existing beliefs of local indigenous people were not necessarily erased – even though conversion was the ultimate intention (McCormack 124). In the vein of Adam, newly arriving traders arbitrarily decided to assign names to the aboriginal people they encountered, based on what little they knew of them. Some of these nicknames include Grand Batard, Grande Oreilles, and Pork Eater (Leonard 44, 62). Meanwhile, some towns were named for HBC employees, such as Taylor’s Flats and Beatton River.⁹³

⁹² Another factor in deciding a namesake was whether something was useful or usable, and therefore of value (New 57).

⁹³ In recent times, some influential figures have had quasi-ironic namesakes. For instance, in the 1980s one of Suncor’s vice presidents was named Mike Supple, and two foundational figures in bitumen sands development were Lloyd R. Champion, and J. Howard Pew. Another name of note comes from an Alberta Health employee who was sent to Fort Chipewyan in 2006 to assure residents that arsenic-laced moose meat was “safe”: he went by the name of Alex MacKenzie (Marsden 193).

In recent decades, as northern Alberta gravitated toward large-scale resource development, the act of re-naming remained predominantly the domain of corporations and businesses in the bitumen sands. Many companies have changed names several times, including Great Canadian Oil Sands, which became Suncor; Big Heart (owned by BC Resources), which was renamed Westar Petroleum (Marsden 84); and Colony Energy Inc., which became Big Bear Explorations Ltd. (Marsden 90).⁹⁴ Initially, Colony/Big Bear pursued Blue Range but failed, then was absorbed by Canadian Natural Resources, and then was renamed Horizon, in a move of somewhat frantic desperation. Some industrial plants that have changed names include Canadian Northern Oil Sands Products Limited, which became Abasands Oils Limited, and Alcan Oil Company, which became International Bitumen Co., then Oil Sands Limited, and then Bitumount Holding Company. As business name changes became increasingly common, a kind of corporate incest amongst the companies became increasingly common too (Marsden 164). In light of the province's strong biblical leanings, the ever-spawning corporate re-namings are reminiscent of the lineages found in the Book of Genesis (Chapter 36), as each descendant begets another descendant.⁹⁵

Perhaps for obvious reasons, another place name that has been altered is Tar Island, which is located 16 miles from Peace River Crossing. Upon its acquisition by Suncor, Tar Island was re-named "Plant 64" and "Plant 66." Although the words "Suncor Tar Island" are traceable on GoogleMaps, the original place-name is no longer used. This change

⁹⁴ There seems to be no connection to Big Bear, the legendary Cree leader who refused to sign treaty, although the contemporary invocation of Big Bear's name, here used in the context of a corporate takeover, nevertheless seems intriguing.

⁹⁵ Such language is used by Chris Turner in *The Patch* (2017), when he writes that the arrival of Syncrude, Shell and CNRL to the Fort McKay region "begat" the Fort McKay Group of Companies (Turner 201).

helps replace the connotations of “tar,” but the alteration is also noteworthy because the name Tar Island reputedly originated from the Cree and Métis people (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 83); therefore, the renaming was both industrially and colonially rooted.

According to Alvena Strasbourg (see Chapter Three), local indigenous people gave places specific names “so that travellers could recognize where they were.” The Cree dubbed the region “Nistowayou,” or “Three Pronged Fork” to signify the three converging streams (Strasbourg 20). Namesakes, then, were not only descriptive but directionally appropriate and helpful. For Strasbourg, the recollection of these earlier place names also serves another function: it hearkens back to a time when indigenous and non-indigenous children played together without issue and learned to co-exist.

Of all the instances of renaming that occur in northern Alberta, however, perhaps the most prominent example of naming and name changes is observed in corporate branding. Big Oil has long found corporate branding to be advantageous because it facilitates the erasure of earlier narratives, allows past mistakes or decisions to be glossed over, and superimposes corporate history over a space’s earlier histories.⁹⁶ As each building or structure adopts a company name, additional focus is placed on the present and pre-existing reminders of the past are effectively obscured. Examples of corporate branding in Fort McMurray include community centres, such as Nexen Field House, Suncor Community Leisure Centre, and Shell Place Athletic Centre – all sponsored by fossil fuel companies. There is also a Suncor-sponsored⁹⁷ ball team, a GCOS Tigers ball

⁹⁶ An early example of industry re-branding occurred in 1952, when the New Franklin Hotel, which was originally owned by the O’Coffey family, was sold to a businessman and renamed the Oilsands Hotel (Huberman 149).

⁹⁷ Not every name change reflects a monolithic devotion to extreme energy. Ironically, a local bus company called Diversified has transported Suncor’s workers to and from the bitumen sands since 1986. The name Diversified is ironic because scientists have called for humans to diversify (and divest) from fossil fuels (350.org).

team (F. Jean 318), and a Syncrude Boreal Open for golf. Even places of learning, such as Holy Trinity Catholic High School, have an oversized Suncor logo stretched across the building exterior and larger than the school name itself (the company donated \$4.5 million to help build the theatre) (see Appendix K).

In addition to widespread corporate naming, it has also been common for places in northern Alberta to be named after prominent men. The town of Brosseau, for instance, is named after the failed gold prospector Edmond Brosseau; the David Thompson Highway in Hinton (Highway 16 South) is named after the British-Canadian explorer; and Gordon Lake is named after a settler from the British Isles named Bill Gordon. Draper Station, meanwhile, takes its name from Thomas Draper, who headed up the private operation McMurray Asphaltum and Oil Company (Fitzgerald 53).

Dubious Commemorations: Enshrining Problematic Men

There are also a number of unsettling instances of place naming that in retrospect may not have merited memorialization. Such is the case with the Brick family and the patriarch John Gough Brick, who founded the Shaftesbury community in the 1880s (Leonard 183-190). For generations, the Brick family name has retained local prominence, despite the fact that the Bricks have also been associated with racism, rape, and theft. The aforementioned John Brick was an Anglican minister and had a reputation for charity; however, David Leonard has noted that the intolerant Brick was exasperated at having to help clothe indigenous children, and at one point remarked that he would not “allow any of those damned Indians around *my* place” (Leonard 192). In 1891, John banished his son “Allie” (Thomas Allen) for having an affair with Nancy Grey, the

daughter of a Métis man named Ambrose Grey, or Whitebear.⁹⁸ As Leonard notes, Allie Brick was reported to have raped Peter Loutitt's wife.⁹⁹ Further, Allie and his brother Fred stole merchandise that belonged to a mission; Fred returned the goods once it became evident to the Justice of the Peace that this was an obvious case of theft (Leonard 238). Over time, Allie tried to restore his reputation in spite of his checkered past and became an Alberta MLA for the Peace River region from 1906 to 1908. Yet despite the shadow over the Brick family name, the Canadian government named John Brick a person of National Historic Importance (Government of Canada, "Brick") and a plaque in the Peace River post office bears his name. This retroactive commemoration and praise seems doubly suspect when one considers that, like many other settlers, John eventually left the region altogether, "tired of his hardships and antagonisms" (193).

In addition to the selective, positive legacy afforded to John Brick, one prominent name stands even taller – Peter Pond. Among the local landmarks that bear his name are the Peter Pond Hotel, the Peter Pond School, and the Peter Pond bar, which was the site of a murder committed by a jealous husband in 1975 (Huberman 235). Pond, a citizen of the United States who was born in Connecticut, murdered at least one person, and possibly more.¹⁰⁰ The notorious trader over-poached furs in the Athabasca in order to solidify his wealth. Some critics also argue that Pond was complicit in the genocide of indigenous people through the distribution of disease-carrying blankets (Hoffman-Mercredi and Coutu 1999).

⁹⁸ Nancy became an Anglican in 1895 (Leonard 239).

⁹⁹ Leonard writes that Allie Brick's alleged rape of Mrs. Loutitt, who was Métis, "was not untypical of the behavior of certain white traders in the north." Will McKillican remarked in 1908 that the shortage of white women in the region was a problem that was compounded by the fact that indigenous women were "entirely devoid of honour," and that the men were "as bad or worse" (Leonard 238).

¹⁰⁰ Faye Reineberg Holt writes that Pond was "implicated in the murders of two competing traders" and eventually left the country (9). See also Daschuk 33.

Pond's dubious namesake is also linked to a legacy of misleading information; he is renowned for having altered geographical maps of the region in order to fit his personal ambitions. Pond's subjective and self-beneficial approach to mapmaking bears similarities with a controversial 2012 video that was released by the company Enbridge: the video included a map of the proposed Northern Gateway pipeline route but was altered in such a manner as to remove pre-existing islands, rocky terrains, and narrow waterways from the proposed passage through the Douglas Channel, and thereby to give the appearance of a straight and uneventful path.¹⁰¹ This precedent of map alteration had similarly been established hundreds of years earlier, when Pond's maps were reprinted and distributed as if they were accurate geographic representations – even though they diverged significantly from reality (van Herk 41-42). Suffice to say, Pond's mapping helped increase his wealth. Over time, the trader was designated as one of sixteen business partners, but Pond loathed collaboration and the sharing model of business practiced by the Northwest Company, so he chose to remain fiercely individualistic. In light of these personal decisions, it is worth noting that Pond died alone and broke – a fact that seems to be glossed over whenever his legacy is discussed.

Yet this man from the United States – Aritha van Herk calls him a murderer, and Andrew Nikiforuk calls him a “serial murderer” (*Tar Sands* 8) – is praised, esteemed, and mythologized in Wood Buffalo region today. The trader's notoriety as a criminal, however, has been sanitized and smoothed into a reputation more akin to a rascally daredevil or a maverick. Surprisingly, Pond's dubious qualities of defiance and heightened sense of self-interest make him appear to be “a fitting harbinger” for the

¹⁰¹ See Appendix I for the map in question, originally created by Lori Waters, a graphic designer (Lavoie).

European settlers who came to the province. “As an American and a murderer who drew a map that misled more than a few people,” van Herk writes, Peter Pond managed to fit “right into the tradition of this province, long before anyone could have predicted the maverick place it would become” (van Herk 42).

In fact, this region is sometimes called the Land of Peter Pond;¹⁰² it has also been branded the Land of “Twelve Foot” Davis. The strong appeal of Davis goes back decades, to an earlier time when local narratives heralded the accumulation of wealth by way of land deals, long before the onset of bitumen extraction. In Peace River, a twelve-foot tall statue of Henry Fuller Davis currently towers over Riverfront Park. The legend of Davis’s fame stems not from having performed some heroic deed, but from having executed a particularly strategic land claim during the gold rush days, which yielded him a significant profit. The “Twelve Foot” Davis legacy is examined in more detail in Chapter Two; however, the ascension of the Pond and Davis names to mythic status¹⁰³ – reinforced by the fact that Peace River and Wood Buffalo colloquially christen themselves with these names – serves as a reminder that this region and its system of values may come across to outsiders as complex and often contradictory.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, as Frances K. Jean notes, there have been countless instances of places being named or rebranded which have verged on nepotism. Some examples include

¹⁰² There is also a literary collection titled *The Land of Peter Pond*, which is edited by John W. Chalmers and the Staff of the Boreal Institute for Northern Studies (1974). In the first sentence of the text, the bitumen sands are referred to as “fabulous” (Chalmers 5).

¹⁰³ Centuries later, the trader even has a fan club (see the Peter Pond Society: www.peterpondsociety.com).

¹⁰⁴ In subsequent decades, Davis’s cunning ability to turn a profit on land deals has been echoed in the actions of local residents. In 1976 for instance, a developer from Fort McMurray bought a piece of land and then resold it to the local school board eight months later at a 400% profit because he knew that the board desperately needed a site for a new high school (L. Pratt 113). Such incidents do not necessarily represent the morality or ethics of the region as a whole, but at the same time this is not an isolated example, and the cutthroat profit motive behind it, and other similar incidents, is striking.

Reidel Street, which is named after former mayor Albert Reidel (195); Engstrom Lake, which is named after Eddie Engstrom, a Swedish trapper who wrote a series of memoirs that were published under the name *Clearwater Winter* in 1984 (199-200); Dr. Clark School, which is named after bitumen sands entrepreneur Karl A. Clark; Haxton Centre, which is named after the family who ran Haxton's Store (208); Peden's Point, which is named after opinionated former mayor Claire Peden (210); and a pair of schools named after Father Turcotte and Father Beauregard, as well as a street named for Father Mercredi (236). In addition, Bob Lamb funded "the training centre that bears his name" (251); Hardin Street is named for the family that ran the local drug store and went into politics (292-293); Jim Mutton Field is named after a ball player who helped build the Shell bulk plant (317); Paul MacPherson Field is named after a ball player who was recruited by Syncrude (319); and the MacDonald Island complex – a major local activity hub – is named on behalf of the "controversial figure" Chuck Knight, where a number of plaques and wall fountains bear his namesake (288-289). Finally, the Jean Family Boat Launch commemorates the Jean dynasty (324).¹⁰⁵

Enshrining Deserving Women and Foreign Settlers

Generally speaking, names of local places, landmarks or structures have tended to commemorate fossil fuel corporations or prominent historical men. However, there are at least a couple of places named after women of note. Unfortunately, these locations are also directly and indirectly tied to acts of greenwashing or monolithic industry projects, as opposed to the namesakes themselves. Such was the case for Dorothy McDonald,¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter Six for more on Jean.

¹⁰⁶ In some instances, McDonald's family name has also been spelled MacDonald.

whose historical influence in the region continues to depend on how various people and groups interpret her legacy. McDonald, an indigenous chief from Fort McKay, is perhaps best known for having spoken out against bitumen sands development, when she was profiled in a sobering CBC report in 1984 (Andrusiak). In the nationally televised piece, ongoing extraction projects led by Suncor and Syncrude were identified as potential causes of lead poisoning found in several local children. McDonald's outrage was fierce – particularly in her steadfast declaration, “We’ll fight for as long as we’re alive” (Andrusiak). Yet as decades passed, McDonald's opposition was recontextualized. In Fort McKay, the Dorothy McDonald Business Center [sic] was named after the same outspoken woman who opposed bitumen sands projects. The most incongruous aspect was the fact that the namesake was established by Suncor (Genoways). In effect, the fossil fuel company had transformed McDonald's once-passionate opposition to industrial projects in the region – including a well-publicized, week-long road block that required provincial intervention – into the greenwashing of a human being.

Crucially, McDonald's narrative has been transformed over time to give the impression that she tacitly endorsed and supported extreme energy projects. The media has suggested that McDonald was resigned to development and agreed to the greenwashing of her name. Gillian Steward declares that although McDonald “had won a battle, she knew her small, poor community would never win the war” against corporations and government.¹⁰⁷ Prior to her death in 2005, it was assumed that

¹⁰⁷ The corporate greenwashing of McDonald continues today. In a 2015 article for *BOE Report* (an oil and gas publication), Petur Radevski wrote that McDonald employed a “balanced approach” between industry's actions and “the economic and social development of her community.” Radevski – who opposes any criticism that perpetrates “the trite narrative of reckless industry exploitation of defenseless local communities” or casts fossil fuel companies as “in cahoots with greedy politicians as the principal antagonists” – portrays McDonald as a model advocate for energy development, as someone who worked towards solutions, and as a public figure who was willing to engage in a process of “give-and-take”

McDonald was content to have “lived to see Fort McKay become a prosperous, thriving hub” (Steward); however, such a clear-cut assumption is problematic. McDonald’s death in 2005 from lupus – an autoimmune disorder that may have been linked to elevated exposure to heavy metals over decades of industrial development in Fort McKay (Genoways) – and her long history of fighting for women and children’s rights, advocating for trapper’s rights, and insisting on the establishment of basic environmental safeguards, all seem to preclude a full change of heart with respect to industrial development. Further, McDonald once even took Suncor and Syncrude *to court* for polluting Fort McKay’s waterways (Genoways). Despite significant and convincing evidence, an Alberta judge decided that Suncor had violated the Fisheries Act but was not guilty of poisoning the citizens. The penalty to the company would have been a meagre \$8000 fine. According to Chris Turner, the Fort McKay community was not notified about the state of the Athabasca River

until more than three weeks later, when Suncor employees visited the community in person. For three solid weeks, the residents of Fort McKay drank and bathed in water awash in oil sands mining effluent. Remarkably, there was no serious illness or injury as a result, but the incident galvanized the community and turned Chief MacDonald into an angry activist overnight. (Turner 199)

At a press conference in March 1982, an infuriated McDonald asked, “Where the hell was the government when all this was going on? ... How foolish can you be to allow a

(Radevski). Radevski’s re-contextualization of McDonald the opponent into McDonald the compromiser deftly promotes a ‘correct’ way to engage with industry interests and, more importantly, to accept their existence and presence as an inevitable fact.

company like Suncor to conduct its own monitoring? Do bank robbers turn themselves in after they've done the job?" (Turner 199).

Even current chief Jim Boucher, whose public collaboration with industry goes back several decades, has noted that McDonald demonstrated "a reeking hostility" toward industry – and that industry demonstrated likewise. Apparently, a number of residents have followed in McDonald's footsteps and do not endorse an increase in industrial development. Ted Genoways, for instance, believes that Boucher and the present-day Fort McKay band compromised their values by making a suspicious environmental and health "tradeoff" wherein "fouled air and water" were exchanged "for financial benefits" (Genoways).¹⁰⁸

For industry, if McDonald's legacy cannot be presented as one of compliance and agreement, it is demonized accordingly. In "The Community Capitalism of the Fort McKay First Nation," Tom Flanagan of the Koch Brothers-funded Fraser Institute labelled Dorothy McDonald and her younger sister Cece as antagonistic obstacles to the success of the community, while the industry-friendly Jim Boucher was depicted as a figure who was more suited to – and more deserving of – his long term as chief (T. Flanagan, "The Community" 4). Boucher's long tenure as chief (1986-1988, 1990-1994, 1996-2019) somewhat parallels the long reign of the provincial Conservatives (at least until the NDP win in 2015), and Boucher's business earnings salary of \$632,785 (2016-2017) suggests that his extensive industry interactions and connections have been

¹⁰⁸ The echoes of these tensions reverberate today. In 2014, Dorothy McDonald's husband, Rod Hyde, collaborated with Edmonton's Ground Zero Productions to stage a "video ballad" called "On the River," which focused on Fort McKay's history and McDonald's impact on the region (*GZP Edmonton*). Audience members witnessed a slideshow assembled by the students from the Fort McKay School circa 1977, as they expressed their love for the community and recalled traditional ways. In a local review of the show, Russell Thomas wrote that the students also "talked candidly about the encroachment of industry and how it affected their way of life" (R. Thomas).

personally beneficial.¹⁰⁹ Citing Fort McKay’s current arrangement with fossil fuel companies as a blueprint for other First Nations to ensure “the best hope for prosperity,” Flanagan encourages a model of “community capitalism” with respect to land usage and natural resources. A trace of industrial colonialism underpins the text: readers soon discover that Fort McKay First Nation does not produce oil, but provides “services to natural resource corporations,” such as lodging for the bitumen sands workers and cleaning up after them through janitorial services (2). Crucially, in much the same way that fossil fuel companies in McDonald’s time failed to notify the community about urgent health and environment developments, Flanagan likewise makes no mention of climate change, pollution, toxins, or the years of poor water quality caused by nearby development projects. His article does, however, feature a map (14-15) that makes the region look like it has been eaten from the inside out (see Appendix J).

Dorothy McDonald’s story also has a rather disturbing postscript. Upon her death in 2005,¹¹⁰ McDonald’s ashes were scattered in Moose Lake, the place where she “felt most at home.” Later, however, the area succumbed to intrusive upheaval when, in 2014, Fort McKay struck a secret deal with Brion Energy (a subsidiary of PetroChina), and allowed the company to begin steam-assisted bitumen extraction operations. McDonald’s final resting place in the Moose Lake area was disrupted significantly. Requests to institute a buffer zone were rejected on the grounds that any sectioned-off area might cause the “sterilization of a significant bitumen resource” (Genoways). Ultimately, then,

¹⁰⁹ Flanagan writes that Boucher has provided “stable leadership and vision since 1986” (T. Flanagan, “The Community” 19).

¹¹⁰ In 2005, the same year of McDonald’s death, production in the bitumen sands reached 1.1 million barrels a day. This level of output was *37 times* more than the output in 1967 (Fort McKay Group of Companies 8).

although McDonald's name appears on the local business centre, her fraught encounters with industry – in life, and apparently even in death – signify some of the complexities connected with this particular instance of name branding.

A similar example of human-based greenwashing occurred in the case of Christine Gordon, for whom the local sites of Christina Lake [sic] and Christina River [sic] are named. At the end of the nineteenth century, Gordon was recognized for her tireless work in helping indigenous and non-indigenous families heal from maladies and illnesses. Chief Paul Cree and his people considered Christine Gordon to be an ally and a friend. The chief even erected a lobstick¹¹¹ in Gordon's name. According to northern Albertan literature, indigenous leaders rarely bestow this special lobstick honour on a non-indigenous person. Chief Cree initiated the commemorative gesture to acknowledge Gordon's selfless acts, including her role in helping many local indigenous people and working collaboratively with them.¹¹² Chief Cree also wanted to single out Gordon regardless of her sex, as a sign of gender equality (Huberman 33-34).¹¹³

In recent years, the details of Christine Gordon's altruism and influence are less well known in favour of popular figures like Peter Pond and "Twelve Foot" Davis, who

¹¹¹ A lobstick is a tall tree in a forest (usually a spruce or a pine) that serves as a natural marker, because the lower branches are cut off so that the tree becomes uniquely identifiable at a distance.

¹¹² Caroline Desjarlais was another celebrated woman who formed strong relationships with indigenous people. After her arrival to the area in 1911, Desjarlais became one of Fort McMurray's first midwives. According to local records, she was able to communicate with indigenous women in Cree, and she did not accept money for deliveries – although anonymous gifts of rabbit and moose meat were quite common (*Community Memories*). Desjarlais also cared for the flu-stricken men of the Hudson's Bay Company in the winter of 1917-1918, and therefore frequently put herself at risk (Huberman 42). By the 1940s and 1950s, Desjarlais was renowned for having delivered or cared for many of the townspeople. Unlike so many others, Desjarlais stayed in Fort McMurray until her passing in 1958. Unlike Christine Gordon, however, there is little to no local commemoration for this influential figure.

¹¹³ There is a substantial amount of data that reflects equality in gender roles in northern Alberta's indigenous peoples. In *Fort Chipewyan and the Shaping of Canadian History*, Patricia A. McCormack persuasively demonstrates how "social relations of production in indigenous communities were "broadly egalitarian" (28).

focused on wealth and financial gain but ultimately died poor (F. Jean 19, MacGregor 214). Like Dorothy McDonald, the namesake areas of Christina Lake and Christina River have been overlaid by their associations with Big Oil. Since 1991, fossil fuel extraction has been commonplace in the area, and since 2000, the prominent bitumen sands company Cenovus has been operating a steam-assisted gravity drainage (SAGD) project at Christina Lake (*Cenovus Energy*). Recent production capacities have approached 210,000 barrels a day, but these formidable quotas have also brought risk; the area became a site of tragedy in February 2018 when a worker was killed onsite (*Cold Lake Sun*). As with Dorothy McDonald, Gordon's modified namesake may have remained in the area, but her initial example of helping others through her physicianship and friendship has been supplanted by a new set of priorities that serves to promote and benefit large-scale resource extraction.

In addition to Dorothy McDonald and Christine Gordon, the Eymundson family name also appears, perhaps most notably with Eymundson Creek. Charlie Eymundson¹¹⁴ was an Icelander who saved his own son because he reportedly possessed psychic intuition. Eymundson was cutting wood one day when he sensed that his boy was somehow in danger. He immediately rushed to the trapline and searched for his son, whom he found clinging to life in freezing temperatures and pinned under a dead moose (43-44). A narrative blend of myth and unusual circumstance, Eymundson's story was widely shared orally for years. As presented by Irwin Huberman, however, Eymundson – neither American nor British – is cast in a somewhat suspicious light by virtue of the

¹¹⁴ Eymundson wrote three books that were published in Manitoba. The first two were written in Icelandic, while the third was written in English (*Knowledge Is My God; or, Ignorance My Curse*).

Icelander's affiliation with fortune-telling and telepathy.¹¹⁵ Today, Eymundson's name can be found at Eymundson Road, which is home to the Cree Burn Lake Preservation Society, and Eymundson Creek, which borders the Athabasca River, and, like Christina Lake, is often cited in industrial and environmental assessments. Meanwhile, the details of Eymundson's story have faded over time. Of course, not every notable figure in the region needs to attain the level of legacy and lore, but even as Peter Pond and "Twelve Foot" Davis have been celebrated for generations, other personalities might also be worthy of commemoration – if for no other reason than to re-discover the original narratives named for people such as Christine Gordon and Charlie Eymundson.

The Naming of Fort McMurray ... and Corresponding Protests

Many of these instances of nepotism through branding are preceded by Fort McMurray itself. Although the city's namesake was inspired by Inspector J.D. McMurray, the fort was actually built by Henry John Moberly – for whom a private school has also been named, as well as Moberly Lake (F. Jean 180). In other words, Fort McMurray was named after Moberly's inspector friend. Over time, the McMurray settlement underwent several name changes that were initiated primarily for economic reasons. In June 1962, it was the Chamber of Commerce that wrote to the McMurray council, and urged the word "Fort" be added to the official name as a technicality so that the council could apply to the province for New Town status. However, once the title of "Fort" was added, the New Town designation also meant that the *province* would control the approval of any schools, loans, roads, or major services (Huberman 176). Essentially, Fort McMurray had

¹¹⁵ In Huberman's words, Eymundson's visions "raised local eyebrows" (43). See also *Provincial Archives of Alberta*, "Charles Eymundson Fonds."

forfeited its autonomy, relinquished control of its infrastructure development, and hindered the capacity for citizens to give input on issues that affected them.

From an industrial perspective, the New Town designation could not have been better planned. Within three years of this dismantling of local governance in Fort McMurray, the first tailings pond was dug, and the first pipeline was greenlit. The circumvention of citizen consultation and local input at this critical time enabled these infrastructure initiatives to proceed uncontested. The fledgling GCOS (Suncor) needed tailings ponds, an inaugural pipeline, and a swiftly constructed plant at the same time that Fort McMurray yielded its ability to be a vocal participant concerning these projects.

The change to New Town status was not universally praised. As local autonomy became undermined and the province gained ultimate jurisdiction over important decisions, Claire Peden, the chairman of Fort McMurray's Board of Administrators, resigned (Huberman 184). As mayor, Peden also spearheaded a letter writing campaign to protest the fact that the province unilaterally decided on the prospective location of a new regional hospital (188). These instances of vocal opposition occurred during a period that is otherwise usually framed as a time of universal support for northern Alberta's inaugural industrial projects. In reality, local pushback in the region was also taking place.¹¹⁶ Mayor Peden's opposition is rarely discussed, even though his protest campaigns signal a deviation from a narrative of success and widespread support that continues to this day.

¹¹⁶ There are examples of outcry during the province's earlier years that have been chronicled in Aritha van Herk's *Mavericks*. Northern Albertans have been engaged in protests, but such instances are not often publicized. In *River of Grit: Six Months on the Line at Suncor, Ft. McMurray, Alberta, 1986* (1996), Rick Boychuk provides a detailed account of a highly contentious disruption with Suncor in the 1980s.

Grassroots resistance to fast-paced change¹¹⁷ also manifested itself when a new McDonald's restaurant was prevented from erecting its iconic Golden Arches sign due to its garish "height and aesthetic restrictions" (Huberman 258-9). According to former planner Terry Langis, the McDonald's emblem was "a grating sign of capitalism" and local residents did not want "to be dictated to by people out of the community" (Huberman 259). This opposition to representations of capitalism in Fort McMurray's earlier years runs contrary to present-day bitumen sands supporters who seem more amenable to large-scale, capitalism-based industrial development. Given the international makeup of energy companies in this region, the power they hold, and the major developmental and structural transformation of Fort McMurray, it appears that any lingering "aesthetic" resentment has subsided. Broadly speaking, residents have not opposed external, corporate bodies from driving the direction of the community, and have not opposed the wide-sweeping practice of corporate branding and renaming that permeates the city.

Eden and Utopia: Sustaining the Image of Bounty

The themes of branding and renaming are reminiscent of Adam from Genesis and his naming of the animals (Gen. 2.19-20), and the colonial or imperial practice of naming or renaming places in the Americas over the last few centuries. It is not surprising, then, to also see the theme of Eden and the Garden recurring in northern Albertan literature. The prevalence of Christianity in Alberta helps explain a tendency to describe the province in Edenic terms. In the region's early literature, northern Alberta – semi-truthfully presented

¹¹⁷ Over \$100 million in building permits in Fort McMurray were issued in the mid-1980s alone (Huberman 258).

as idyllic, bountiful and abundant – assumed the role of Eden, and its settlers assumed the roles of Adam and Eve.¹¹⁸

For decades, picturesque language has been used to minimize disruptive projects. In the national magazine *Saturday Night*, Raymond Davies once described northern Alberta's bitumen operations as "being conducted in a picturesque setting," and, although widespread disruption was occurring, nature seemed "to smile upon man who disturbs her eternal enigmatic silence." Such phrasing suggests that developers presumed that nature had given them permission to disrupt and subdue it. According to J. Joseph Fitzgerald, Davies's "rather romantic sketch" in *Saturday Night* reflected how the bitumen sands were being presented to Canadian readers in the 1930's and 1940's (82).¹¹⁹

Yet early accounts also reveal that this idyllic representation was in some cases a fabrication or distortion. In the late 19th century, there were concerns that if surveyors wrote negative reports about Peace River's agricultural potential, newcomers and investors would stay away. Consequently, fawning accounts and narratives necessarily strove to cancel out any of the more blunt and realistic ones. Initially, William Ogilvie exemplified this kind of optimism. Ogilvie was happy to frame the region favourably, particularly after reports in 1872 from Charles Horezky and the botanist John Macoun "gushed enthusiastically about a 'veritable garden of Eden' in the Northwest."¹²⁰

However, when Ogilvie returned to Peace River in 1891, his findings stressed that the area was not suitable for farming. Upon his return to Ottawa, he explicitly wrote that

¹¹⁸ The narrative of abundance dates back to when settlers were lured to the region by pamphlets and brochures which falsely claimed that wheat was growing to record heights in Alberta (van Herk 185). See also Bezanson, Chapter Two.

¹¹⁹ See also S.C. Ells (Chapter Four), whose poems and short stories were highly attuned to nature yet celebrated its subservience to anthropocentric agents.

¹²⁰ There was also praise from William Francis Butler, and guarded optimism from the geologists George Dawson and Alfred Selwyn (Leonard 179).

anyone looking for a home in the Northwest should not consider Peace River because the likelihood of success was marginal at best. Ogilvie regretted that his account of the region was “unfavourable,” but with the exception of a few select places, he determined that the land was unlikely to improve over time (Leonard 179).

Ogilvie’s conclusion, which plainly contradicted other stories of prosperity concerning the region, was not the only contrarian account. John Macoun’s son James likewise published an unfavourable impression of the region in 1903, but in some ways his remarks were even more incendiary because they had not been vetted beforehand by the Minister of the Interior, Frank Oliver.¹²¹ According to Jim Leonard, backlash occurred after Macoun depicted the Peace River region as “emphatically a poor man’s country,” and after his “largely negative” conclusion that the area could never successfully grow wheat (181).

In Edmonton, reactions to Macoun’s report were “swift and largely hostile.” In several editorials in *The Bulletin* – the newspaper founded by Frank Oliver himself in 1880, and that he continued to own until 1923 – Macoun was called “a charlatan” and staff writers insisted there was a century’s worth of proof that the area was one of Canada’s “most valuable assets.” Duncan Marshall, the *Bulletin*’s editor, was offended that a novice government worker dared to “loudly and widely” contradict previous laudatory accounts of the Peace River region. Marshall rejected Macoun’s assessment because Macoun had only spent a few months in the area. “Whatever may be said of his

¹²¹ Frank Oliver’s influence and power impacted a number of marginalized groups. Oliver resented the prospect of having “undesirable” immigrants come to Canada who threatened the “social system that we could enjoy, be proud of and transmit to our children” (Oliver 2939). Among his more notorious actions, Oliver oversaw the Immigration Act of 1906, drafted legislation that prevented black people from immigrating to Canada, and implemented laws that ensured that land was taken away from First Nations.

facts,” the editor wailed, “there is no doubt whatever that his conclusions are absolutely erroneous: and as injurious as they are erroneous” (qtd on 182).¹²²

James Macoun’s *counter-bounty* narrative was challenged at the provincial level, and quickly became personal. In April 1904, a debate unfolded before the House of Commons concerning Agriculture and Colonization, whereby Macoun’s own father John became the first witness of the Select Standing Committee. Unlike his son, the elder Macoun had not even been to the region for three decades; nevertheless, he was otherwise considered to be an expert concerning the prairies, and Macoun Senior was adamant that Peace River country was agriculturally promising.

James – the younger, ostensibly provocative Macoun – subsequently appeared before the committee, and the hearings became combative and harsh. At the heart of the matter was the question of which narrative would be permitted to represent the region for outsiders. Frank Oliver accused Macoun of knowing too little about the area and also for obtaining his information from the 1892 Ogilvie report, which was considered to be dated. Macoun maintained that his prior expertise and ventures made him sufficiently qualified to evaluate the region’s prospects. Oliver countered that 1903 was a year of bad frosts and noted that all other Canadian writers had praised the Peace River’s bounty with the exception of Macoun, whose opinion stood “alone” against every other man Oliver had ever encountered. Oliver was warned by the committee chairman that he was out of line, but he further accused Macoun of “deliberately and purposely” causing “inferences to be drawn which are absolutely and utterly misleading and injurious to the last degree

¹²² Although Oliver initially wrote editorials for his newspaper prior to becoming Minister of the Interior, *the Bulletin*’s subsequent editorials, written by editor Duncan Marshall, were undoubtedly influenced by Oliver. Oliver’s allies also joined the fight in discrediting Macoun and announced that Macoun was only looking for attention (183).

to the best interests of this country” (182). Oliver then accused Macoun of “being political,” to which Macoun answered, “I have no politics”; further, in light of his disheartening findings, Macoun lamented that “there was no more disappointed man” in all of Canada than himself.

The committee ultimately determined that Macoun’s three month stay in Peace Country was too short to have adequately generated appropriate knowledge of the area. Both the content of Macoun’s report and his evidence were disqualified from entering the public sphere. The committee specifically recommended that Macoun’s report be “suppressed” until the region’s resources “could be further assessed” (183).

In addition to the suppression of the report, and in order to solidify the perception that the area was bountiful, Peace River promoters were summoned as witnesses, including Fletcher Bredin, Jim Cornwall, H.A. Conroy, Fred Lawrence, and the aforementioned John Macoun. The testimonies overwhelmingly favoured “the promotion of agricultural settlement in the Peace River Country.” This evidence – and not James Macoun’s – was compiled and collected by the committee, and then published by Ernest Chambers under the title *Canada’s Fertile Northland* (183). In addition, as Macoun’s findings were being suppressed, Frank Oliver directed his department to buy and hand out 500 copies of A.M. Bezanson’s “new and unscientific, but laudatory account of the Peace River region” titled *The Peace River Trail* (183). Every MP and senator received Bezanson’s text, and its glowing depiction of the region held prominence in the decades that followed, as we will see in Chapter Two.

Today, advertisements continue to use words and images of abundance to characterize northern Alberta. Provincial paraphernalia boasts of Alberta’s “abundant

natural resources” (Alberta Transportation) which suggests a kind of perpetual harvesting capacity. This perception of bounty is crucial, and to dare to contradict this narrative now is to play with fire – just as it was a century ago for William Ogilvie and James Macoun.

There remains, however, no assurance that the bounty of northern Alberta will somehow be permanent. As Evan Eisenberg argues, even in undisrupted nature, abundance inevitably becomes spoiled.¹²³ Further, if a time and place like Eden exists, its “origin should by rights be the most ravaged place on earth,” because humans would be unable to suppress the temptation to consume its idyllic abundance (Eisenberg xxiii).¹²⁴

Indeed, the Eden of northern Alberta’s boreal forest has been disrupted for decades, and industrial projects are rarely contested by Albertans. This tacit acceptance can partly be attributed to how residents perceive the resource and their relation to it. Laurence Buell observes that nation states have a tendency to reproduce or manufacture specific kinds of outback nationalism (Buell, *Future* 16). With respect to past literary representations of northern Alberta, the unique type of manufactured outback nationalism involves perceiving the land as ripe with resources and as one of North America’s last great frontiers. Many of the region’s pioneering authors – including A.M. Bezanson, James G. MacGregor and L.V. Kelly (see Chapter Two) – have presented the land as

¹²³ Eisenberg establishes three classifications: a Golden Age, which is temporal; Arcadia, which is geographical; and Eden, which is a simultaneous combination of both the temporal and the geographical. Arcadia, Eisenberg notes, “contains in its ripeness the germ of its own spoiling” (xxii). In Arcadia, Eisenberg argues, human beings crave either “another place at this time, or this place at another time” (xxiii). The innate craving for “this place at another time” is a particularly apt analogy for northern Alberta, a region that was relatively late to be able to capitalize on its untapped reserves, as compared to conventional extraction.

¹²⁴ Although Eden takes a consumptive toll, however, the damage inflicted upon it “can sometimes repair itself,” Eisenberg notes, “especially if it has been damaged so badly that the people go away” (xxiii). If Eisenberg’s argument for Eden’s capacity to self-repair is correct, then northern Alberta’s boreal forest could ostensibly recover from severe environmental damage once humans and human-devised extractive industries “go away.”

plentiful and ready to be plucked or harvested. Such literary representations underpin a powerful narrative framework of the land as divine, or divinely bestowed. As extreme energy pioneer Herman Kahn once remarked, the bitumen sands are a “global godsend” (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 19).

The environmental consequences to such ways of thinking have been well-documented, and there are many corresponding examples of overtly Dominionist action and behaviours towards natural resources. Like biblical Adams, humans often proceed under the assumption that nature is meant to be domesticated and tamed, or else perish beneath its raw power. This domination over nature, though, can damage Eden, and the consequences are often significant.

Turning Damage into Benevolence, and the Reclamation Myth

In addition to the analogy of plentiful abundance, a common narrative has evolved whereby extraction operations in the bitumen sands are justified under the premise that bitumen extraction occurs primarily for the sake of the land. It is a presumably necessary activity because it corrects a dirty and unpleasant space that is always/already in desperate need of cleaning up.

This mindset goes back decades; bitumen sands development enthusiast J. Joseph Fitzgerald – who will be examined in more detail in Chapter Four – remarked in 1978 that bitumen regularly “polluted the surface sandstones by migrating upward from oil pools” (21). For Fitzgerald, the sands were already dirty,¹²⁵ and the reclamation that was

¹²⁵ While some tend to emphasize “the man-made dangers” of bitumen sands development, Fitzgerald argues that “one should not lose sight of the ‘natural’ hazards of this region.” Embankments, he insists, leak more oil than Suncor would ever allow. Somehow nature has caused pollution, particularly at the Snye, and has made the water “anything but clean.” For years, before the processing plant even existed, bitumen

planned by Syncrude and Suncor would revegetate and restore the area (205). Today, many labourers continue to perceive the extraction of bitumen as the practical equivalent of “cleaning up Mother Nature’s biggest oil spill” (Nikiforuk, “It’s Official”). Through such language, extreme energy development is reframed as a positive act, because nature – and Eden – somehow erred ever since hydrocarbons first spilled to the surface.

In order to better understand how such a mindset can become popular, one can look to the two primary industrial methods of bitumen extraction, which are *in-situ* (i.e. in place, in its original position) and steam-assisted gravity drainage (also known as SAGD).¹²⁶ When *in-situ* operations occur, copious stretches of boreal forest are cleared. In such instances, the refrain of “nature’s biggest oil spill” is crucial, because large-scale environmental disruption and ecological loss are easier to justify when they are paired with an image or narrative of the land itself as always/already in a state of disrepair. The trope of the region as a site of constant, naturally-occurring oil spills has persisted in part because the early literature contains numerous accounts of fossil fuels overflowing in plain sight.¹²⁷ Today’s *in-situ* operations, of course, are not simply a matter of retrieving bitumen from the land’s surface, as if plucked or culled like wild berries. Bitumen is a

covered the feet of all who entered the water and could only be removed by using “great amounts of soap and scrubbing” (207).

¹²⁶ Although *in-situ* projects continue, at present the more common method for accessing bitumen is digging (SAGD). There are clear advantages to this process, not the least of which is the fact that SAGD poses less of a disruptive threat to above-ground areas. Yet even as industry supporters endorse SAGD methodology, they acknowledge that this technique entails excavating large quantities of hydrocarbons, and then refining the product. Andrew Nikiforuk summarizes the two processes of *in-situ* and SAGD as “two earth-destroying ways” (*Tar Sands* 13).

¹²⁷ The authors of these accounts include Alexander Mackenzie, Charles Mair, John Macoun, and Robert Bell, among others. According to Andrew Nikiforuk, when Mair encountered the “impressive” bitumen sands, “[t]he tar was everywhere. It leached from cliffs and broke through the forest floor. Mair observed giant clay escarpments ‘streaked with oozing tar’ and smelling ‘like an old ship’” (*Tar Sands* 8, 9).

complex substance that requires a great deal of complex manipulation before it can be used as a fossil fuel.

Regardless of how bitumen is extracted, collected or refined, inevitably there are repercussions to the land and surrounding wildlife. Eden has been significantly altered. Environmental critic Carolyn Merchant has argued that humans tend to attempt to rehabilitate or retroactively reinvent Eden after it has been disrupted or destroyed (Merchant 2-4). In the case of northern Alberta, reclamation projects are meant to give the impression that stretches of disturbed boreal forest have been restored to a kind of Edenic status. Reclamation assumes a role of beneficent intervention, and is framed as a process that transforms the land from its natural state into a better, more useful one.¹²⁸ At the same time, the very existence of reclamation initiatives constitutes a postlapsarian acknowledgment that humans have, in fact, influenced and disrupted this area. Through reclamation projects, human ingenuity rises to quasi-divine status because land has been improved from even its pre-development state.

Such rhetorical strategies are essential in the battle between the current, disrupted state of the land and the beatific way it is meant to appear in the public imagination – even if the facts tell a different story. While serving as Alberta’s ambassador to the United States (2005 to 2007), former energy minister Murray Smith¹²⁹ once declared that industry would achieve “100 per cent long-term restoration of the lands it makes use of” (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 94). As of December 31, 2013, however, the amount of land

¹²⁸ The reclamation process is one that moves very slowly. As researcher Jonathan Price notes, “It’s probably going to be centuries before these systems become indistinguishable from natural systems.” Price adds, “We can’t kid ourselves ... We can’t replace nature” (Weber, “We Can’t”).

¹²⁹ Smith was also a board director at N Solv, a bitumen sands company, and served on the boards of other energy companies. For his efforts with indigenous people, Smith was awarded the title of “honourary chief” by the First Nations of Alberta and was named “Seven War Bonnets Man” (Speakers’ Bureau of Alberta).

certified as reclaimed was less than 1%. In fact, it was a mere 0.2%,¹³⁰ and the amount of land that has been certified as reclaimed has remained at 0.2% since 1963 (*Tar Sands* 95; E. Flanagan and Grant). This percentage represents 257 acres of forest. The obvious disparity between a fraction of one per cent and the perennial promise of 100% land restoration exposes the divide between claims made by companies and politicians, and the actual state of land reclamation in northern Alberta.

The successful deployment of the myth of restoration and reclamation is reinforced by industry's frequent usage of language that is beatific and inspiring. Some reclamation narratives utilise imagery from Canada's renowned artists. The Mining Association of Canada, for instance, once stated that open-pit mine reclamation could be completed with a "vision worthy of a Group of Seven artist" (qtd. in Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 94). Such a declaration conjures an imaginary ideal whereby a potentially razed space has been replaced by beatific nature-based paintings – quintessentially Canadian paintings no less – from an earlier time. At the same time, this claim from the Mining Association is also a tacit acknowledgment that its current treatment of this space is a deviation *away from* its natural state, and that reclamation work is required in order to repair damage caused by miners. In other words, the professed industrial goal is to rehabilitate or recreate the region so that it can return to emulating a pre-industrial state.

Mellifluous language also permeates industry advertising. In the past, Syncrude has spent more money on advertisements *about* reclamation than it has spent on reclamation itself. In 2005, 0.2% of Syncrude's budget was allocated to reclamation (Nikiforuk, *Tar*

¹³⁰ See oilsands.alberta.ca/reclamation.html. In his article "Rebuilding Land Destroyed by Oil-Sands May Not Restore It, Researchers Say," Weber specifies that some of the reclaimed areas have poor biodiversity. See also Nikiforuk, "Scientists Doubt."

Sands 96, 105), yet the company spent exorbitant amounts on promoting and publicizing its supposed achievements in eco-restoration. Industry and government have long relied on the perception that reclamation translates into responsible development, even when the actual results reveal that much more work must be done.¹³¹

For years, not only has Syncrude promised to reclaim the land and restore it to its pre-industrial state, but they vowed it would be improved by the process. Writing about reclamation in a 2004 paper, Syncrude promised “to return the land we disturb to a stable, biologically self-sustaining state. This means creating a landscape that has a productive capability equal to, *if not better than*, its condition before mining began” (qtd. on *Tar Sands* 98; emphasis added).¹³² Notably, Syncrude’s statement also invokes the word “stable,” which problematically suggests a presumption that nature is controllable or predictable, and that newly reclaimed spaces will likewise operate in a controllable or predictable way.

In a region deeply rooted in Christian ideology, the prospect of reclamation offers the crucial restorative promise of a makeshift return to Eden, and a helpful talking point when attempting to justify large-scale development to outsiders. It is easier for industry supporters to endorse human-based ingenuity, particularly with respect to reclamation initiatives, than to re-examine resource extraction projects. Despite the aforementioned well-documented reclamation shortfalls, a powerful cognitive dissonance willingly overlooks widespread environmental damage and instead focuses on a very small

¹³¹ Reclamation efforts also reveal contradictions and paradoxes. The bitumen sands contribute to climate change, yet one of the barriers hindering reclamation attempts is the fact that, as local temperatures rise, fens and bogs are at risk. The same reclamation areas that industry has targeted for rehabilitation are drying up because of climate change (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 97).

¹³² Original quotation is from *Edmonton Journal*, Sep. 4, 2008, also Canadian Oil Sands Report, page 13 (credited to Dr. Russell Chianelli and Rudy Sookbirsingh).

geographical pocket of well-groomed rehabilitation space. The fierce belief in innovation also helps to solidify a Dominion-based prioritization of humans over nature.

In addition to the equivocation of reclamation and Eden, industrial projects like pipelines are presented as Edenic – and such analogies undoubtedly also help augment public acceptance and approval. In the 2014 opinion piece “The ‘Perfect’ Pipeline that May Never Get Built,” Doug Firby likened the Northern Gateway pipeline to Eden.¹³³ Firby, who is the editor-in-chief of *Troy Media*, chastised the formidable opposition to the pipeline, and argued that, with the new pipeline, Enbridge “could promise a new Eden, gilded with community and social benefits that would reshape the economy of central B.C.” (Firby).¹³⁴ According to Firby the Enbridge project would mark an improvement for the space, because nearly 75% of the pipeline’s path already fell “on previously disturbed land,” and because Enbridge promised to leave the area “better than the way it found it” (Firby). Such comments reflect a larger trend of casting industry and innovation in heroic roles. Human beings have long assumed the role of heroic agents whenever they have introduced new methods of transforming or redeeming nature from

¹³³ The sizable investments required to initiate pipeline projects – and those who stand to benefit financially from its existence – seem as formidable a temptation as the snake, or the devil, in the Garden of Eden. Symbolically, the serpentine shape is comparable to pipeline routes, which wind their way through Eden’s gardens, and continually threaten to suddenly disrupt paradise in the form of unexpected pipeline leaks. The metaphor of pipeline as snake can also be seen in *The Enpipe Line* (2012), which is a poetry project that transforms Enbridge’s potential Northern Gateway pipelength into a text comprised of more than 70,000 kilometres of poetry that slithers and winds.

¹³⁴ Firby’s full quotation reads as follows: “Enbridge could promise a new Eden, gilded with community and social benefits that would reshape the economy of central B.C. — wait! Isn’t that what it did? — and still it wouldn’t be enough to convince the anti-oilsands warriors to lay down their arms” (Firby).

its existing – and presumably fallen – state.¹³⁵ As men invented technology to mitigate fallen Eden,¹³⁶ land – often framed as female – was presented as faulty or fallen, like Eve.

This separation of man as innovator and land as fallen woman has been highlighted elsewhere. W.H. New, for example, has argued that land, when linked to concepts of ownership, can have apparent connections to gender (as well as to class and to ethnicity) (New 5-6). Critics Carolyn Merchant and Michael Pollan have likewise noted that vocations such as gardening and farming connote an active male agent, while the earth inhabits a more subjective role, signified by the female garden or farm (Merchant 182). Similar examples of male dominance over the land are ubiquitous in the Bible, and Alberta's strong Christian base, coupled with the high ratio of men working in the energy industry, has long endorsed precepts of male dominance. While a few women in northern Alberta have become dump truck operators and bitumen sands employees (as chronicled in Charles Wilkinson's 2013 film *Oil Sands Karaoke*), the industry is predominantly comprised of male workers.¹³⁷

Such gender disparities invite questions about how northern Albertans themselves perceive the land and nature. As William Cronon has noted, the "idea of nature" is never separate from its cultural context (*Uncommon Ground* 35). For Alberta, then, the

¹³⁵ In his chapter "Harnessing Help from Hades," J. Joseph Fitzgerald remarks that *in situ*, or "in place," methods have led intrepid bitumen sands entrepreneurs to create "their own miniature infernos" deep inside the bitumen beds. These subterranean fires, coupled with injections of steam, gave the impression "that these men were setting up shop with the devil himself," and each flame that rose to the surface left no doubt about "the helping hand of Hades" (88). See Chapter Four for more on Fitzgerald.

¹³⁶ In the history of bitumen sands development, female inventors or innovators generally have not been recognized. An example of this trend can be observed in the annual golfing tournament called "The Oilmen's." Since 1951, the invited participants have included suppliers, industry leaders, and companies of all sizes; however, for 41 consecutive years, every player was male. It was not until the 42nd Oilmen's Golf Tournament that Petro-Canada vice president Dee Parkinson-Marcoux would be invited to be an "Oilman" (Canadian Energy Executive Association 12). Parkinson-Marcoux would become Suncor's Executive VP.

¹³⁷ In December 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was criticized for pointing out that men tend to work on large infrastructure projects, and that influxes of men in such areas tend to have social impacts and potential repercussions (Dawson).

historical and cultural “idea of nature” has strong ties to Christian ideology and values. As I have previously noted, this religious tenet is often at odds with the principles of sustainability, since the basic premise of biocentrism – that all species are on equal relational terms with nature – contradicts the claim in Genesis that human beings hold the unique privilege of species dominance, bestowed to them by a divine being. Genesis emphasizes the importance of going forth and multiplying (1:28), but this biblical endorsement of reproduction and expansion runs contrary to present-day warnings from the scientific community to exercise restraint with respect to population growth.

This polarizing divide between biblical and scientific principles also dovetailed with tensions and conflicts toward indigenous people, whose relationship to the land is often characterized as sustainable and non-Dominionist. For early settlers who arrived to Alberta and favoured agriculture, Adam’s penalty of having to toil the land (Gen. 3.17-19) was an unexpected, “natural” task; however, as Michael Asch and Shirleen Smith have noted, the imposition of an agricultural way of life onto northern aboriginal residents was a colonial enterprise that primarily was justified through the simultaneous ideological stigmatization of hunting (McCormack and Ironside 151). For local indigenous people, the transition to working with agricultural tools was foreign and difficult, but settlers were determined to supplant existing hunting and fishing lifestyles with farming – an activity which favours the Judeo-Christian model of domesticating the land. Additionally, as indigenous people consumed the new foods produced by these crops, their diets and dietary routines changed; in some cases, these alterations had severe consequences.

Whether farmed by indigenous people or white settlers, the land has historically been difficult and stubborn in northern Alberta. Just as God punished the original mother Eve with painful childbearing (Gen. 3.16), the pains of childbirth also have correlations with northern Alberta's "non-fertile" land.¹³⁸ While writers and promoters have attempted to present the region as abundant, fertile and productive, the climate and rugged topographical conditions of northern Alberta's soil have been challenging.

Conclusion

The thrust of this chapter has sought to point out how a number of themes inevitably return to the manner in which the land and its residents are represented within the literature. To appreciate this space, one could perceive it in terms of bigness or smallness. To understand how many local residents perceive themselves, one can note the dominant influence of maverickhood, Christianity, Creationism, and the contrarian underpinnings of Dominionism. In order to maintain such stances, positions, and beliefs, many residents see themselves in the underdog role offered by counter-counter-discourse. For industry supporters, there is great value in privileging the language of technology in popular discourse, especially when consultations regarding major projects are underway. From a reputational standpoint, there is also strategic value in minimizing industry's past failures, even when these have been clearly noted and criticized in a number of northern Albertan texts. Similarly, there are strategic advantages to naming and re-naming various local places – especially when dubious men are commemorated and prominent women are recognized infrequently or insufficiently. The region is also commonly framed in

¹³⁸ There have been a number of accounts of problematic births and deliveries in northern Alberta. Some of these cases have been chronicled by Monica Storrs in *God's Galloping Girl*.

idyllic terms, rather than as a disrupted or upended space. Edenic images depend largely on the promotion of the myth of reclamation, and the problematic premise that industry and government continue to (heroically) make the land better than it was before it was disrupted.

Many of these themes touch upon each other and overlap, perhaps because when grouped together they ostensibly reinforce the common and presumably-shared goals of resource extraction, anthropocentric domination, and the colonial suppression of non-Christian ideologies and cultural beliefs. Some of these themes will be evident in the prominent narratives and major figures I will examine in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Bezanson, Davis, and Cornwall: Three Major Northern Narratives

Among the most popular personalities from northern Alberta are A. M. Bezanson, “Twelve Foot” Davis, and “Peace River Jim” Cornwall. Their legacies are outlined in three texts: Bezanson’s own book *Sodbusters Invade the Peace*, James G. MacGregor’s *The Land of Twelve Foot Davis*, and L.V. Kelly’s *North with Peace River Jim*. The three lives chronicled in these publications reflect long-standing connections to resource development, wealth, and the imperative of transforming the land into commodity. In Bezanson’s text, the author places himself squarely within local history, including a short promotional book he wrote concerning the region, and his personal participation in provincial and federal matters. The influence of Bezanson’s texts becomes particularly important when one considers issues of race, gender, and environmental connection and responsibility. In MacGregor’s book, a number of local personalities are profiled, but “Twelve Foot” Davis is presented as a figure whose legacy and scruples influenced the region irrevocably. As with Bezanson, MacGregor sheds light on matters of indigenous relations, gender, and human interactions with nature, as well as colonialism, the disruption of land, and industrial innovation. This chapter concludes with Kelly’s text, which recounts the cliquish sightseeing expedition led by “Peace River Jim.” Invitations for the trip were sent only to influential men who could have, with relative certainty, a tangible impact on industrial prospects for the area and facilitate its development. Although the content of the aforementioned books sometimes overlaps, the trio of men who are chronicled also constitute three of the most popular and enduring regional

narratives. As such, these voices established a particular perspective of northern Alberta that solidified specific ethics and values – namely, white, Christian, androcentric, individualist, and commodity-driven.

2.1 A.M. Bezanson

One prominent historical figure *in* northern Alberta was Ancel Maynard Bezanson, for whom an entire town has been named. With steadfast conviction, Bezanson secured approximately four hundred acres to be transformed into his very own townsite; however, adversity often plagued this rancher, mill worker, and promoter. Today, a portion of the Peace River is dedicated to Bezanson’s early entrepreneurial ambitions,¹³⁹ where he unsuccessfully attempted to create a new town. The space has been granted protection as a historic part of the Peace River region, and Bezanson’s legacy continues to echo and resonate for locals. Yet as we will see, the details gleaned from his foray into writing and self-publishing were taken at face value by curious readers – regardless of their accuracy.

Self-Publication, Influence, and Questionable Reliability

Published in 1954, *Sodbusters Invade the Peace* is among the more rhetorically charged works of northern Alberta’s literary output;¹⁴⁰ however, it was not Bezanson’s first published text. His preceding book, *The Peace River Trail*, was printed in 1907. That first

¹³⁹ The abandoned town recently celebrated its centennial anniversary (Zenner).

¹⁴⁰ According to D. (Dorthea) Calverley, *Sodbusters* “is full of anecdote and incident, embroidered with racy comments” (Calverley, “A.M. Bezanson – Peace River Promoter” n. pg.). In the same article, Calverley states that Bezanson is not “the best writer, but probably the best-known writer in the Peace Country.” Calverley’s article underscores the region’s scarcity of local literature; although *Sodbusters* is no longer in print, it remains “the only reference book on our country.” As such, Calverley chastises the text for its role in conveying “the impression that we are still in the ‘primitive’ stages of development.”

text sold very well,¹⁴¹ and was widely believed to contain reliable and trustworthy content and anecdotes about northern Alberta for readers who were considering coming to the region – despite Bezanson’s status as a newcomer to northern Alberta himself.¹⁴²

Crucially, the 1907 publication was a feat of strategic marketing because it offered the promise of wealth and fortune to its readers, and sparked a migration of newcomers into the region.¹⁴³

Bezanson finally published *Sodbusters Invade the Peace* nearly half a century later. The new book built upon Bezanson’s earlier blend of travel literature and adventure narratives.¹⁴⁴ These rhetorical influences dominate the text; therefore, rather than providing an objective or impartial depiction of the region, *Sodbusters* frequently conforms to writing styles and popular genres that favour embellishment or hyperbole. These exaggerations in turn helped Bezanson to encourage the settlement and colonization of northern Alberta.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Bezanson’s May 1907 publication *The Peace River Trail* saw 5,000 copies printed; 1,000 copies were sold to the federal government (*Sodbusters* 71). These figures are corroborated by Wanda Zenner, who wrote that *The Peace River Trail* saw 5,000 copies sold (Zenner). Despite its popularity, Bezanson claimed he made no profit from the 74-page publication (*Sodbusters* 72).

¹⁴² The author was from the United States. Although he was born near Halifax, NS on September 1, 1878, Bezanson spent his childhood near the Santa Fe trail, on Texas ranches and farms, and northward to Canada’s border (*Sodbusters* 1-2). His American upbringing impressed upon his subconscious “the innate hunger for a piece of land” of his own, the same land that drove other men “on and on into the wilderness,” thereby accomplishing “the fabulous development of America” (2).

¹⁴³ Up to that point, few people had been to northern Alberta. Consequently, *Sodbusters* served as a primary source of information concerning the region. For many, Bezanson’s subjective observations formed the basic general knowledge of Alberta’s north.

¹⁴⁴ Bezanson toggles between personal narratives constructed in an explorer vein and, eventually, narratives of disappointment. For instance, when the author finds himself confronted by strong river currents, he writes that hope “buoyed me and renewed my strength. I’d lick this monster yet!” (59). Bezanson proceeds to sing a made-up parody in the style of a renowned cowboy ballad. Soon his canoe capsizes and he floats upstream. What follows is a Herculean battle with the current and the canoe. After six hours, Bezanson arrives back at the same spot he had left ten days earlier and must start the portage again (61). Ultimately ending where he started, Bezanson’s efforts echo a recurring pattern of disappointment familiar to the region, such as bitumen extraction and steamer failures (see pages 53-54 above).

¹⁴⁵ As Bezanson writes in the tenth chapter, the “North of my dreams was to become a land of homes being developed and children raised” (70). Settlement and colonization aligned with the agricultural and railroad goals that had been catalysts for his reveries. In fact, when the Edmonton Board of Trade told Bezanson

Since Bezanson's recollections span several decades, the veracity of the events described in *Sodbusters* is often tenuous. Even the book's inset contains a map that Bezanson drew by hand in 1906 (see Appendix L); such an inclusion may have been intended to be innocuous, but its presence comes at the expense of including a more formal cartographic representation of the region. The author's 1906 map includes touchstones from the area, but some places – like Fort Chipewyan – are absent entirely.¹⁴⁶ These inaccuracies aside, Bezanson's personally drawn maps stimulated and excited readers about the prospect of tracing the author's steps as he explored Peace River country for the first time.

Beyond providing readers with a vicarious experience, Bezanson used his retrospective text to establish a sense of myth. In fact, the first chapter of *Sodbusters* is titled "On the Trail of a Myth," and includes Bezanson's explicit declaration, "I'm starting out to track down a myth, I hope" (3).¹⁴⁷ Eventually, the author confirms that he has believed Alberta's north to be a "primitive and remote frontier" ever since he was a child, and as an adult he feels this myth-based belief has been substantiated (14). Unlike Robert Kroetsch's claim that Alberta events first become folklore and then become myth

that the region was not suitable for settlement, he became infuriated and became "a crusader" who lost much of his "self-consciousness in the Cause" of promoting northern Alberta (71).

¹⁴⁶ Bezanson's erroneous cartographic rendering is reminiscent of earlier flawed representations of the region, including from Peter Pond. At one time, maps simplified the region by demarcating a blanket "To the Yukon" directive, thus allowing northern Alberta to capitalize on potential travellers through the region. Cartographic representations often neglected to specify the 2000-mile distance to the Yukon, or the hardships that aspiring travellers might encounter (MacGregor 310). The deliberate omissions were strategic attempts to generate new business.

¹⁴⁷ There is barely any exposition at the beginning of *Sodbusters*. Bezanson impulsively started his journey after he and some friends received a promotional pamphlet from the federal government. The name "Peace River" seemed inviting to Bezanson, and he wanted to look the area over. So he caught the first available train that could transport him from Ft. Frances, Ontario to northern Alberta (2).

(“On Being” 330),¹⁴⁸ Bezanson starts from the position of myth and then tries to make the region and his prose conform to the myth.¹⁴⁹

Bezanson is forthright about these subjective preconceptions, and he plainly admits that his personal exploration of the north “was merely a means to self glorification” in his “scheme of values.” Personal exploration, then, is only the first step; Bezanson wants eager farmers to populate the land, just like he had imagined them in his head (*Sodbusters* 12).¹⁵⁰ In order for local socioeconomic structures to alter and align with his own vision, a specific kind of citizen – hard-working and determined – would be required. Accordingly, the language of *Sodbusters* emulates the language of adventure narratives in the early descriptions of his trek to northern Alberta. Bezanson gives readers the impression of a perilous, remote, exhausting journey, and describes having to cross “hundreds of miles of muskeg” (4).

Bezanson’s episodic text proceeds to employ an array of masculine tropes, from the intrepid young adventurer to the rugged entrepreneur.¹⁵¹ The author emulates the strong influence that explorer texts held for him in his youth, particularly as he encounters and recognizes “fascinating” landmarks – trading posts, for example – that had been described by other authors in earlier exploration chronicles (17). Bezanson exuberantly enters “the *real* Peace River country,” and remarks that he experienced it as “the country

¹⁴⁸ Kroetsch writes, “Events become story, become folklore, edge towards the condition of myth” (“On Being” 330).

¹⁴⁹ In the first few chapters, the author insists that he will make his representations of northern Alberta conform to previous explorer narratives.

¹⁵⁰ Early in *Sodbusters*, an Icelandic Canadian tells Bezanson that his personal goal is to dismantle longstanding myths about the North, including the notion that white men are ill-equipped to handle its challenges. Bezanson responds that he has a similar goal of exploring the Peace River area and debunking its accompanying myths (11-12).

¹⁵¹ Even Bezanson’s use of the word “invade” in the book’s title evokes conqueror or warrior language.

Mackenzie described” (28).¹⁵² As Bezanson acknowledges the influence that explorer narratives held for him, readers are reminded that the author has presented his own encounters with this space in a similar manner.

In fact, Bezanson habitually – if perhaps questionably – presents himself in heroic terms. Bezanson’s description of how some dangerous narrows in the region “allured” him, for example, exemplifies his tendency to emulate adventure narratives. As the author rushed toward the water, however, the reader discovers “that there was no danger, but fun” (15). Later in the text, Bezanson presents what seems to be a perilous experience, when his appendix suddenly caused him significant pain. Initially, the author planned to “take the damn thing out” on his own, and he bravely gathered the necessary morphine, scissors, gauze and forceps, while the appendix “continued to gnaw” at him. Bezanson even wrote a will for himself and asked another person to perform the emergency “butchering” while he talked them through the procedure (177). Yet this heroic buildup ultimately fizzles out, because Bezanson actually travelled to Edmonton instead, where his appendix was removed under regular medical conditions. The careful reader notes that Bezanson’s heroic account could be summarized as an unfortunate experience whereby the author went to the hospital after his appendix began to hurt.

Bezanson’s avowed consumption of explorer texts – along with the author’s general inexperience as a writer and producer of texts – is reminiscent of Michel de Certeau’s term for a certain type of reading called “poaching.” Described as “an impertinent raid on the literary preserve,” poaching extracts only the elements of a text that might be pleasurable to the reader. “Far from being writers,” de Certeau writes, “readers are

¹⁵² Alexander Mackenzie (1764-1820), the first white settler to explore the region.

travellers” who “move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves” (de Certeau 174). One key feature of the poaching process involves readers gathering fragments from popular texts and reassembling those fragments in a way that reflects or comments upon their own social perspectives. Consumers of a popular text reclaim the subject matter and make it their own, “appropriating or reappropriating it” as desired (166). In the case of Bezanson as author, local personalities and landmarks are poached and reappropriated to best conform to his explorer and adventurer frameworks.

It should also be noted that Bezanson was in his seventies when *Sodbusters* was published. As such, the author and his memories may not be fully reliable. Bezanson even admits that in his younger years, he enjoyed “swapping lies about past achievements” (*Sodbusters* 9). Although Bezanson cautions readers not to judge people based on their appearances (11), and emphasizes the importance of keeping an open mind, his book contains a number of sweeping generalizations and potentially offensive characterizations. These subjective remarks make it difficult to read the 70-year old’s recollections impartially.

Of course, tenuous authorial reliability dates back to Bezanson’s previous book, which he produced himself.¹⁵³ By personally controlling the publication of his writing, Bezanson retained subjective authority over his narrative.¹⁵⁴ In *Sodbusters*, Bezanson reveals that many people were profoundly influenced by the *The Peace River Trail*. Rede and Robert Stone, for instance, told Bezanson that they made the decision to move to

¹⁵³ *The Peace River Trail* can be accessed online at <http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/bibliography/3020/9.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Bezanson was notoriously antagonistic toward print media. He claimed newspaper writers were “pet peeves” who exaggerated hardships faced by Hudson’s Bay men and Mounties (23).

Peace River after they read his book. Bezanson, in turn, considered the Stone cousins to be “the finest type of frontier stock,” because they chose northern Alberta as their preferred destination. The Stones truly believed that this “rich country” resembled “*a Garden of Eden*, after the desert we were living in” (74; emphasis added).

Other references to Eden in *Sodbusters* include an excerpt from Alexander Mackenzie’s account of his late eighteenth century trip through Peace River country. Mackenzie encountered “exuberant verdure” and “beautiful scenery” wherein the “magnificent theatre of nature” possessed “all the decorations” that the animals and trees could give it. Poplar groves of all sizes covered “the scene,” along with elk and buffalo herds (Mackenzie qtd. on 1). For Bezanson, this “exuberant verdure” signified a favourable agricultural climate “even more important” than buffalo and elk and buffalo, especially in a newly colonized world that was “land hungry” (2). By his second paragraph of *Sodbusters*, Bezanson explicitly prioritizes growth and development over game animals – whether in 1907 or 1954 contexts.

Bezanson received countless fan letters from people who read *The Peace River Trail* and were impacted by its content. The author personally replied to each correspondence, and many readers confirmed they came to the region based solely on his 1907 text (*Sodbusters* 88-89).¹⁵⁵ The Thompson family, for example, moved to Peace River because they trusted that the region would be “as good as” Bezanson’s favourable

¹⁵⁵ After meeting a Colorado man and his two sons, Bezanson concluded that these independent, self-made Americans were “just the right people for the Peace River country” (*Sodbusters* 89). Raymond Addison Sprague (“Boody”) read the book too, and eventually helped the author set up an entire sawmill (130). Bezanson also had dealings with an unnamed former partner “who had been bitten by the Peace River bug when reading *The Peace River Trail*” (147). Another man named Mr. Gaudin travelled to the region not only because he thought that God had pointed him there, but also because the 1907 book explicitly “pictured such a beautiful country” (166). The Trelles, a coal-mining family, also wanted to do their part and promote the Peace River country so they left Edmonton after they read the 1907 publication (171).

“picture” (130).¹⁵⁶ Bezanson’s 1907 text also held importance in light of the scarce population of white people who lived in the region. In effect, the 74-page document prompted an ethnographic change. Although not all of the new settlers came to the region because of Bezanson’s promotional endeavours, many did come primarily because of his words, language, and promotional savvy.

Developing Eden, U.S.-Style

The values introduced by Bezanson in 1907 remain in his writing in 1954’s *Sodbusters*, where the vocabulary of land acquisition and commodification continue to permeate the text, and reflect what the author perceives as fundamental American values. In one passage, Bezanson recalls telling a man named Roberts that northern Alberta has all of “the basic ingredients of the American dream,” because the north allowed millions of U.S. citizens to obtain their own land and cultivate it as they saw fit. Bezanson saw Alberta’s endless, “park-like country” as a *space* destined for thousands of new homes, and as a *place* where this American “vision” could become a reality (26).

Yet the differences between the two countries posed problems. From a pragmatic, arable perspective, land in the prairie provinces was stubborn, hard, and antagonistic; in print, however, Bezanson shrewdly presented the region as valuable commodity and he urged readers to participate in increased development.¹⁵⁷ Bezanson characterized Peace

¹⁵⁶ During this formative period, Bezanson’s idealized “picture” of northern Alberta was an essential way to fuel the imaginations of readers. According to W.H. New, iconic images that depict a given place are reflections of a society’s power relations, and these images perpetuate that society’s myths. For New, the images themselves are rarely realistic or representational: they transform a setting from its actual state into something serene or beatific. This glossing tendency dates back to early settlers – in this case, someone like Bezanson – whose idealized depictions of the landscape did not, in all likelihood, reflect the author’s own experiences of grueling travel conditions and copious hardships (New 21).

¹⁵⁷ These promotions were often an underdog crusade. Bezanson could find only one person who believed the region was suitable for farming – a man by the name of Mr. Griffin (*Sodbusters* 29). Undeterred, Bezanson continued to advocate for the agricultural potential of the region for many years.

River country as “at least a billion feet of merchantable timber,” and metaphorically converted Alberta’s trees into plentiful lumber, instead of depicting them as part of an ecosystem or boreal forest.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, he believed agriculture to be the land’s primary purpose, and considered those who disagreed to be merely ignorant (27). Looking back on these early years, as newly arriving settlers dominated the region, this anthropocentric sense of control over natural resources instilled a profound sense of happiness and fulfilment. For Bezanson and those he influenced, “the spirit of conquest of our new environment kept us buoyed with *élan* such as we had never known before” (101).

Since such sentiments of conquest and Dominionism permeate *Sodbusters*, Bezanson’s role in ensuring these ideals invites scrutiny. During this time, just as United States congressmen were influenced by outsiders, Bezanson likewise often lobbied politicians to get what he wanted. Frequently, Bezanson’s approaches clashed with the desires of long-standing citizens, particularly when he fought to impose agricultural designations for the land. As his fixation on commodification and capitalism grew, the author’s disdain for sharing and charity became more pronounced.¹⁵⁹ He also became increasingly preoccupied with natural resources such as coal, and even sent samples to the University of Alberta for analysis but received no follow-up (165).

Although few others saw promise in the future of the region, Bezanson firmly believed in its potential – often at the expense of his own familial and social obligations.

¹⁵⁸ At the same time, Bezanson also argued that timber should be “properly” protected indefinitely. He deemed governments to be careless and negligent when it came to the protection of natural heritage (*Sodbusters* 81).

¹⁵⁹ For instance, Bezanson criticizes Allie Brick’s family and farm because their “philosophy of life” is based upon “sharing.” He doubts Brick can even be considered to be prosperous since Brick is married to an indigenous woman and has many children (*Sodbusters* 28). This cynical view of sharing is also observed when Bezanson is visited by Ralph – his broke, rheumatism-stricken, older brother – in Edmonton. Bezanson decides there is “nothing organically wrong” with his brother “that some folding money wouldn’t cure” (149). Ultimately, Bezanson offers Ralph a share in the Revillons’ herd of cattle ranch.

For instance, on the day that he married his second wife Lois, after the wedding Bezanson met with various businessmen who wished to learn more about the Peace River country. Meanwhile, Lois was left alone to talk to relatives. Worse, at the business meeting Bezanson learned of a potential mining boom in Haileybury, New Liskeard, and Cobalt, Ontario,¹⁶⁰ so he immediately rushed eastward to capitalize on the resource tip. Perhaps serendipitously, upon his arrival the “money country” was already saturated with like-minded fortune-seekers (144).

Certain that the Peace River region was Eden and “a new Eldorado” (27), Bezanson explicitly likened northern Alberta to the Promised Land (165).¹⁶¹ The steadfast belief that northern Alberta was Edenic complemented Bezanson’s willingness to overlook its shortfalls in order to exploit the “vast stretches of virgin prairie untouched by plow” (30). Natural obstacles such as gnats, mosquitoes and cold water, he argued, were unpleasant encounters that were “offset by the vistas of truly virgin landscape” – the region’s ever-abundant resources awaited only agricultural development (15, 83).¹⁶²

Local, Bioregional Connections to the Land

According to Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty and Karla Armbruster, bioregionalism emerged as a movement in the 1970s that addressed important environmental matters by means of “a politics derived from a local sense of place,” but which complemented pres-

¹⁶⁰ Tellingly, today’s major streets of Cobalt, Ontario are named Silver Street/Silver Lane, Pyrite Street, Cobalt Street, Argentite Street, Ruby Street, Nickel Street, Commission Street, and Prospect Avenue.

¹⁶¹ For Bezanson, the first settlers were courageous, true pioneers; when they first arrived into the Beaverlodge Valley, the experience “must have reminded them of the first vision of the Promised Land by Moses and his people” (165).

¹⁶² This “land of fabulous beauty and extraordinarily luxuriant growth” was even able to recover from wildfires, because the boreal forest’s burnmarks and scars somehow idyllically “healed,” and the soil had been “replenished by accumulated humus” (29).

existing national and international projects and efforts (Lynch et al, *The Bioregional Imagination* 2). Pamela Banting notes that bioregionalism tries “to restore a sense of that intensely lived-world, which tends to get over-written by jurisdictional and political designations,” by prompting citizens to become more authentic and aware residents of their natural surroundings (Banting 731). As such, bioregional theory often considers political borders and boundaries to be arbitrary, as compared to natural parameters. While *bioregionalism* encourages humans to remember that their lives are intertwined with ecosystems – and to act accordingly and live sustainably, *bioregional thinking* foregrounds “an environmental ethic” in the daily actions of ordinary citizens (Lynch et al 3). Robert L. Thayer Jr. uses the term “life-place” to describe a bioregion that can be defined by the arrangements of watersheds, by plant ecosystems, by natural proteins or limits of animal or human populations (Thayer Jr. 3). Yet beyond the geography of how waterways have formed, or the places or manners in which plants have grown, bioregions are also “already filled with stories and modes of discourse” (Lynch et al 14).

Interestingly, there are passages in *Sodbusters Invade the Peace* that demonstrate how some residents connected to the area on a bioregional level. For example, Bezanson encountered a “mad Alaskan” whose expertise on the frontier involved observing “the lay of the land in relation to lakes, rivers, or other physical characteristics.” The Alaskan’s observations allowed him to interpret the kind of terrain he would traverse. The man intuitively knew how to situate himself at all times, “even in strange surroundings” (40). In other words, nature and environmental biorhythms were essential to the Alaskan and they determined his understanding of how the region functioned and was constructed.

Despite this connection to nature, the Texas-raised Bezanson depicts the Alaskan as a man who ranted, frothed at the mouth, and suffered from madness. Readers, in turn, perceive the man's symbiotic connection to *nature* as *unnatural*. The Alaskan's unpredictable outbursts contrast with the rational, commodity-focused Bezanson, who keeps his "cool" while the Alaskan shouts strong religious curses and loses his temper with the horses.¹⁶³ By presenting the Alaskan unfavourably, Bezanson establishes a tacit tension between bioregionalism (folly and madness) and progress (rational and calm) – a precedent that will recur in many northern Albertan texts. We will return to local examples of bioregionalism in 2.2.

Problematic Depictions of Race

In light of the scope and influence of Bezanson's popular text, one must consider a number of problematic passages and archaic vocabulary concerning race¹⁶⁴ and gender. One example involves a man named Sexsmith, who rode a horse he named after a derogatory term (the "N-word"). The cayuse was, Bezanson concludes, "black enough and good natured enough for the name to fit" (34). The horse disappeared, and Bezanson decided to devote extensive and exhaustive efforts to track it. After the horse was finally recovered, the author ultimately decided to sell it at a profit (66). The conclusion to the passage is jarring; Bezanson had embarked on a lengthy quest to find the animal, only for readers to discover that his concern was primarily materialist or capitalist in nature. The

¹⁶³ The Alaskan cursed "as no man had ever cursed before in my hearing, nor dared to curse ... He frothed and raged at the horses, and cursed God and His Son, then turned his curses on Jesus' mother and his own mother again and again" (Bezanson, *Sodbusters* 41).

¹⁶⁴ Bezanson's most prominent and unfavourable representations are of black people and indigenous people; however, the author also depicts non-English speaking Euro-Canadians in exaggerated, often negative ways. John Gladieu, for example, of French lineage, is presented to the reader as a dandy (*Sodbusters* 79).

author had no intention of actually engaging with the “black enough and good natured enough” horse.

In another section, Bezanson recalls hearing of an old Alaskan “sourdough” who sometimes had “a klooch” staying with him. Indigenous people believed the Alaskan acted “queer” and that his female partner was afraid of him. Bezanson then assures readers that he usually does not debase himself by interacting with such people; however, the author made an exception and talked to them because he suspected the Alaskan could have encountered the horse on his daily travels (36). For novice readers of *Sodbusters*, such qualifying statements emphasize the perception that engagements with local indigenous people were rare and occurred only under unusual circumstances.

Later, Bezanson describes a neighbour named Muncie as a “tall, lithe, swarthy man of mixed breed,” who was not like other indigenous people (101).¹⁶⁵ In the chapter “Trouble with the Muncie Gang,” Muncie’s sons are described in unpleasant terms, such as Pete, who is characterized as “a slouchy appearing person” (109). After Muncie’s other son, Jake, was taken to Bezanson’s house, the boy was diagnosed with syphilis, and Bezanson referred to the Muncie family as “dirty stinkers.” The author emphasizes that even the dog disliked Jake. Yet despite his fervent irritation that the Métis boy might have brought disease into his home, Bezanson happily adopted a new bear cub, and the household immediately “fell in love with the little rascal” (109). By contrast, the Mounties were summoned to remove the “noxious” Jake from the Bezanson home. Further, Bezanson tried to invoice the Mounties \$85 for the expenses he incurred by helping care for Jake; in turn, the author was accused of “profiteering off the misfortune

¹⁶⁵ Later in the text, Tom Sinclair refers to Muncie as the “half-breed Blood Injun” who stole horses “from other Injuns, I bet you” (107).

of another” (112). The Muncie passage is just one of a number of examples of disrespect or cruelty toward indigenous people in *Sodbusters*.¹⁶⁶

Indigenous cultures fascinated Bezanson, dating back to his youth, when his “most prized trophies” were arrows and spearheads. Every night, Bezanson would absorb indigenous legends and then retire to his bed in the attic (1). Despite this keen fascination in his youth, however, Bezanson obscured aboriginal and indigenous voices in his adult writings. In fact, the author was generally apprehensive about interactions with indigenous people and the class they represented; upon his initial arrival to the Slave River region, Bezanson had “no desire to enter the ranks of common labour in competition with the half breeds, even if I could get a job as one” (3). This aversion to having to work among the Métis anticipates subsequent problematic representations in the text, as the reader discovers.

Despite such tenuous passages, there are also a few tempered moments concerning race. In the text, some favourable depictions of indigenous people include: when the author calls the Crees a “very decent lot” (9); when indigenous women appear to have manners that are “much better than their civilized sisters” (18); and when Chipewyan, Chippewa, Cree, and Beaver men are deemed to amount to “a pretty decent-looking and well-behaved lot of people” (18). Bezanson also admires how tepees, in their “magnificent” settings, were “symbolic of the love of beauty inherent in all races.”

Perhaps in a moment of retroactive regret, the author recalls “the innate dignity of the

¹⁶⁶ Bezanson and Moostoos, a chief from Hay River, are invited to dinner by “Peace River Jim” Cornwall (see page 135 below). Although Bezanson characterizes Moostoos as both dignified and “swarthy,” it is Cornwall who comes across as deliberately cruel. At the dinner, Cornwall says that Moostoos is free to order anything he likes off the menu – even though he knows Moostoos is illiterate. Bezanson is irritated by the prank and takes care to point out this example of inappropriate debasement from Jim Cornwall, a man with an otherwise esteemed reputation in northern Alberta (*Sodbusters* 132).

free Indians” he had encountered, and how this sight made Bezanson realize he had “probably, though unwittingly, been extremely rude” to local indigenous people (49). Despite such self-discoveries, indigenous people are often presented as unreliable in one sentence, and white people (including Bezanson) are presented as more evolved in the next (174).

Bezanson and Gender

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bezanson’s text overtly favours men, and emphasizes the size and strength of male figures. Some examples include Captain Shott, who is described as “a big bushy-whiskered mixed-breed” and resembled Bezanson’s “boyish concept of Black Morgan, the noted pirate” (7); an Icelandic Canadian who was fair-haired, tall, and “barrel-chested” (11); J.K. (“Peace River Jim”) Cornwall, who was “a big, deep-chested man with a superior body and dominating personality” (12);¹⁶⁷ John Revillon, who continued to grow “taller in our esteem” (14); the RCMP superintendent Major Constantine, who was “stout, very military, and very deeply impressed by the dignity of his position” (23); and George Bredin, who was “a big powerful fellow” with a “domineering personality” (99). One striking passage describes an unnamed, but “very impressive,” indigenous man who “looked indomitable” and

was very handsome in a strong masculine way. ... All eyes were fixed upon him. ... Studying his strong face with its eyes that could look right into your mind and read your thoughts, I grew to admire that Indian as I have admired

¹⁶⁷ The reader later discovers that Bezanson will name his own son after Jim Cornwall (193). Conversely, earlier in the text, Bezanson also calls Cornwall a “prima donna” (12).

but few men in my lifetime. He was *all man*. His was a strength of character secure against the vicissitudes of fate. (49; emphasis added)

In Bezanson's text, the numerous characterizations of northern Albertan men as strong and hearty align well with a local preoccupation with masculinity and largeness,¹⁶⁸ as exemplified by the mythic nickname of "Twelve Foot" Davis.

Meanwhile, women in *Sodbusters* are often presented as weak, inferior, or sub-human; one man, for example, told Bezanson that indigenous women were similar to "pack animals" (63). Elsewhere in the text, women are depicted as commodities; a Peace River man known as the "mad Alaskan" told Bezanson he could "always buy a woman" if he needed one (52-53). When George Bredin, Grande Prairie's first settler, wanted to obtain a non-indigenous woman, he offered to pay Bezanson if the author could arrange to have someone brought into the region for him. Bredin, who was a blacksmith, lamented he would lose three days of work if he had to spend time finding a prospective partner, and insisted it was easier for Bezanson to hand-pick a wife for him (77-78). Bredin's nonchalant delegation of finding a female partner – all so that he may continue working – bluntly emphasizes the priorities and values of early settlers, and the carefree attitude toward relationships that prevailed at the time.

Not to be left out, Bezanson eventually found a partner of his own, although the language he uses to describe the partnership is rather puzzling. When he first met Dorothy (Dolly) Robillard – a hospital nurse¹⁶⁹ trained in New York – Bezanson was both frightened of, and challenged by, her (85).¹⁷⁰ For months, he had lived alongside

¹⁶⁸ See Chapter One for a more detailed analysis on "bigness" in the region.

¹⁶⁹ Bezanson refers to Dolly as "a worthy disciple of Florence Nightingale" (109).

¹⁷⁰ Dolly's "deliberate avoidance" of Bezanson scared him, but it "roused" his "fighting spirit" (87).

animals and men in northern Alberta, so Bezanson was acutely self-conscious when he found himself in Dolly's presence. It took a few days of social integration before he began to feel at ease. Although his relationship with Dolly was platonic, he decided "to make the relationship permanent" by marrying her (85). Interestingly, Bezanson phrased their union in agricultural terms: "I said to myself, I'll plow a new furrow from now on" (86).¹⁷¹

Bezanson depicted the women in his life as precarious or fragile creatures. On one occasion, a mounted policeman came to the aid of Dolly's sister Lois, who had fallen out of a canoe into a nearby river. In Bezanson's words, it "took a he-man to rescue a helpless woman from that water" (111). The author's patronizing account of the rescue also overshadows the fact that Lois was a successful individual who operated the ferry in the area. Lois's initiative and independence – in a region dominated by men – are undersold by Bezanson's phallogentric rescue narrative.

Dolly, meanwhile, is presented in a frail manner, particularly after she experienced the "alleged curse of pregnancy" (116). Upon giving birth to a son, Dolly died of cancer and was buried in Bear Creek. Bezanson deeply resented the baby, whom he considered a "poor shriveled mite," and he also became mentally unstable for a while (126).

Bezanson also associated women with domesticity and insisted that Dolly's attempts to transform their cabin into a makeshift home conclusively proved "that making a house a home is a normal woman's first interest" (97). After Dolly died, Bezanson proceeded to marry her sister, Lois. While Bezanson performed duties such as clearing away land, he praised Lois for not complaining and for keeping "her cheery outlook."

¹⁷¹ Bezanson also vowed to quit smoking, drinking, and gluttony, and to "build a new life; one that a decent girl can trust" (86).

Eventually, Lois assumed “her role as homemaker” (207), even though she sorely missed no longer being permitted to engage in social interactions with others.¹⁷² Bezanson’s view of the opposite sex can be summarized by his remark, “Women are wonderful creatures – when they are really good” (160). Bezanson’s constrained approach to women and gender roles are echoed in other early works of northern Alberta literature.

Bezanson Departs the Region

Although it is tempting to characterise Bezanson as a textbook example of a self-made man, he was far from an individualistic figure. In the text, the author namedrops frequently, as he refers to meetings with: Allie Brick, the MP for Peace River;¹⁷³ W.S. (Bill) Harris of the newly launched Edmonton *Journal* (5); provincial mineralogist for BC William Fleet Robertson (54); and future *Arctic Prairies* author Ernest Thompson Seton, who produced a report on fauna and flora (85). Bezanson also remarks upon his encounters with the religious and political lawyer Mr. Rae,¹⁷⁴ the surveyors Will Davis and Freely Bennet, the Marquis wheat developer Dr. William Saunders (146), and the Geological Survey member James McCowan (146). As these references accrue, Bezanson’s own legitimacy and authenticity gradually accrue for his intended readers.

Yet despite a local, “construction minded” trajectory that previously made him feel “at home” in northern Alberta (191), Bezanson and his family ultimately left the region.

¹⁷² The protective Bezanson was uneasy at the notion of the two sisters leaving the confines of the home. Once, Lois told him that she had veered off of the trails, and Bezanson became flustered that Dolly and Lois, the two “city girls,” “simply could not realize that a horrible death lurked in the bush for those who had not learned its secrets” (114).

¹⁷³ Brick’s appearance surprised Bezanson, since it “did not fit my preconceived image of a member of parliament. But it suited me much better. Frontier was stamped all over him. He was squarely built, had nice eyes and a kindly face. I liked him” (3). Of note to contemporary readers is the fact that Brick won his seat by acclamation; this detail is consistent with a history of poor voter turnouts in Alberta that continues today (see Nikiforuk’s “The First Law of Petropolitics,” *Tar Sands* 152-167 and van Herk’s *Mavericks*).

¹⁷⁴ Eventually, a nearby area will be named Rae’s Flat.

When the railroad route did not eventually pass near their household, the Bezanson family realized they were “left hanging on a high limb practically naked” (208). This early example of an over-reliance on the success of a future infrastructure project – only to be disappointed by failure and unforeseen outcomes – has remained a common refrain that is familiar to many northern Albertans today. For Bezanson, promotional enthusiasm gave way to grim realities, and the accumulation of his “hopes and dreams and labours” laid “in complete defeat” (208). Bezanson kept lobbying and advocating for the region, and for a connecting railway (192). His late appeals to link the area to other places in Canada resemble appeals from industry today, which likewise seek to connect northern Alberta to the rest of the country through infrastructure projects like the Energy East and Northern Gateway pipelines, especially under the guise of “nation-building” (Francis; Findlay, “Northern”; Findlay, “To Get”; The Canadian Press, “Critics”; Krugel).¹⁷⁵

Today, just over one hundred residents occupy the hamlet of Bezanson. The Old Bezanson Townsite is still accessible for outdoor activities, but it does not have potable water or basic power; forest growth has taken over the initial site and nature has reclaimed the space (Hinks). Likewise, Bezanson’s cornerstone 1954 text is now a scarcity: at present, *Sodbusters Invade the Peace* remains out of print. Nevertheless, the author’s pivotal role in shaping local opinions – regardless of reliability or accuracy¹⁷⁶ – persists to this day. Although Bezanson’s book makes references to prominent policy-makers and well-reputed local citizens, it is also a construction of Bezanson’s ego,

¹⁷⁵ A quotation from Energy East’s website declares, “It is rare for a single project to have a nation-building dimension to it, but the Energy East Pipeline Project has exactly that” (Energy East, “Benefits”).

¹⁷⁶ As D. (Dorthea) Calverley writes, “Of course, some find fault with details of time or place, but inaccuracies were to be expected when much of its content was memories of events fifty years before. There were others who said that Bezanson always had exaggerated. ‘He was that kind of guy,’ they said” (Calverley, “A.M. Bezanson – Peace River Promoter”).

especially in its depictions of reciprocal favours and overt nepotism. Early life in northern Alberta is presented as a glossed distortion, recounted in subjective hindsight. Bezanson chose not to linger on the fact that his earlier *Peace River Trail* misled many readers into coming to a region that was not otherwise ready for agriculture or settlement. In this respect, Bezanson's 1907 text was an example of false advertising and promises, and 1954's *Sodbusters* represented an attempt to justify the hype he helped create – without having to explicitly atone for the impacts of his words.

2.2 “Twelve Foot” Davis and James G. MacGregor

Like Bezanson's texts, James G. MacGregor's *The Land of Twelve Foot Davis (A History of the Peace River Country)* pre-dates northern Alberta's bitumen boom in the 1960's. Although MacGregor wrote a few popular texts about the region,¹⁷⁷ the author never actually lived there. This admonition by MacGregor in his preface to *Land* continues a pattern of prominent narratives from northern Alberta that have been written and published by outsiders.

As with Bezanson, MacGregor relies on colonial language, frequent hyperbole and subjective embellishment.¹⁷⁸ He refers to Peace River, for instance, as “the last frontier of the white man's setting” and as an “empire” that “hovers over the rest of Alberta.” While some Albertans – particularly indigenous peoples – might question such declarative remarks, MacGregor believed that local achievements were the result of “well-founded dreams” that originated from the region's “determined and clear-eyed pioneers” (9).

¹⁷⁷ For instance, MacGregor also wrote *Paddle Wheels to Bucket-wheels on the Athabasca* (1974).

¹⁷⁸ Like Bezanson, MacGregor's rhetorical language also features repetitions of certain anecdotes, which suggests the author forgot he already made the same points earlier in the text.

MacGregor – again, like Bezanson – introduces readers to a number of prominent personalities in his text. Among the profiled are fur traders (Fraser, Finlay, MacKenzie and Thompson) and “gold seekers” (“Twelve Foot” Davis, “N—r Dan” and Banjo Mike), as well as missionaries (Bishops Bompas, Clut, Grouard and Young), who delved “into the wilderness” to bring religion’s “light and comfort” to the Beaver people before they “vanished from the earth.” MacGregor also includes references to some prominent indigenous people who have been “[s]tealing along silently” (10), such as Pouce Coupe, La Glace, and Catherine Bisson (who lived to be over 100 years old). There are also sections devoted to E.F. Carey, Bill Cust, Fletcher Bredin, and “Peace River Jim” Cornwall, heads of settlements (Bill Grant, Sheridan Lawrence, E.J. Martin and Bill Williams), and a number of “men of vision” from the 1950s (Percy Tooley and Frank Donald – the region’s first millionaire) (13).

As they appear in one of the few early books from and about the region, the names MacGregor chooses to include are magnified in importance and attention. The author’s words shape readers’ minds and help establish and reinforce pre-existing values. At times, MacGregor’s writing is surprising and immersive, and although much of the content is historically grounded, contemporary readers may observe some intriguing underpinnings.

MacGregor acknowledges and perhaps admires aspects of earlier ways of life in northern Alberta; however, while his text contains passages that might be associated with simpler times – bioregional connections to the land, for instance – the narrative trajectory can largely be described as a move (and ethic) toward wealth and industry. Although MacGregor’s account of a local figure named Billy Smith is a striking example of a man

deeply attuned to nature, such material soon gives way to more destabilizing or harmful developments in the region, such as colonialism, and the sense of entitlement exhibited by white settlers over the land and its indigenous inhabitants; Christianity, and its intervention into the region; rampant, uncontrollable fires, and hints of what might be considered the “toxic sublime”; gold prospecting and obsessions with wealth; and ultimately MacGregor’s overt fetishization of industry, through steamboats and subsequent businesses that took hold in the region. While such themes and passages may accurately reflect northern Alberta’s general historical arc up to 1952, MacGregor’s hyperbolic, preferential and prophetic diction concerning all things industrial or exploitative reads like a regional master narrative blueprint for the decades that followed.

The Bioregional Billy Smith

One figure in MacGregor’s text who has received little attention over the decades is Billy Smith,¹⁷⁹ a man who lived along the Athabasca River for much of his life. At the time, Smith developed a reputation for having often traveled from Edmonton to Athabasca Landing – on foot. During these grueling trips, the long-time resident became knowledgeable of every nuanced detail of the route. Smith travelled trails so often that he began to know them “intimately.” He could anticipate every road bend, and “the old familiar trees, and rocks, and the creek” appeared “to welcome” him at each turn. Familiar touchstones included old lightning-struck trees, clusters of snowy birches, disfigured jackpines, and white poplars that had been marked by bear claws. For Smith, each natural encounter acquired “an individuality” and became intrinsically “familiar.”

¹⁷⁹ Billy Smith was likely to have been William Forester Smith, who died November 9, 1950 at the age of 85. Smith was buried in Athabasca Cemetery.

On occasions when he did not travel by foot, he used horses who also became accustomed to various landmarks. On these long treks, Smith spent much time in contemplation. “Yes,” as MacGregor writes, there were “many things to see on a freighting trail, and much time to reflect” (294-295).

MacGregor’s description of a reflective Smith who developed an intimate connection with the area demonstrates a *bioregional* way of experiencing the trail, in a manner that incorporated the senses. In one winter, Smith made fourteen trips on foot from Athabasca Landing to Edmonton, where he gradually developed a deeper appreciation for the land through his accrued capacity to identify natural *presences* and to acknowledge them *as* presences. Smith was not just a resident of the Athabasca region; he was a resident of the Athabasca River, of the paths, and of the forest. MacGregor’s account of Smith demonstrates how literature can help re-establish new ways of perceiving otherwise familiar places.

Like Billy Smith, a Peace River Country “old-timer” named Hughie Hunter also had a bioregional connection to the land. Hunter knew all of the waterways in the region “by heart,” and he could expertly navigate the rapids based on his knowledge of each rock and how to steer his canoe accordingly. He also knew where fish were likely to lie, even through the river ice (348).

In addition to these examples of bioregional connections demonstrated by Billy Smith and Hughie Hunter, MacGregor himself advocates the importance of experiencing the area bioregionally and phenomenologically. With respect to northern Alberta, words alone cannot convey this space, and “writing cannot describe it. You have to feel it, listen to its little noises and its stillness and smell the fragrance of its hillsides.” Further, in

order to understand this region, it must be seen in the same manner as the first settlers, fur traders and missionaries saw it 150 years earlier (124-125). As his words hail the reader, MacGregor urges readers to engage with the past, including all pertinent historical and cultural contexts.

Yet despite MacGregor's brief endorsement of a bioregional approach to the region, elsewhere in the text he opts to describe Peace River's natural settings anthropomorphically, and to instill a more anthropocentric approach. In his depictions of the prehistoric origins of the region's topography, MacGregor describes a "titanic struggle" between the Peace River and the Rockies (37).¹⁸⁰ The Peace then seems to develop sentience, when MacGregor writes that the river is "in no mood to be trifled with," and "goes muttering and grumbling and roaring on." Eventually, the author plainly states that the Peace River has a "personality" (119). Certain sections of the tributary are likened to various stages of aging, such as how the river "manifests all the symptoms of old age" once it reaches Vermilion Chutes and begins to show signs where the "old river begins to lose its identity" (40). In this creative fusion of personification and bioregionalism, MacGregor seems to be indicating that some stretches of the Peace River are of greater value than others.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Warrior language is used as this "titanic struggle" is "waged and won" by the Peace River against the Rocky Mountains: "It was a battle all our other Alberta mountain rivers tried and lost. As the Rockies rose across its path it fought and tore, but maintained its right to flow east. The battle waxed and waned. Sometimes, the Rockies gained the advantage and backed the river up for many miles. At other times, the river cut away faster than the mountains grew, but in the end the Mighty Peace gained the day and carved a path out through the mountains to the east" (MacGregor 37). War-like depictions of the river return again when the Peace River confronts human-made technology (43, 45).

¹⁸¹ On the topic of bioregional or anthropomorphic connections to waterways, MacGregor also notes that steamboats should include a team of fur traders, because the crew "must love the River and the North, and they must know every snag and bar and island in the rivers" (262). MacGregor furthermore explains how the naming of any vessel is crucial: "Now add to your steamboat the prime essential that makes for perfection," he writes. "Name her the 'Athabasca,' the 'Wrigley,' the 'Peace River,' the 'Grahame,' the 'Midnight Sun,' the 'Northland Echo' or some similar name" (263).

A Colonized Land

These hints of preferential treatment of certain areas in northern Alberta foreshadow a more colonial tone from the author. Later in the text, MacGregor implies that nature hailed settlers, because the valleys and the waterways “called to them” (74).¹⁸² Without using words explicitly, the region sought to be colonized and dominated. MacGregor endorses this anthropocentric domination of nature, and asserts that rational men, fueled by “indomitable will and determination,” can just as easily master “even canyons and mountains” (87).¹⁸³ This tone of anthropocentric entitlement also extended to fossil fuels; when MacGregor once addressed the Northern Alberta Teachers’ Association, he boasted that “tar-sands” were so abundant they could “pave the streets of the world” (qtd. by Kaiser and Aubrey in Hughes xvii).

MacGregor’s affinity for conquest of the land seems to echo Bezanon’s explicit intentions, but the authors’ perspectives on indigenous peoples diverge, at times. According to MacGregor, whites cannot lay claim to the discovery of northern Alberta; explorers only mapped the region – they did not create it. Subsequent settlers assumed “that all things great or good can be ascribed to the white man,” and they “tacitly arrogated” to themselves “the so-called discovery of northern Canada” (57).

To emphasize the importance of acknowledging Canada’s first peoples, the author devotes textual space to historical content. According to MacGregor, the Cree people

¹⁸² MacGregor further writes that the “zest and joy of exploring is a personal and lasting pleasure. One need not be the first man to discover a lake or valley. Each man, when he first discovers any country-side, recreates within himself all the thrills and joys of discovery” (74).

¹⁸³ The author’s palpable confidence and Dominionist enthusiasm is reminiscent of accounts from the early explorer Alexander MacKenzie, who remarked that nature performed a role of pageantry, spectacle, and splendor; the explorer wrote that the Peace River Country’s “magnificent theatre of nature has all the decorations which the trees and animals of the country can afford it” (MacGregor 88). Meanwhile, indigenous peoples perceived the arrival of white men as “a bad omen of impending change for the land” (99), and Alexander MacKenzie in particular as “the forerunner of the white invasion” (102).

were born of the forest, and they also died there, “without once leaving the great woods.” The forest’s animals provided food, its lakes supplied fish, and its birches yielded bark for the construction of canoes (58). This way of life “was a free one” but it also turned the Cree into “pupils in a hard school” (59).¹⁸⁴ Such depictions of the Cree as forest-born or nature-weathered peoples hint at a kind of colonial language that will increase throughout the text.¹⁸⁵

Tribal wars were waged over the land, and one tribe might describe another as “ogres and merciless villains.” MacGregor particularly admires the account of how the Beavers eventually made peace with the Cree: they smoked pipes together and called the site of the mutual truce Unchaga, or Peace Point (61). Despite this seemingly favourable account, however, MacGregor also concludes that the region suffered from unnecessary conflict until white traders and settlers arrived – after which time peace continued henceforth. In point of fact, by 1782, there were more pressing concerns: the Cree had to deal with one of the most “deadly gifts” ever given by white men – smallpox (99).

MacGregor’s subjective historical material becomes increasingly colonial in his references to Peter Pond and Alexander MacKenzie. Accompanied by indigenous guides, Pond built a post, and was also “the first white man” to view the Athabasca and “the great McMurray tar sands” (63). Indigenous people were “highly gratified” that Pond had brought with him an array of items designed for convenience and comfort (64). Pond’s arrival to the region also accelerated trade and made Pond successful. Accordingly,

¹⁸⁴ Examples from the text concerning this “hard school” include an excerpt from Charles Mair about a pregnant indigenous woman who gave birth from a tree (MacGregor 59), and how, after famine struck, “the emaciated bodies of a luckless Cree family” were covered by the unforgiving snow (60).

¹⁸⁵ Later in the text, MacGregor remarks that treaties with indigenous peoples have been obstacles to “taking over the lands” (338).

MacGregor remarks that, “Great dreams have a way of working themselves out, and the greatest dreamers are the great men of history” (64). Colonization, “found wherever free enterprise flourishes,” motivated people like Pond, “first, to see an empire to conquer, and then, to conquer it” (73).

Although likely unintentionally, MacGregor also naturalizes the dominance of white settlers, beginning with his description of the first meeting between indigenous peoples and Alexander MacKenzie near Peace River. While the encounter “was full of respect for each other, and friendliness,” the explorer methodically “asserted the mastery of the white man” (79). MacGregor’s language suggests that it was not until MacKenzie came to the region that nature began to reveal itself – to white people: “Every bend in the river, every island, every hilltop glowing in the morning sunshine or lost in the clouds of evening, every creek, river or canyon from here on were all new to the white race. No one had seen them before” (86). MacKenzie himself, meanwhile, stoically avoided camping with the Beaver people (88); he also killed too many animals, and wastefully left carcasses to rot (95).

Relying on an account from Colin Campbell, MacGregor also asserts that indigenous people hunted buffalo with “customary improvidence,” and somehow relished in decimating the buffalo. Indigenous hunters presumably chased the “great beasts” through thick snow, then “overtook them and stabbed them” with lengthy knives. “Laughing and rejoicing in their rare sport, with the gleeful abandon of boys,” indigenous men “pursued and killed” the buffalo “until the last monarch of the Peace River plains lay exhausted and dying in the snowdrift at their feet” (206-207). MacGregor concludes that indigenous hunters were exuberant participants in the “wanton slaughter” and the

“senseless killing” of the buffalo “monarchs,” and he laments that these actions contributed to the absence of buffalo along the Peace River (207). Such inflammatory statements are of course conjectural, or at least incomplete, in the sense that the arrival of the Hudson’s Bay Company jeopardized buffalo numbers as soon as the animal became “an important resource for sale” and for trade, as well as a target of excessive hunting by newly arriving Europeans (McCormack 39).¹⁸⁶

On occasion, stereotypes of indigenous people are challenged by MacGregor, as when the author describes how relations of reciprocity developed from the unions of European traders and indigenous women.¹⁸⁷ Generally, groups of traders lived in harmony with indigenous camps – they did not segregate into separate silos (MacGregor 63). Some indigenous members of the Swan River Reserve come across very favourably after they rescued a pair of white newcomers. According to MacGregor, an old freighter and his partner had gotten stuck on ice on the Swan River, and a hole had caused their bedding to become soaked. The indigenous helpers arrived on the scene and provided the distraught white men with dry blankets, a warm supper, and a safe place to spend the night (333). Later, lice had to be cleaned from the freighters’ blankets. MacGregor’s subsequent remarks, however, seem derogatory:

¹⁸⁶ Yet for decades, the state insisted that, when compared to white people, indigenous people were wasteful. According to McCormack, the notion that indigenous people “not only used resources rationally but also managed the lands that generated those resources was unfathomable to Euro-Canadians until late in the twentieth century” (234). Moreover, after official restrictions were placed on buffalo hunting, indigenous people generally respected the game laws, while white hunters continued to pose a significant threat (238). Indigenous people offered additional explanations about the buffalo decline, such as the persistent threat of predatory wolves, but ultimately government officials implemented anti-hunting protection policies based on their stereotypes about indigenous hunters (regarded as “a kind of human ‘varmint’”) rather than lend credence to these very real, alternative possibilities (245-6).

¹⁸⁷ Here, MacGregor’s language is archaic: the “dominating” trader was the “master” over the attractive indigenous women (MacGregor 62-63).

... Indian camps are notoriously dirty, and many a white man would never dream of sleeping in an Indian's blanket. Our friend [the freighter] was not so squeamish; he and his partner slept the sleep of tired men. In the morning they breakfasted with the Indians, returned their blankets and took their leave. The Indians were gravely polite and wished them Godspeed. Before they turned the corner of the trail leading back down to the lake, they looked over their shoulders to wave farewell to their hosts. For many a day after their ears burned when they remembered what they saw. The Crees, reputed to be so dirty, had spread the blankets the white men had slept in over a rail fence and were busily picking at them, trying to clean them of the freighters' lice. (333)

This anecdote stresses the dichotomy between cultures, and between perception and reality. The stereotype of indigenous people as unclean was more applicable to the helpless white settlers. Nevertheless, there are few examples of positive representations of indigenous people in the text.

Christian Interventions

Unsurprisingly, James MacGregor contrasts dubious depictions of indigenous people with a corresponding praise for the endurance, bravery, and service of early colonial missionaries.¹⁸⁸ These “robust men” came from France or England and ventured from indigenous band to indigenous band – sometimes thousands of miles apart from each

¹⁸⁸ Father Bourassa (R.C.) arrived in 1845-7, then Father Lacombe (R.C.) in 1855. The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (O.M.I.) came to the region “to brave the rigors of pioneer Canada as young men” (MacGregor 238), and on their “strong shoulders they took the load of organizing the missions all over the North-West. ... Long may they continue to serve” (239).

other. Unmotivated by profit, the missionaries instead “were fired with zeal for their religion and with pity for the Indians” (233). Here, MacGregor’s invocation of “pity” positions the missionaries heroically. Other examples of heroism include how the missionaries overcame the “smoke and stench of Indian lodges” by pretending that the odours were “minor ills” (232), or when Reverend Robert Terrill Rundle endured crossing deep snow just to preach to “disagreeable” indigenous people in Lesser Slave Lake (235). MacGregor uses patriarchal language to elevate the stamina of the priests, as when the author notes that the “austerity of the Northland could only be met by strong men” (240). Although many members of the Beaver tribe suffered and died from scrofula, tuberculosis, whooping cough, malnutrition, and starvation, MacGregor emphasizes that this particular point in time was difficult for the *missionaries* (246).

A contrast emerges between nature as open unsheltered space and missions as safe, protected space. Although missions were set up in remote pockets, they were still influential. MacGregor describes mission buildings as places of light that transcended the surrounding darkness of nature, including the forest.¹⁸⁹ The now-derelict Catholic church in Dunvegan featured one particular curiosity that reflected the way religion imprinted itself onto the natural world. The church’s main attraction was its “priceless altar-piece”: a pelt that consisted of a “blanched tanned skin of a moose” that had been shot in the skull by Jean-Baptiste Castawich. An image of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus on the cross was painted onto the moose pelt, which hung over the altar for 34 years. Even after the

¹⁸⁹ MacGregor’s language verges on the pastoral or rustic: “Here and there in a small green clearing on the rocky shore of some spruce-girt lake, hundreds of miles from any other, stands the mission. A small clearing, also used for growing vegetables and grain, contains the mission, the church and the hospital, *while all around spreads dark endless forest*. As the sun goes down in a glory of red and gold, far out over the lake rings the angelus-bell, a signal of peace, surpassing even that of the lake’s solitude” (238; emphasis added).

structure was abandoned, the painted pelt continued to look “down over the empty seats” (248).¹⁹⁰ This fusion of religious and pagan symbols is unique and unconventional.

MacGregor introduces “another of those heroic northern priests,” Father Grouard (242). Grouard came to Chipewyan and began his seven-decade long vocation, all while confronting “frost, ice and blizzard, hunger and hardship, mosquitoes and muskeg.” Grouard traveled and lived with “his Indians and Eskimos,” ministered to “his flock,” and studied indigenous languages and printed texts (242).¹⁹¹ He lived in Lesser Slave Lake until his death in 1931. In honour of Grouard, a settlement was named after him (244).¹⁹² By 1915, the railway bypassed the town of Grouard by twelve miles. As a result, stores folded or relocated near the railway, and grass grew where streets had been intended to thrive. Despite these setbacks, MacGregor insists that, even in shuttered places like Grouard, the colonizing mission of Christians was “larger than ever, persevering in the work of adapting the natives and Metis to the modern way of life” (251). Similar revisionist declarations in subsequent decades¹⁹³ prove that religious colonization of indigenous people was still a priority for northern Albertans – and Christians – in 1952.

¹⁹⁰ Father Le Treste moved the painted pelt to Peace River in 1919, and then, when his church burned down, the “priceless painting” was lost forever (MacGregor 248).

¹⁹¹ MacGregor’s praise for the renowned Grouard reads awkwardly after the author remarks that Grouard “constantly faced the perils of travel” whenever he risked encountering “the hostility of unpredictable natives” (243). MacGregor describes Grouard’s other activities as both industrious and “beneficent,” such as helping to run Peace River’s first steamboat and importing Chipewyan’s first printing press.

¹⁹² MacGregor also chronicles the arrival of Reverend Alfred Campbell Garrioch and his wife, who come to the region after over one hundred days of travel (256-7). The Garriochs resided at the Anglican mission house for 5 years, and Mrs. Garrioch was “plunged into contact with the Beaver Indians under distressing circumstances” that included measles, whooping cough, and rampant despair. Ever the colonizer, Reverend Garrioch declared that the Beaver people could only be saved if they embraced agricultural pursuits and the gospel in tandem (Fort Vermilion Agricultural Society, Introduction, in Lawrence xiii). In spring 1891, the Garriochs left the region and went to Manitoba; they were unmotivated to stay in Dunvegan once the indigenous people “were practically all gone” (MacGregor 257). The mission house was later sent down the river by raft. Today, the former mission area is used for picnics.

¹⁹³ For MacGregor, Christian pioneers “left the permanent imprint of their unselfish ministry across the vast Peace River Country, *which neither time nor tide can obliterate*” (261; emphasis added).

An Incendiary Obsession and the Toxic Sublime

In northern Alberta, the onset of colonialism and Christian influence coincided with a perception of the land and the space as more expendable. There was an increasing allure to seeing beatific and sprawling swaths of prairie decisively tamed or even razed.

Although James MacGregor appreciated the region, he was enticed by the prospect of witnessing its destruction.

One particularly intriguing example in MacGregor's text is the author's constant admiration of forest fires. Although MacGregor states that he enjoys the spectacular views offered by the region's hills, that sense of awe is never greater

than when seen through a haze of smoke from the forest fires in the northwest ... a mass of red, yellow and brown; and, over all, the mantle of wood smoke casting a blue haze over the valley and adding to the redolence of autumn an incense pungent and stirring – all this creates a majestic scene with that touch of the mysterious that fascinates the beholder. (97)

MacGregor is enamored by the smell of fallen trees whenever they are used to make buildings because, once built, the structures emit a forest odour that is “a lovely clean smell, unknown to modern city dwellers” (158). He also asserts that fires helped to facilitate the settlements of the Prairies because they helped keep forest growth at bay. MacGregor's ruminations suggest a justification for white settler fires and their accompanying environmental impacts.¹⁹⁴ This hypothesis is later validated when MacGregor remarks that the 1912 forest fire in Lesser Slave Lake “did much good,”

¹⁹⁴ “Fires cleared the Peace River prairies originally,” MacGregor writes, “and recurring fires ... kept the woods down” (218).

because it “performed the initial clearing of a great deal of land for the colonists.” Forest fires, the author insists, “made it easier for the colonists to break up their land” (346).

This diction concerning forest fires also suggests a kind of empathetic nature writing, as when MacGregor describes the large fire of 1894 as “a thing of beauty” – even as it traumatized the forest’s animals and sent wildlife fleeing (299).¹⁹⁵ The author’s depiction of this fire employs language reminiscent of what Jennifer Peeples has called the “toxic sublime” (Peeples). The author defines “toxic sublime” as the various tensions that emerge from the recognition of “the toxicity of a place, object or situation,” while at the same time “appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe” (Peeples 375). The toxic sublime explores how some sites of contamination are presented in aesthetically pleasing terms (376), and seeks to portray ugliness and beauty simultaneously. The discomfort of witnessing environmental harm is contrasted with awe at technological wonder, often amid large-scale destruction. The horror aspect urges its viewers to interrogate the social, personal, and environmental ethics that allow such places of contamination to exist (380).

Broadly speaking, the toxic sublime also addresses the attempt to make unseen environmental harm visible (pollution, for instance). Of course, in the case of wildfires, the horrific is already visible; nevertheless, the toxic sublime seems an apt descriptor of MacGregor’s diction. With phrases like “magnificent but terrifying spectacle,” pretty but “ominous red” glows, and “smoking stumps” that are “beautiful at night” (299),¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ After the fire, night-time darkness made “a thing of beauty out of scarred stumps and tree-trunks that were left standing,” even as some continued to burn in places. “What had once been a forest was now a circle of torches, tall and short, their flames flickering in the breeze. Occasionally the flames would burn through a tall trunk, and the upper twenty feet would crash to the ground in a sea of sparks that flared for a while and died out as they passed down the wind. It was beautiful, but tragic” (MacGregor 299).

¹⁹⁶ MacGregor’s diction concerning fires hearkens to the ambiguous manner in which Kant interpreted the sublime, where the individual is both drawn to the sublime phenomenon but also repelled (Peeples 380).

MacGregor invites comparisons to the toxic sublime as observed in present day bitumen sands projects – for example, in the photographic works of Edward Burtynsky.¹⁹⁷

MacGregor’s text then transitions to macabre writing, as the author remarks that, in the days following the 1894 wildfire, travelers would encounter a forest that was once vibrant, but was now a bare, “blackened” place characterized by the “sour smell of ashes and burned bush.” Before long,

the snow fell, and charitably covered all the charred remains of a forest centuries old. But over the blanket of snow stillness reigned, the stillness of death. The snow covered hill and valley, the corpses of trees and animals alike. No tracks of inquisitive weasels criss-crossed the snow. No bush partridge remained to fly from tree to tree. No track of deer cutting through the snow remained to quicken the pulse of the hunter. Desolation reigned. (299)

Even after the extensive damage of the 1894 fire – what MacGregor calls “the white man’s first major attack on the forest”¹⁹⁸ – trees struggled to bloom and, for a while, grass

Edmund Burke conflated the evocation of terror with the sublime (Burke 36, 52; Peeples 381). The evocation of terror is synonymous with the sublime, and with Kant, “The sublime is that in comparison with which everything else is small” (Kant 65-66; Peeples 382). In the toxic sublime, the “attractive images compel and at the same time frighten the audience” (Peeples 386). Peeples argues that the toxic sublime often is intended to prompt action and advocacy, because it initiates “a comparison of the self to the toxic sublime” that “raises questions of complicity, producing an internal reckoning (at least initially) as one measures one’s life choices against the sites of destruction” (388).

¹⁹⁷ In “Toxic Sublime,” Peeples references Edward Burtynsky’s photographs of tailings ponds and mining quarries to coin the term. Since images are usually expected to reflect realism, Peeples points to the difficulty of depicting toxins in visual terms. In fact, some critics urge less ocularcentric engagements with environments (Pezzullo), despite the fact that photographs and videos are often the closest many citizens or policy-makers get to physically visiting or witnessing polluted places.

¹⁹⁸ For the author, the 1894 inferno was the “logical outcome of that first chop of the woodsman’s axe” (MacGregor 300). Earlier in the text, MacGregor describes how, in the fall of 1883, the sound of chopping reverberated through the forest, and the axe of a metonymical white man struck a nearby birch tree. The tree, in turn, “quivered at the blow” inflicted by the “axe-wielding” stranger (289). The nearby trees “shivered,” and the chop echoed through the forest, as if other trees now “called to ask what was the matter” (290). That initial blow, however, “sounded the knell of the forest,” and proclaimed the arrival of “the white man, who respected no forest and would sweep it away if it stood in his path” (291). Although

neglected to grow amidst “the universal blackness” (300). The contrast here between MacGregor’s earlier admiration for the fire and these grim accounts of the fire’s capacity to decimate natural activity is alternately incongruous and sometimes poetic. Whether originating from a vantage point of awe or of nihilism, the author’s diction represents an important deviation away from strictly factual content and toward artistic flourish and subjectivity. The language also anticipates future attempts to put into words widespread environmental destruction in the decades to come.

Gold Prospectors and the Legend of “Twelve Foot” Davis

In tandem with increasing damage to forests and wildlife in the region, there was an increasing shift toward personal wealth and material acquisition. This ideological shift can be attributed partly to the onset of newcomers from the United States. In 1898, many Klondikers or “goldseekers”¹⁹⁹ came to, or through, the region. Although they were comprised of all ethnicities, their common “creed” was gold – as well as the eternal and primal “lure of it and the hunt for it.” They were a “motley crew” who exchanged gold for money, then spent that money on drinks or gambling and awoke the next day “sober and broke, ready to start again” (MacGregor 182).²⁰⁰ MacGregor likens the scarcity of gold, and the elation of finding it, to fishermen and hunters who are driven by the

the passage is hypothetical, MacGregor’s language demarcates the precise moment of contact between nature unmolested and the original intrusion of white colonizers.

¹⁹⁹ For the most part, the Klondikers treated indigenous people poorly (MacGregor 194). From the moment of their first arrival, they abused and disrespected “the red men’s rights,” wrecked bear-traps, “killed their game, set forest fires and generally made themselves very unwelcome.” MacGregor tries to balance the Klondikers’ abusive actions by including accounts of indigenous people who got even through raids of the prospectors’ camps. One night, the Beaver and Sikannie people – led by Bellyful and the Wolf – raided a Klondiker camp near Fort St. John. “Yells and fiendish laughter rent the air,” the Klondikers’ wagons rolled downhill and crashed, and the Beavers were “avenged” (319-20). After the damage to the wagons, many Klondikers did not proceed any further north. Starving and broke, some stayed in the Peace River area and settled there.

²⁰⁰ This pattern of goldseekers spending all of their earnings is a habit similar to today’s bitumen sands workers, as depicted in the 2013 documentary *Oil Sands Karaoke*.

promise of the big catch. Goldseekers, similarly, live for “the search” and “the zest of the hunt.” In any stream could lie “the biggest fish ever caught.” Out in any forest could be “the biggest moose – the grandfather of all moose.” MacGregor insists that the thrill comes not from the fish, the meat or the gold, but from the search itself and “the eager anticipation of finding it” (183). MacGregor’s analogy of the one-tracked pursuit of animals for goldseeking suggests there is an innate human drive that is more important than the resources themselves. Such a perspective marks a decidedly different approach to the concept of wealth and riches.

Although MacGregor presents the Klondikers and goldseekers as a non-descript group, the author devotes some space to one prominent prospector from the area named “N—r Dan,” whose proper name was said to have been Dan Williams. The derogatory nickname may have been an extension of Williams’s encounters with the Company of Adventurers, who did not get along with him because he had a trouble-filled background, was “slightly unbalanced,” and rarely turned “the other cheek” (187). Williams’s infamy spread all over the Northwest. According to Daniel Gordon, in the summer of 1879, people from the Peace River region focused on him more than anyone or anything else (Leonard 141). Dan Williams’s “greatest notoriety” (139) came from his overt opposition to the Hudson’s Bay Company, which culminated in a long and infamous standoff (138-144). Williams’s cabin had been on land that the Company wanted to designate for its own property, so Williams invoked squatters’ rights. According to William Francis Butler, Williams “issued manifestos of a very violent nature” from “his lair” and he painted figures along the river that served as warnings to others. Sometimes Williams recited biblical passages “in a pitch of voice and accent peculiar to gentlemen of colour”

(Leonard 139). Williams became the subject of other “dark rumours” (138), including the rumour that he had killed up to three men, robbed several communities, and moved beyond the mountains in order to stay secluded. Yet it was also apparent that Williams’s skin colour made him a perpetual target of prejudice and misinformation, particularly since many locals otherwise regarded him as a generous soul who shared produce from his garden.

Eventually, Williams was sentenced to several months in jail for causing a disturbance. He had been brought to Fort Saskatchewan, where he was defended by Banjo Mike. James MacGregor speculates that Williams may have been hanged at Fort Saskatchewan, since a black man named Jesse Williams had been hanged in 1884 in Calgary, and this might have been the same individual (MacGregor 188). However, David Leonard notes that a man named Williams was actually acquitted, and, after his release, resumed prospecting and trading on the British Columbia side of the Peace River. In 1887, this Williams became ill and “wasted away” until his death the following February (Leonard 144).²⁰¹ Regardless of the circumstances concerning his fate, as a black man Dan Williams evidently enjoyed little peace of mind in the region while he was alive. One need only compare Williams’s narrative to Peter Pond’s hallowed legacy to discern a different set of standards for two men with similar histories and back stories.

Despite the heft of Williams’ infamous tale, however, another prospector has been boldly memorialized in the region. The arrival of “Twelve Foot” Davis during the height of the gold rush imbued the man with bona fide American myth. For MacGregor, Americans already had

²⁰¹ It is also possible that Williams became sick in the winter of 1886-87 and died in a shack.

their Johnny Appleseed, and their Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. The lumber camps from Quebec to Oregon have their Paul Bunyan. But the Peace River Country has its Twelve Foot Davis. At the time of his death fifty years ago, he was described as a pathfinder, pioneer, miner and trader. But in the last half century his stature has grown, and now Twelve Foot Davis is the unrivalled legendary figure of the Peace River Country.

(209)

Born in Vermont circa 1820,²⁰² Henry Fuller Davis was predisposed to adventure and travel, since his home state had already boasted a number of pioneers and fur traders.²⁰³ Growing up, Davis heard many stories about the faraway north (209).

Formerly a pastry cook, the legend surrounding Davis's fame stems not from having performed some heroic deed, but from having executed a strategic land claim during the gold rush days, which yielded him a significant profit.²⁰⁴ A pair of miners had secured parallel regulation claims at Barkerville in the Cariboo region. One miner owned the Discovery claim, and the other held the specific title, Discovery claim No. 1. Each man took a significant amount of gold; however, the miners "did not reckon with little Davis from Vermont, in whom was bred a good deal of Yankee shrewdness." Davis

²⁰² Little is known of Davis' life prior to appearing in the gold fields of Cariboo. Miners often replaced proper names with nicknames, so Davis "entered the Cariboo as F.H. Davis. He left it as Twelve Foot Davis" (MacGregor 210).

²⁰³ Daniel Harmon, for instance, was also from Vermont. MacGregor speculates that Davis would have grown up hearing about Harmon: "It is fascinating to wonder whether the boy of nine [Davis] may not have known the old Dunvegan trader [Harmon], who had tales to tell of the upper Peace and of the junction of the Smoky and Peace Rivers. It is not impossible that the old man passed on to the adolescent the yearning for the wilderness of the Peace River Country. But this, of course, is all idle speculation" (210).

²⁰⁴ This trope of shrewd profiteering also appears in other local narratives. For example, a man named Hawker moved his family from Fort McMurray to the Uranium City region in the 1950s and became wealthy "by 'grub staking' new prospectors; in other words, Hawker supplied prospectors in exchange for company shares. Then he waited for the shares to rise in worth and re-sold them at the height of their market value (Huberman 151). Hawker's cunning handling of his shares echoes the lucrative land claims of "Twelve Foot" Davis.

intuited that the two claims avoided touching each other “by a strip of land twelve feet wide.” Davis claimed this small land stake and then took \$12,000 worth of gold from the strip. From that point onward, people called him “Twelve Foot” Davis (210).²⁰⁵ Davis was illiterate, but he knew how to “figure,” and managed to convert his earnings into goods of trade. Subsequently, he set up posts throughout northern Alberta (Calverley, “Twelve Foot Davis & Associates”). As a result, the HBC’s monopoly over the region was disrupted.

Although Davis was physically short,²⁰⁶ he was strong and sturdy. On trips and portages, Davis carried up to 200 pounds – or two times more weight than he made his crewmen carry. Local indigenous residents knew that Davis could carry heavy loads over formidable distances, and his reputation of endurance earned him the nickname “The Wolf” (MacGregor 212). According to Dorthea Calverley, Davis hired indigenous people as packers and canoemen because they were “inherently honest” and paid their tabs (Calverley, “Twelve Foot Davis – in the Tradition of Enterprise”). Davis’s “unshakable reputation” for treating indigenous people fairly even “passed into their folklore.”

“Twelve Foot” Davis soon developed a reputation for hospitality and kindness. He was inherently altruistic toward his neighbours, and “was blessed with much of the milk of human kindness” (MacGregor 211). Pioneers and travellers also blessed this “hard-bitten old tobacco-chewing trader” for “his ever open door,” and for his renowned

²⁰⁵ According to Dorthea Calverley, Davis, unlike other discoverers, “could keep his mouth shut until he had recorded his claim in the Department of Mines. Out of his fractional claim he took \$12,000 worth of gold, and earned the nickname which has stuck to him until this day” (Calverley, “Twelve Foot Davis & Associates”).

²⁰⁶ Dorthea Calverley refers to Davis as “a short, powerful figure of a Yankee trader and miner with a high squeaky voice.” Upon his death, Davis’s “empire stretched from Quesnel to Fort Vermilion and south to Edmonton” (Calverley, “Twelve Foot Davis & Associates”).

pumpkin pies (212). For white, indigenous, and “even Chinese” citizens, Davis was a “friend, counsellor and hero” (Calverley, “Twelve Foot Davis & Associates”).

Yet despite his philanthropic nature, Davis was “plagued” by a deep-seated fear that he might die old and poor. In the final years of his life, the man previously known for his boundless strength would go blind and, after losing the use of his legs, he “had to be carried from canoe to post, and from wagon to fort” (MacGregor 214). Near the end of his life, the “hard-bitten old trader” said to an Anglican sister, “I never killed nobody, I never stole from nobody, I never wilfully harmed nobody and I always kept open-house for all travellers all my life. No, miss, I ain’t afraid to die.” After speaking these words, Davis passed away, confident that he had made it to heaven – despite his well-established antipathy toward religion (215).²⁰⁷

Jim Cornwall had the bones of “Twelve Foot” Davis brought to the graveyard overlooking Peace River. Davis’s headstone read: “Pathfinder, Pioneer, Miner and Trader. He was every man’s friend and never locked his cabin door” (122). The general consensus – then and now – has been that his resting place which overlooks the town is an ideal, natural fit. MacGregor apostrophizes: “Twelve-Foot Davis, what a resting place you chose! If ever a spirit gains rest and repose, yours must have done so, as from its dwelling place, day after day, it looks out over a scene so serene and a land so beautiful” (124). Six decades later, the town of Peace River erected a statue of carved wood in Davis’ honour. The monument was placed near the riverbanks.

As the “Twelve Foot” Davis narrative sears its imprint over Peace River and beyond, conflicting messages arise. The wily trader earned notoriety for capitalizing on a

²⁰⁷ Calverley confirms that Davis did not observe any religion. The announced date of Davis’s death was September 13, 1900, in Lesser Slave Lake.

real estate loophole but was also beloved for his sense of community and charitable disposition. Davis's statue – itself an irony, given the man's diminished height – enshrines a man who was more concerned that he would potentially die broke than to enjoy a legacy of altruistic and beneficence toward his fellow citizens.

The Fetishization of Steamboats and the Inevitable Arrival of Industry

Some of MacGregor's most intriguing passages chronicle the advent of steamboats – or, more precisely, the feminization and sexualization of these new steamers. This is a sudden shift away from ostensibly objective diction (dated vocabulary excluded) and toward subjective embellishment and imaginative depictions of technological innovation in a fantastical context. As we will see, the coupling of industry and feminized representation persist even today.

In Chapter 11 of his book (titled “Steamboats”), MacGregor states that a steamboat requires more than just basic parts and materials. Other essentials must be considered too. On a standard steamboat, ship operators need to “fill her boilers” with water from the nearby waterway, “[c]ram her furnace” with nearby trees, “[f]ill her crew with meat of the moose shot in the shade of the willows,” fill “her engineer with whisky distilled in the full of the moon,” and “blow her whistle” (263). “Her boiler,” MacGregor writes, “must be hauled up,” and – if headed toward the icy region of Peace River Landing – “caulk her well and plug the ends of the tubes in case the ice breaks. Take off her manhole covers, nest a case of whisky inside and bolt them on again good and tight,” for she is venturing

into indigenous territory, “where liquor is only allowed on permit” (263).²⁰⁸ The author’s suggestive diction continues, especially in a passage that culminates in a near-climax:

When she’s built at the river’s edge, listen for the rumble that denotes the spring break-up of the ice. Get your lines around the capstans and tie their ends to sturdy spruce trees and wait for the flood. Wait until the flood waters launch her and then ease off the lines. Steam her up, blow the whistle and let her run with the current down around on the broad bosom of the Athabasca and turn her up-stream. See the black smoke and the steam. Smell the spruce pitch of her fire. Feel her tremble with excitement as her pitmans turn the great paddle wheel, as she gains momentum in vibrating splashing jerks. (263, 265)

The sexually charged language here places the human steamship operator as controlling agent over the “pleasure” experienced by the steamboat – as feminized and objectified symbol of technology.

MacGregor then writes that one must “load her” with goods to trade, and “[k]eep her tied up for the night.” As the water splashes “past her planks,” one must “listen to her little impatient grunts and rumbles as she waits for the morning” (265). The anthropomorphization continues, as MacGregor cautions that, before one can call

her steamboat she must make her first trip down to Grand Rapids and back. Not her maiden voyage, for this is no pampered darling smelling of lavender and christened with champagne. Let her smell of fish and smoke

²⁰⁸ To keep the steamboat operational, liquor will be needed “when it comes time to erect her, for bolts rust and nuts stick. Penetrating oil may save bruised knuckles, but whisky keeps infection out of them” (MacGregor 263).

and greasy bacon and bannock, for she, like her Cree sister, has work to do. She is no tall, lithe yacht slicing through the water. Like her Cree sister, she is short and broad and flat-bottomed. Like her Cree sister, when nightfall finds her, she stops by the river's bank. And there with the wash and slap of the river going by she waits out the few hours of darkness. Her fires burn low; her boiler rumbles and mutters uneasily, as if disturbed by the volume and variety of snores arising from the tired relaxed crew. All the quiet night sounds of the forest float out to her. For here, stretching back two hundred, five hundred, and even a thousand miles roams the forest, dark and mysterious, and complete unto itself, needing not, nor desiring, man and his works. (265)

After finishing the long trip, one must "Tie her up and come off her, and, as you walk up the bank, turn and look at her. There she rides – battered a bit – but now she is part of the North and floats straining at her moorings eager to be off again down the stream into the North, towards the land of musk-ox, polar bear, Eskimo and the spouting whale. Now she is a STEAMBOAT" (266). Suffice to say, MacGregor's conclusion to this rather violent domination²⁰⁹ and phallogocentric conquest invites comparisons to the anthropocentric domestication of nature and wild animals, to the colonial domination of "Cree sisters," and – with the language of assault – the forceful submission of men over women.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Darlene J. Comfort also writes about steamboats in *Ribbon of Water and Steamboats North*. Her language is poetic at times; however, like MacGregor, Comfort's vocabulary and diction with respect to industry and technology verges on the violent. Passages in Comfort's text echo James MacGregor's gendered diction, as when the author personifies the steamboat *Grahame* as female (Comfort, *Ribbon* 124-127), despite the vessel's otherwise masculine moniker. Comfort's feminization of the steamer contrasts sharply with her references elsewhere in the book to notable pioneering women.

²¹⁰ Not all residents perceived steamers the same way. Apparently, the first indigenous people who saw the S.S. *Grahame* steamboat were "astonished at this smoking, sparking, splashing monster" (MacGregor 267). Labourers, meanwhile, celebrated this "new machine" for providing more agreeable employment.

Today, there continues to be a disturbing connection between industrial development in Alberta and instances of subjectification, sexualization or violence toward women. One recent example includes a graphic billboard for an oilfield company, in which a drill was depicted penetrating a woman (CBC, “Alberta Oilfield Company Bedeviled”). Another instance saw a petroleum company employee distributing an image of climate activist Greta Thunberg raped by a fossil fuel supporter (CBC, “This Shows We Are Winning”). In light of the high ratio of men who work in the region and in the fossil fuel sector, these and other examples of male dominance and aggressive conquest appear to have persisted over the decades.

MacGregor’s “Steamboats” chapter concludes with the observation that, although they represented a formidable industrial step forward,²¹¹ steamboats provided an opportunity for humans to return to nature. Along some stretches of the Athabasca River, “civilization was left behind,” and steamboat passengers “floated down the broad stream of the rivers hemmed in by forest, untouched since time began.” Along other stretches, various trees with stripped branches proved that humans had been in the area, and these sights signalled man’s “nominal mastery of the forest” (281).²¹² Some passengers shot at bears or moose from aboard the steamers, then retrieved the fresh meat.²¹³

MacGregor describes the steamship as if an insatiable beast: “The belching smoke-stacks arose from a flaming furnace whose hungry maw was never satisfied. Stokers pushed logs in and stuffed them in, and still the fires demanded more” (269).

²¹¹ Interestingly, the Boiler Rapids were named after a steamboat accident. A scow transporting a steamboat boiler to McMurray hit a rock and the boiler is still in the rapids. The accident prompted the naming of the rapids (MacGregor 277). Another boiler blew up in Mirror Landing in 1903 and laid there for years (279).

²¹² MacGregor characterizes the vast “virgin forest” as mysterious, and “unconcerned with the little men who walked at the feet of its old trees” (289). Although the Athabasca Trail was in use by indigenous people for centuries, white men were the first to cut it with axes.

²¹³ On one occasion, a lynx attempted to cross the Athabasca river but neither saw the oncoming steamer, nor recognized “the dreadful capabilities of this splashing monster.” Caught in the threshing paddle-wheel, the lynx was thrown into the air. Fortunately, the animal survived but the lynx learned a key lesson with respect to human technology: avoid it (MacGregor 282). In more recent years, birds learned a similar lesson when they wound up stuck in Syncrude’s tailings ponds in 2008 and 2014 (CBC, “122 Birds Died”).

The steamships signaled a new era for the region, whereby industry took off. Peace River Country's population of one hundred thousand soon doubled, and the swift development of agricultural prospects represented "phenomenal progress" (381). Although optimism reigned,²¹⁴ MacGregor concludes his text with profound nostalgia for pre-industrial times. The author rued the winds of change,²¹⁵ and he lamented that a "new generation, which knew not the old land," was now living in northern Alberta. As industry soared, the older generation – helpless to prevent this changing of the guard – was left to gaze peacefully at "their newly cleared farms" (372). Fortunately, the unifying element between the old and the new is "quiet friendliness," which "meets one and enfolds one as does a warm chinook wind after a siege of frost" (382). This pairing of quiet social encounters and wind as comforter demonstrates how MacGregor's subjective praise of oncoming industrial domestication of the region does not preclude representation of that which is human or is linked to nature. MacGregor's extended expressions of longing at the end of *The Land of Twelve Foot Davis* hail the reader in unexpected ways, particularly when one considers the author's influential status among regional authors (and by extension, the influence of his subject, Davis). At times willing to steer historical accounts into bioregional and anthropomorphic terrain, MacGregor's text is more than just an endorsement of the American dream and ever-approaching values of wealth and fortune; it is a lyrical, multi-discursive, heteroglossaic document that invites heightened analysis and scrutiny.

²¹⁴ The Peace River's real estate "was booming. Everybody was optimistic. The boom was based not upon the people that had already settled in the country, but upon those who were certain to come" (MacGregor 344).

²¹⁵ Like Sidney Ells (Chapter Four), MacGregor wrote at length about how the old life no longer existed, and how technology had replaced it. Still, "the old pioneer spirit ... remained alive throughout the Peace River Country" (382).

2.3 “Peace River Jim” Cornwall and L.V. Kelly

In addition to the figures of A.M. Bezanson and “Twelve Foot” Davis, the legacy of “Peace River Jim” Cornwall is also prominent in the region. *North with Peace River Jim* (1972), is comprised of a series of newspaper articles written by the *Calgary Herald* reporter Leroy Victor Kelly between August 13 and October 1, 1910.²¹⁶ Cornwall had invited many noted personalities to visit the region, and Kelly’s text is a detailed account of the ensuing historic expedition. Renowned as the “Apostle of the North,”²¹⁷ Cornwall believed northern Alberta’s isolation from the rest of the province could largely be blamed on its cumbersome muskeg. Like Bezanson and Davis, Cornwall did not hail from Alberta; he was born in Brantford, Ontario, and he only came to the region after he heard about the gold rush. It would not be long before Cornwall formed the steamboat initiative Northern Transportation with W.F. Bredin, and then launched the Athabasca Railway Company in 1905. The entrepreneur sold his interests, however, to a syndicate that would later sponsor the “scandal-ridden” Alberta and Great Waterways Railway Company line (Dempsey, Introduction in Kelly 5).

Like Bezanson, Cornwall spent his own money to promote the region. Eventually, he contacted prominent writers and agriculturists and offered to provide a free tour of northern Alberta. He also promised the participants plenty of good fishing and hunting. By spring 1910, eighteen “adventurers” from the United States and Canada agreed to come north, including university professors, members of legislature, political economists,

²¹⁶ Despite Kelly’s newspaper credentials, *North with Peace River Jim* contains many typos and errata. Presumably these have been left intact by Hugh A. Dempsey, the editor of this 1972 text.

²¹⁷ The nickname also appears in Harry A. Switzer’s “On the Edson-Grande Prairie Trail” in *Alberta Historical Review*, Summer 1960, p. 4.

real estate owners, board of trade presidents, agronomists – and even the author of the newspaper articles that would become *North with Peace River Jim*, L.V. Kelly (who was originally from Detroit).²¹⁸ Cornwall’s impressive roll call constituted a roster of prominent white men who could exert influence on the region (6).

The expedition was designed to attend to all of the visitors’ needs, including transportation, accommodations and food, so that they would enjoy “their journey through a land which was ready for settlement” (Dempsey, Introduction in Kelly 6). The expedition brought public attention to Peace River, and resulted in the arrival of hundreds of new settlers. Cornwall’s promotional efforts earned him widespread adoration and esteem. On August 31, 1910, L.V. Kelly proclaimed in the *Calgary Herald* that Cornwall “had done more to show the world” the Peace River region

than any government, church or individual. He believed in it and he preached it, he lived there and he finally convinced others to try and see if it was not what he said. They have tried and found it so, and Edmonton is proud of him, and the northland loves him, and the entire province is glad and proud to know that there lives within its boundaries a man of such public spirit and absolute confidence as J.K. Cornwall. (7)

Historical acclaim for Cornwall can be traced to a number of accomplishments, but this expedition specifically combined strategy, promotion, and spectacle to such an extent that Cornwall’s memorialized status has been cemented – and a significant portion of this acclaim occurred thanks to the words of L.V. Kelly.

²¹⁸ A short biography for each member of the expedition appends Kelly’s text (67-74).

The Expedition, the Space as Expendable, and the Inhabitants as Other

Cornwall's group set out from Edmonton on July 27, 1910. The party traversed luxurious vegetation, and bright, large flowers were copious. L.V. Kelly describes how the idyllic land inherently sold itself to the newcomers, as newly arriving settlers waved to passing expedition members (9).²¹⁹ The group was also saluted by some locals in the form of an arch made of evergreens and bunting that had been built for them (12).

Not all of Kelly's account is flattering about the experience. For instance, the expedition encountered 26 miles of mud and sand; however, this difficult terrain was balanced by intermittent stops at the homes of local residents. During the group's portages, the onset of mud, timber, holes and stumps frequently had significant, unpleasant impacts.²²⁰ In much the same way that Bezanson downplayed the region's drawbacks, L.V. Kelly does not linger on the obstacles encountered by the expedition.

These incidents aside, the region is presented to Kelly's newspaper readers as lucrative. For members of the expedition, farms appeared to be prosperous, and the region appeared to have "splendid crops" (11).²²¹ When a construction team was spotted erecting telephone poles, the sight was considered a sign of the "hand of civilization" (22). Cornwall's party admired the ubiquitous shining bitumen, and they were assured that "greater things" were in store for the substance (14). Similarly, along the banks of

²¹⁹ For Kelly, the grass, "as green as the greenest verdure of Ireland, profusion of wild flowers, and flourishing fields of grain" were evidence that northern Alberta had arable land and unmatched farming pedigree. Kelly's pastoral tone is pervasive: cows, "with coats as sleek as silk, lay stuffed to repletion along the sides of the road, chewing meditative cuds as they gazed in mild-eyed indifference at the passing 'rubber necks'" (8).

²²⁰ Kelly remarks, perhaps presciently anticipating the bitumen boom in a few decades, that the mud "is a millionarish-looking mud" (16). Later, the steamer goes to Tar Island, where the party inspects "the tar springs that bubbled up along the bank." Kelly calls the sulphurous springs "natural wonders" (45).

²²¹ While private stores, hotels and residences are identified in the text, Kelly refrains from including stories from the farmers.

the Athabasca River were endless amounts of trees – or, prospective timber. Kelly writes that as soon as these trees were “cleared off,” the region would boast “some of the richest farms in Alberta” (14). Like Bezanson and MacGregor, Kelly saw the “thick woods” (15) as a commodity that would bring unprecedented wealth. Kelly explicitly comments on the impending development of the region, including Grouard, where industry was presumably poised to provide new settlers with an array of riches (21-22).²²²

Riches were certainly foremost in Kelly’s mind in his descriptions of Peace River Crossing, where the sun hit the river and “the silver ribbon of the mighty Peace shone and glistened like polished ware” just as “two large, emerald-green islands loomed up sharp and clear in the morning light” (26). The use of words such as “silver,” “glistened,” “polished ware,” and “emerald-green” evoke a land that is bejewelled. Later, upon reaching the Vermilion region, the Cornwall expedition stood silently and “drank in the beauties” of their surroundings, as they wondered why more people had not visited this regional treasure trove. Some group members began to focus on commerce: Kelly remarks that a “commercially-inclined” member of the party believed that a “summer resort somewhere along here would be a dandy,” and the group proceeded to examine the ground accordingly (35). Whether perceiving the trees as prospective lumber or seeing the land as prime real estate for a summer resort, Kelly’s account of Cornwall’s expedition hinges on the introduction of northern Alberta to key influencers and transforming the space into a more domesticated and industrial space.

Such a vantage point of entitlement and ownership is complemented by a sense of superiority and *othering* of the region’s indigenous peoples. Cornwall’s party encounters

²²² At this time, 500 settlers had already taken 100,000 acres, and another 150 settlers had already entered Peace River country (Kelly 24).

other Métis, indigenous people, and a “breed shack” (18). Aboard the Northland Sun, Captain Barber’s new steamer,²²³ the crew was comprised of eager and husky “breeds” (13). At each stop along the river, the expedition members were fascinated by the indigenous people and vice versa. The fascination, however, sometimes verged on disgust; when an indigenous man caught a muskrat and ate it for breakfast, the act repelled Cornwall and Egerton Day enough to make them lose their appetites (25).

There were some apparent differences, especially as members of Cornwall’s party wanted to hunt moose and bear. The men obtained rifles, shotguns, and revolvers, and then waited along the upper deck for potential game to appear.²²⁴ In the meantime, they fired at bottles, sticks, geese, and driftwood. At one point, the hunting party shot at a bear cub, but the group decided not to keep the animal since it was “too small” (27). In the text, there is also a gruesome account of a full-sized bruin that was shot (28), and later, the party made “warlike preparations” to hunt yet another bear. In anticipation of the bear hunt, Gillies compared the hunt to “War, bloody war” and insisted that bears can even be killed at night if necessary (43).²²⁵

²²³ Like MacGregor, Kelly refers to the boat as female (e.g. “her sharp prow,” 15).

²²⁴ The startling image of the gun-laden deck of the steamer resembles something out of a wartime bunker: “Miller brought forth his automatic. Hough cleaned up the big gun, Bull polished his small rifle, and Stanton sighted longingly down the barrel of his Savage. The captain, the engineer, the purser, Jim Cornwall, and three deckhands each brought forth guns that appeared to have seen service, and the deck looked like a pirate ship ready to spring a surprise on some unsuspecting merchantman. In every corner stood the guns and rifles, in every attitude of readiness the hunters sat or stood, while the deckhands placed the pike-pole handy and the pilot steered with his rifle leaning against the wheel” (Kelly 43).

²²⁵ Kelly, meanwhile, saw this hunt as the best of two anthropocentric worlds: “Could anyone conceive wearing bedroom slippers and lolling back in a deck chair while he waited to kill a bear or a moose? Could anyone dream of sitting down to a game of whist or bridge, with a cigarette or pipe in his lips, knowing he might go forth any moment and luxuriously slay big game? Could anyone imagine the luxury of sitting down at a snow-white table, eating what was set before him, drinking what he found in the cups, being waited on by a waiter, and knowing that any moment a blast from the great whistle would tell him that there was moose or bear within shooting distance, and all there was to do was to shoot straight and get big results?” (43). Here, Kelly overlays human comforts and hunting as a sport – albeit with dubious success.

In addition to overexuberant hunting, some members of the expedition showed a transparent interest in “the breed girls.” These “Lotharioesque sightseers” attempted to impress the “simple hearts” of these Métis women, but they are soon told that the fathers of these women were rich fur-traders. As such, it was also likely the women had been to places like Paris or London, “and were perhaps just as experienced as the Lotharios,” so Cornwall’s men chose not to spend any more effort on the pursuit (13). The swift retreat here implies that the men were not seeking equality in a partnership but had hoped that they could pursue indigenous or Métis women who were less worldly or civilized – and therefore more desirable or more easily dominated.

One passage in the text depicts a Métis woman not only as *other*, but as synonymous with darkness. Early in the expedition, an electric searchlight aboard flickered onto “a breed lady,” but the illumination was too bright for her. In “a frenzy of modesty” the woman “turned and dashed away into the darkness,” and retreated into “a friendly tree-shrouded tent,” which apparently provided cover that quickly relieved “the palpitating heart of the river maiden” (15). Kelly presents the Métis woman as more at home with the darkness than appearing in the light from the group of white men.²²⁶

As with Bezanson and MacGregor, the accuracy of Kelly’s text varies. The problematic claims are perhaps most evident in a recurring association of indigenous

²²⁶ As a newspaper writer, this passage from the Kelly’s 1910 articles shares some contemporary overlap with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which similarly features a steamer that rides through a terrain unfamiliar to its white passengers. (Marlow’s fascination with “blank spaces” – or, as befitting a Cornwall-ian context, his fascination with “the biggest, the most blank” space – mirrors the large swaths of unmapped northern Alberta; Conrad 497.) Further, Cornwall’s crew is comprised of local indigenous crew members whose voices are either silent or underrepresented in Kelly’s text. Chinua Achebe argues that while Britain’s Thames River appeared to have “conquered its darkness” (Achebe 15), in Conrad’s text the steamer that slowly moved through the Congo teetered “on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy” (Conrad 539). Conrad’s use of “frenzy” is echoed in Kelly’s reference to the indigenous woman’s “frenzy of modesty.”

people and cannibalism. According to Kelly, a Beaver woman who had become ill was told by her fellow tribespeople to start eating “human steaks.” When the tribe “began to fear her appetite,” nuns at the Catholic mission in Fort Vermilion intervened and convinced the woman to change her diet. After sisters “took her in hand,” the church was said to have “succeeded well in driving out the evil appetite” (30). The story has all the makings of an endorsement for conversion of indigenous people toward Catholicism. Kelly also relays how Alexander “Black” Mackenzie,²²⁷ a teamster who was born in Quebec, told Cornwall’s group “strange stories” about “Twelve Foot” Davis, and also about “cannibal Indian ladies who ranged the woods attired like Eve, with the exception of the fig leaves, and ate any unsuspecting human they could ... (I mean the cannibal ladies, not Davis)” (51).²²⁸ As relayed to the 1910 readers of Kelly’s regular newspaper columns, such sensational and circumspect accounts of cannibalism could not have been helpful with respect to perceptions of the region’s indigenous peoples.

From July 28, 1910 until the end of the Peace River expedition on August 18, Jim Cornwall’s group had covered 1,239 miles.²²⁹ L.V. Kelly was convinced that northern Alberta was a place of opportunity and “a land for dreaming” (60). While he believed brave citizens with daring visions of the future were the true solutions for the region, the author also pointed out that the large stretches of thick, obstructed trails needed to be addressed. Like Cornwall, Kelly also became increasingly critical of what he perceived to

²²⁷ The expedition observed the site where the more famous Alexander Mackenzie first camped in 1792. The driver told Cornwall’s men “the terrible story” of a time when Mackenzie shot an indigenous person “because of some trouble over food.” He then identifies the place where the act was presumed to have taken place (Kelly 46).

²²⁸ Kelly also had heard of another “person of this kind” who “had been captured fifteen years ago and now lives a happy married life at Lesser Slave Lake, respected (in a certain sense), by all who know her” (51).

²²⁹ By contrast Hugh A. Dempsey, perhaps incorrectly, writes that the expedition constituted 2,000 miles (Dempsey Introduction, in Kelly 6).

be the government's passive role in furthering colonial enterprises (55).²³⁰ And like Bezanson and MacGregor, Kelly's attempt to present Cornwall's comparatively-pampered convoy as modern-day adventurers – much less heroes – strains even the most generous of readers.

The legacies of A.M. Bezanson, “Twelve Foot” Davis, and Peace River Jim became three of the predominant narratives in the region, and they influenced northern Alberta's trajectories and priorities for generations. Their stories – as well as the corresponding authors of the stories – introduced specific ideals of masculinity, capitalism, and externally based values concerning natural resources that have since been adopted and embraced. With respect to depictions of the bioregion, these figures focused primarily on the development of industry, the expansion of colonialism, and the domestication of their natural surroundings. To be sure, there were representations of local residents, but the underlying primary intent was to reimagine this new-to-white-people space, and to bring new settlers into the region. Rather than seeing northern Alberta for what it was, the aim was to promote a vision of the region that deviated drastically from its pre-existing past. The sublime quality of the region was acknowledged, but only to the extent that it needed to be mastered or domesticated. These non-fiction publications from Bezanson, James MacGregor and L.V. Kelly stood uniquely different from the content of other works during this time from elsewhere in Canada – notably, from the nature-soaked poems penned by the Confederation Poets.

²³⁰ “The settlers have done as much as they can,” Kelly writes, “and it is now up to the government” (55).

The prominent male voices in these narratives also presented certain relationships with – and representations of – black, indigenous, and female residents that have been ostensibly naturalized over time. The white, male-centred stories of A.M. Bezanson, “Twelve Foot” Davis, “Peace River Jim” Cornwall have assumed legendary status – even though none of them hailed from Alberta. As a result, whether in written or oral form, there are few examples of marginalized or underrepresented groups contributing their own narratives. The success and popularity of their texts were effectively contingent on the amount of discursive power that pre-existing hegemonic frameworks allowed.

Yet there were in fact other writers who were able to produce equally important works of non-fiction. In the next chapter, I will examine some of these regional texts that have been written by women. These works were not as popular or as renowned as the Bezanson, Davis, and Cornwall legacies; nevertheless, they reveal a great deal about northern Alberta and its people.

Chapter Three

Lawrence, Hughes, Dahlgren, and Strasbourg: Four Lesser Known Alberta Narratives

With respect to the sphere of northern Albertan literature, although some texts have been written by women, these works are obscure. The content from these publications, however, is just as important as the prominent narratives chronicled in the previous chapter. Among the less commonly known works are, in chronological order: Mary Lawrence's *Wilderness Outpost: The Fort Vermilion Memoir of Mary B. Lawrence, 1898-1907* (2008),²³¹ Katherine Hughes's *In the Promised Land of Alberta's North* (2006; first published in 1909), Dorothy Dahlgren's *Tales of the Tar Sands* (1975), and Alvena Strasbourg's *Memories of a Métis Woman: Fort McMurray, Yesterday, and Today* (1998). These unheralded authors used their own words and voices, and consequently challenged a literary tradition rooted in explorer-influenced narratives of dubious merit and in deliberately constructed showcases of masculinity.

3.1 Mary Lawrence

As is the case with so many other northern Albertan writers, Mary Lawrence was from the United States. Born in Rossville, Indiana, Mary Walter met the Quebec-born Fred Lawrence when he was south of the border and hospitalized at Purdue University. Fred came from a family of prominent farmers who moved to northern Alberta in 1879; his father started a mission school in Chipewyan, then moved the family and started another one in the Fort Vermilion area.

²³¹ Lawrence's journal had been held by Alberta's Provincial Archives prior to this 2008 publication.

Mary and Fred got married, travelled across several states, and eventually arrived in remote Fort Vermilion in the fall of 1898. Like A.M. Bezanson, Fred desperately wanted to promote the region, and as he gained in prominence and responsibilities, he wanted to disprove the notion that northern Alberta was a wilderness and was instead “a fine country for white people to live” (Lawrence xviii). Like Bezanson, Fred often liaised with Ottawa on a number of projects but failed at many of them. As with the town of Bezanson, today there is barely anything left of the Lawrence ranch (211).

Located along the Peace River approximately 350 kilometres northwest of Fort McMurray, the settlement of Fort Vermilion represented a strange new world for Mary, who at twenty-one years old inherited many unexpected responsibilities. Upon her first arrival to Fort Vermilion, Lawrence “burst into uncontrollable weeping” and her “fortitude snapped” (Fort Vermilion Historical Society qtd. in Lawrence xxvii). Nevertheless, Lawrence kept writing despite isolation, food shortages, childbirths, house fires, and linguistic challenges. Those living conditions – as well as the local inhabitants – are detailed in her writing.

*Wilderness Outpost: The Fort Vermilion Memoir of Mary B. Lawrence, 1898-1907*²³² is an important text for a number of reasons. First, it is a document that pre-dates many others, including A.M. Bezanson’s *The Peace River Trail* (1907) and L.V. Kelly’s newspaper articles about the “Peace River Jim” Cornwall expeditions (1910). Although another text from this period, Agnes Deans Cameron’s *The New North*, makes unique mention of Fort Vermilion, Cameron only visited the settlement in 1908 before her 1909 text was published. Arguably, even Charles Mair’s *Through the Mackenzie Basin* (1899)

²³² The original title was “Keewaiten: God of the North Wind.”

– one of the only other early texts to mention and describe Fort Vermilion – does not precede Lawrence’s text, because the author arrived in 1898. As a matter of fact, Mair, a journalist, poet, and nationalist, stayed at the “comfortable” Lawrence homestead and even made a note of the visit in his text (Mair 94). Mair remarked that Fort Vermilion was “cut off from the outer world,” and its families led “somewhat monotonous, by no means irksome lives.” Still, his ultimate conclusion was that the locals were “to be envied rather than commiserated,” and few people wanted to leave (95). He even claimed that the Lawrence family “never had a failure” (93). Writer Agnes Dean Cameron also visited Fort Vermilion in 1908 with her niece Jessie Cameron Brown and declared that the settlement was a “progressive community” that projected “happiness,” which appeared to be its “keynote” quality (Chapter XX, *New North*, n pg.). All of these favourable depictions belied the real struggles and obstacles experienced every day.

Second, these other accounts of Fort Vermilion were either rudimentary or concerned with quantitative descriptions, rather than an in-depth account of one of the oldest European settlements in Alberta. Lawrence’s text adds nuance instead of the rosy gloss-overs of Mair and Cameron. Mary Lawrence and her family had already left the area by the end of 1907, and Lawrence’s memoir did not benefit from publication until years later; therefore, her observations and content would remain hidden while Mair and Cameron’s texts painted a cursory and inaccurate picture of Fort Vermilion.

Finally, as has been established, the narratives of men like Bezanson and Jim Cornwall have achieved a status of dominance. Yet Lawrence, from the United States, also has some keen observations about northern Alberta, and can now be read alongside

these other authors. Given the dearth of material from Fort Vermilion's early days, this literary inclusion is both historically and culturally important.

This analysis will focus primarily on three aspects of Mary Lawrence's text: the way elements of the Bildungsroman develop throughout the text; the incorporation of bioregionalism; and the complex representations of indigenous peoples – many of which, up until that point, were unprecedented in northern Albertan literature.

An Author's Personal Growth and Bioregional Acknowledgment

Mary Lawrence's memoir unfolds much like a Bildungsroman, as the author begins her journey accustomed to the creature comforts that accompany a lifestyle of privilege but ends with a number of important life lessons that could only have been taught within the unflinching setting of "the strange North." Lawrence initially saw herself as an "average greenhouse flower" that had been "transplanted to the sudden impartiality of open soil." When she and her husband first travelled the arduous trek to Fort Vermilion, she was "a mere slip of a girl," who had decided to place her trust "in six sturdy feet of husband" (2).

Lawrence struggled to confront the challenges of northern Alberta, even on the initial route into the region. Along the unsurveyed trail, Lawrence felt like she was "being pounded all over with hammers" (5). On the very first night, one of the guides – who preferred to be called Jack the Ripper – scolded Lawrence after she failed to ration her bacon. Mary then became offended when Fred asked her to collect wood for the fire, and after he offered to pay for her to go to Edmonton (6). On such occasions in the text and at other points, Lawrence's memoir is reminiscent of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the*

Bush. Like Moodie, Lawrence lamented the absence of culture in the region,²³³ while also insisting that she could handle demanding wilderness conditions (8).

Yet Mary continued on the trek northward. When she stayed at a Métis home for the first time, Fred instructed her “to be real brave and try and eat” a meal prepared by a Métis woman. At the same time, Mary had her first humbling experience in the north when she also met the Métis woman’s ten-year-old daughter, who was “already desecrated with terrible ulcers” at the hands of Klondikers who had passed through the area (19). When the mother asked Mary if the child’s sores would heal, she could not bring herself to tell the truth – that the child’s fate was a foregone conclusion.²³⁴

Lawrence soon learned the complexities of preparing camp and she discovered that, ever since white Klondikers carelessly left the region in disarray,²³⁵ it was the indigenous people who were keen stewards of the land (22). Taking their cue from this stewardship, the Lawrences strove to focus less on profit and more on Fort Vermilion’s “rich soil that paid high rewards to those who respected and worked it” (30). By the time the Lawrences arrived in Fort Vermilion, they were visited by white and indigenous people alike. When they went to church for the first time, Mary wore her wedding gown and the entire community came to see her rare attire and to welcome her to “the wilderness life” (38).

²³³ Moodie bemoaned “the loss of the society in which [she] had moved, the want of congenial minds, of persons engaged in congenial pursuits” (196), and she felt obliged to retreat “from the rude, coarse familiarity of the uneducated people among whom we were thrown ...” (Moodie 197).

²³⁴ The full, haunting and expressive passage reads: “In the same measure the Indian had learned of the white man’s high morality, he had also learned of his degradation. Anxiously the poor mother searched my face, asking if I thought her child would soon be well, and I had no courage to tell her the truth. I lied my reassurance that some day the brutal sores would disappear. I could not tell her that that would be when the child had been laid deep in the ground and the earth had mercifully hidden them from her sight. In the same earth the screams of other Indian women had already been hushed, women who in agony had left their bodies literally falling apart. And the echoes of their cries are not yet stilled” (Lawrence 19). The author’s empathetic words here transcend the cursory snapshots provided by authors like Mair or Cameron.

²³⁵ Despite this reputation for leaving the land in shambles, during their first winter in the region the Lawrences also opened their Fort Vermilion home to wayward, transient Klondikers (Lawrence 36-37).

In order to adapt to life in northern Alberta, Lawrence increasingly examined her relationship to nature. The trip to Fort Vermilion spanned several weeks and took its toll on her; she felt “the North closing in,” especially because of its vastness and solitude (26). Yet despite the practical hardships associated with life in Fort Vermilion, Lawrence found time to remark upon nature, as she formed preliminary connections to this new place. On days that seemed unbearable or wearisome, she regained “confidence and strength from the sound of the water lapping on the beach below” and the river would anthropomorphically quiet her like “the touch of a loved hand,” put her to sleep, and comfort her “like a human friend” (35). Elsewhere, Lawrence likened her connection to the water with the Métis, who preferred hunting and trapping.²³⁶ In the author’s view, the “pride” of the Métis was

the conquering of nature, knowing water and being good river men. They could tell every thread of current and every twist of the rapids in the big river that rolled majestically at our door and they could take a boat through without shipping [sic] one drop of water. I had already felt the call of that great waterway; in their lives it must have been far stronger. It was well enough to know summer water, but to know ice and snow in winter, the ice crust over the big river, a sure death-trap because of its countless air holes camouflaged with snow, to know exactly where these were located, though a hundred miles from home, this was knowledge only the ingrown experience form [sic] childhood could give. (42)

²³⁶ Although trapping previously provided food, Fred Lawrence’s father induced the local indigenous people to farm the land and pursue independence (Lawrence 42). The arrival of whites in the region – including their odour and noise – made hunting more difficult.

Lawrence's words illustrate an implicit bond with the bioregion, but her conclusion – that the Métis knowledge of water patterns signifies the “conquering” of nature – reveals a marked difference in perspectives and ideologies.

Lawrence also establishes an intriguing connection to bioregionalism in her passage about “Twelve Foot” Davis. The trader's post was situated just across the river, and Lawrence remarks that this wilderness imprinted itself upon Davis since birth – even though he was from the United States. Despite the disparate nationality, Lawrence believed that Davis's death was an example of “a spirit of the North going slowly back to its own” (63).²³⁷ The reference here to Davis as well as to the Métis people earlier reflects Lawrence's growing understanding and appreciation of how locals were intimately connected to this region.

Learning about - and from - Indigenous Peoples

Although Lawrence outlines a number of personal and notable experiences, the author's descriptions of – and reflections upon – her encounters with indigenous people comprise the most enlightening and complicated aspects of her writing. The foreword of *Wilderness Outpost* was written by Utinowatum,²³⁸ who was the daughter of an indigenous friend of the Lawrences named Shirloh. Utinowatum explicitly states that Lawrence's text is antiquated and has inherent biases – particularly in light of the fact that the female author was raised with United States-based, Christian values (xxvi). Yet

²³⁷ Lawrence also remarks – perhaps inaccurately – that Davis had “considerable education” (63). She further states that “Twelve Foot” Davis had an honest reputation and never had to explain his decisions, and that his infamous dispute over land claims (see page 126-130 above), was actually a “major quarrel” that escalated “to the point of gun play” (62).

²³⁸ Utinowatum also went by the name Wanda Beland. The book's foreword was written “on behalf of the Cree people,” and Lawrence's text provided her the opportunity to perceive the region's history, albeit as filtered through the lens of white culture (xxv).

she appreciates Lawrence's "insight, understanding and acceptance of the unique skills of the Cree people in reading and understanding nature, of their humour, faith and culture" (xxv). The author's inaccuracies, and jarring references to indigenous people – including the claim that the Beaver people cannot bond with their own children – were "narrow and obviously wrong," but Utinowatum stresses that Lawrence's disparate background informed her observations (xxvi), and her behaviour and language were a product of historical and cultural context. At the same time, the Lawrences also grew in their knowledge about indigenous life: the family invited indigenous people into their household, learned their names and family histories, and forged lasting friendships in the region. In a sense, Mary's unvarnished remarks and recollections seem more authentic precisely because of her unpredictable actions toward – and ever-changing opinions of – indigenous people over the span of her decade in northern Alberta.

Frequently, Lawrence's impressions of indigenous people begin as condescending or dismissive but are challenged or re-contextualized over time. For example, early in the text, the author speaks her first Cree words, and the indigenous people are described as reacting "like delighted children" (16). The patronizing comment might seem to represent a divide of sophistication between the two cultures. However, the observation is inverted later when a Métis woman tells Lawrence that in northern Alberta it is in fact the white man who is "like a child" who "doesn't know anything," and "does things that even a child would be ashamed of" (172). This trajectory from assuming indigenous people are children to white people being called children is reflected in the journey Mary takes as she begins to learn more about indigenous people and the ways she can learn from them.

The learning curve was steep, though. After Mary had her first child in Fort Vermilion, she tried to emulate the way indigenous mothers carried and reared their babies but fared poorly (43). When the author later had a difficult childbirth with her daughter, Lydia, the experience brought her closer to the local indigenous people, including her willingness to try their medicines. The experience formed “the beginnings of true intimacy” with indigenous people (88), who came from hundreds of miles away to see and support Lawrence.

Mary befriended the indigenous people Nokum Julie and Heber. Nokum Julie – the word “Nokum” is Cree for grandmother – was a large woman “with the easy dignity of a queen” (52) and a face that was “Lincolnian,” weathered, and “a world of character” (53-54). She kept her own winter trap line and maintained it as well as any man. Despite linguistic barriers, Mary and Nokum Julie discussed many important topics. When Mary met Heber, she was still unable to grasp the Cree language, yet she still presumptively believed that she could read the minds of indigenous people. Heber, who was partially fluent in English, introduced Mary to indigenous customs, including the ones that seemed taboo (61), and Heber continued to correspond with Mary for years, even after she left the region (36). Lawrence’s extended recollections of these local figures reflect a genuine engagement with indigenous ways of life and expand upon a depiction of a more varied and heterogeneous makeup of the region.

Among the unique aspects of *Wilderness Outpost* is Lawrence’s personal, detailed account of the arrival of the first Treaty Commission. On the historic day, the author witnessed a “wonderful sight” when Governor Laird convinced a Métis man named Johnny Bourassa that the government was repaying indigenous people “their just due for

the land the white man was taking,” and that the Queen Mother “was their friend” (73). The indigenous people, meanwhile, laughed when they received dollar bills and considered eating them.

Significantly, Lawrence claims that she witnessed the precise moment when materialism first infiltrated the indigenous people, who obliviously bowed to “the inevitable” dominance of white people (73). On treaty day, white salesmen emulated sideshow barkers and coveted the overflowing pocketbooks of the “country greenhorns.” The eyes of indigenous people “gleamed” at the prospect of obtaining items useful or useless. Once adults and children received money, a monster was created – Lawrence even likens the experience to a “slaughter” (74). As the indigenous recipients discovered the basics of financial transactions, they became “as shrewd as any Cape Cod Yankee.” Even pregnant women sought compensation for babies yet to be born. Lawrence’s account of the party concludes with the unexpected revelation that the commission men and the newspaper reporters actually ended their long day by travelling to the Lawrence home for dinner and tea (75).

This new influence of money and capitalism on indigenous culture was soon reflected in palpable, physical ways. When the commission returned the following year, everyone in the settlement – with the exception of Lawrence and her cousin – became ill from the same fever over the next three days. Delirium was rampant. The commission men showed no overt sickness, but there was little doubt that they were the carriers of the influenza-like disease. Lawrence contrasts the previously healthy community with the new disease brought by white settlers (111-112); clearly, the contagion of capitalism had extraordinary consequences.

Despite seeming to take steps forward with respect to equality and understanding, Lawrence also comes across as a white American who believes in the superiority of her race and religion. The subject of miscegenation is of particular importance to Lawrence, who qualifies that she admires indigenous men because they are members of a “subdued but broken race” (46), and states that indigenous mothers have approached white men suggestively in order to conceive “pretty babies.” With little supporting evidence, the author remarks that indigenous women craved white fathers for their children because they knew that

white babies, or those with white blood mixed in their veins, were prettiest of all. The whole Indian psychology in regard to sex admitted no consciousness of illegitimacy. The mothers were all fiercely maternal and took their children unto themselves. With promiscuity instinct and practice among them from the time they were fourteen, they could be as frank and unabashed as animals in making known their desires and their advances rarely had much camouflage of subtlety. Many a fur trader of the North has married an Indian or half-breed woman as much for protection against her avid sisters as anything. (44)

Lawrence uses the word “cunning” to describe indigenous girls who wear “close-fitted” tea-length dresses and “pretty moccasins” (44). Lawrence rather tenuously claims that indigenous women wear provocative attire, are instinctively promiscuous by the age of fourteen, and seek white fathers in order to have prettier babies. In addition to undermining the author’s credibility, this derogatory stance seems to be borne out of a sense of jealousy on Lawrence’s part toward indigenous women.

Lawrence also felt comfortable imposing her cultural values and morals onto others, particularly when she told a Métis man named James that his daughters should only marry among “their own people.” James’s three daughters later confessed to Lawrence they also did not realize “that it isn’t right for a woman to have more than one man” until the author told them so explicitly. The daughters promise to teach their own children the “right” way to behave, and Lawrence happily tells James’s daughters that they simply did not understand their wayward behaviour until now (156-158).

Lawrence’s disparaging depictions of indigenous people include remarks that they carry the odours of their camps, avoid bathing, change their clothes infrequently, and welcome lice onto their bodies. During her first year, she also could not tell individual indigenous people apart because they all looked the same to her (48). Lawrence’s inability to differentiate indigenous people eventually leads her to admit that she had “read enough Fenimore Cooper to have a certain acquired fear of the Indians, even though my growing association with them gave me no reason for it” (90). She also labels a starving man named Tall Cree as deceitful and “without conscience” because he was “simply an Indian” (150). Further, Lawrence feared that some of the Métis who came to the house would be lazy, despite no evidence of this proclivity beyond “a strong hunch” (119-120). More generally, on a few occasions Lawrence declares indigenous people to be inherently lazy by nature (136, 151) and care only about self-preservation (150, 162).

These sweeping claims, however, belie many examples of indigenous generosity in the text. On some occasions, the Beaver people helped clean the Lawrence kitchen; Old Shirloh took Fred’s father to some haypiles so that the family could secure an important supply of hay (82); and Sophie (Flett) Flette, a 14-year old Métis girl, looked after Mary

Lawrence's daughter Lydia, and mimicked basic diaper techniques – which Lawrence appreciated since Flette was making the “effort to live as a white woman” (99).

One particularly notable act of generosity when the Lawrence house burned in a fire. The incident was so traumatic for Fred that he ran toward the fire yelling “like a raving maniac” and madly “cursing God”; in the months that followed, the only thing that would return him to sanity was his “need of labor” (164). After the devastating fire, the only people from the area who helped the family rebuild were the indigenous neighbours (166). The generosity of these indigenous people stands in contrast with earlier, selfish behaviour of Hudson's Bay Company workers, who refused to lend any food or aid to starving members of the Lawrence family (109).

Mary Lawrence believed the fire was a mixed blessing, as a wave of community spirit and generosity emerged from the ashes of the disaster. It was the indigenous community – not white people – who helped Fred cut trees and logs to build a new home within ten days. Mary was heartbroken at the idea of having to start over, but the fire also provided her “a final unity with the natives of the settlement.” White and indigenous cultures had already been interacting through the mutual care of babies, but “disaster and consequent poverty” meant that the humbled Lawrence “was on a level with them all now” (166-167).²³⁹

Superstition, Incompatible Values and the Departure of the Lawrences

As the text progresses, it becomes clear that the Lawrences will never fully abandon their pre-existing American values and that they will continue to perceive indigenous people as

²³⁹ Earlier in the text, Lawrence reveals that at Christmas time, all cultures gathered and “shared alike without distinction,” and friendship united one and all (50).

unknowable others. Mary increasingly becomes convinced that indigenous people have acute psychic powers. Her husband Fred likewise becomes a strong believer that indigenous people can predict future events and have inexplicable capabilities.

One particular event is related in tragic detail. Fred received word concerning his father's death, and the circumstances and details unfolded precisely as an indigenous boy had described them earlier. Apparently, the father had obtained a new thrasher, but it was "considered hoodooed" by indigenous people because it had already been a cause of death for two previous owners. The father had been at the separator, and some Métis were loitering around the separator and refused to move (129). The belt suddenly began to turn, and the father jumped into action and grabbed the idler. His clothes became caught in the belt and he was torn around the pulley, "his left arm ripped from its socket, his body crushed and mangled." Transformed into "a terrible, bleeding thing," Father was rushed to Edmonton, but died within two days. Word of the tragedy spread quickly. The funeral was well attended, as had been foretold by an indigenous friend named Pierre – who himself died soon afterward (131).

Although the death of Fred's father was as traumatic for the family as it was gruesome, Mary Lawrence's diction suggests she blamed the accident on the Métis, and she elevates the father to heroic status. Lawrence writes that on that fateful day, Fred's father became "a sacrifice to his own long argued theory that[,] in working with machines[,] the white man was always responsible for the lives and safety of whatever Indians or halfbreeds he employed as help." Through industrial advancements, the means of the father's demise was also how he died, even as he rushed to try to save nearby indigenous men. The father's act of rescue is framed as a cautionary tale regarding the

perils of technology. Fred's father – initially content to live in northern Alberta and perform missionary work – had finally left the region and grew accustomed to the industries and innovations of bustling Edmonton. Ultimately, he was figuratively – and literally – devoured by new machinery and technology.

Eventually, the Lawrences played an even more visible role in changing the region. Fred met with owners of coal mines, railroad officials and influential men from Eastern Canada. He courted capital initiatives and sought ways for these projects to tap into vast resources, such as salt, asphalt deposits, and fossil fuels. With Alexandre Cardinal, Fred spent a year breaking a trail to Grouard, and he also was named a Fellow of London's Royal Geographic Society, "in recognition of his pioneer exploit" (151). For Mary, all of these advancements were beyond the comprehension of indigenous people because they saw the land only in terms of hunting, and they "could not be expected to understand the resources science would seize for quick development" (148).

Fred continued to network with prominent people, and he provided the eager Frank Oliver²⁴⁰ a report concerning the region. The demonstrably pleased Oliver remarked that Fred "was the best publicity man the North ever had" – even though much of Fred's briefing in Edmonton described "a country locked in snow and ice" (187). Fred was also actively involved with the Autonomy Bill for Alberta in 1905, for which he concluded that there were illegalities and ethical violations. Additionally, when it was discovered that local citizens could not vote if they lived on the wrong side of a waterway, Fred organized a second election in order to ensure fair representation (203). In later years, he

²⁴⁰ Frank Oliver (1853-1933) founded Alberta's first newspaper, the *Edmonton Bulletin*. He was an MLA, then a Member of Parliament, and later the federal Minister of the Interior and the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. Oliver used these positions of power to advocate for removal of treaty lands from indigenous bands, and to draft legislation preventing blacks from entering Canada (see page 75-77 above).

also ran an experimental farm at Ottawa's request, and was away from home for most of the time.

Despite Fred's civic engagement on a provincial level, he believed that federal taxes on timber were "an injustice to the country" and he refused to pay them, even after members of the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) were sent to collect the outstanding fees. In an attempt to capitalize on his connections, Fred wrote a protest letter to his ally Frank Oliver and insisted the tax "would injure the country and slow up settlement" (189).²⁴¹ While they waited for a response, the maverick-like Lawrences remained steadfastly defiant, even if it meant Fred might be sent to jail for six months (196). The family became local pariahs, and Fred's reputation was never the same; ultimately, he only handed over a fraction of the taxes he actually owed (198).

Although the Lawrences influenced the region in many ways, Mary and Fred were "determined to leave the North." In July 1907, Mary and her five children eventually left Fort Vermilion; as with Agnes Deans Cameron, they were the subjects of a large farewell before they left for Indiana by steamer to visit family members. That fall, Fred joined them, and the Lawrences never returned (205). According to Marilee Cranna Toews, some of the Erastus Lawrence route still exists, but the "famous, extensive ranch" is no more (Lawrence 211). Today, readers can appreciate the cultural, historical, and ideological elements of *Wilderness Outpost*, as well as the impact the Lawrences had on Fort Vermilion, while simultaneously acknowledging the temporary nature of the family's commitment to the region before they chose to leave it all behind.

²⁴¹ Today, Conservative think tanks argue that carbon taxes would likewise harm Canada (see Kenneth P. Green of the Fraser Institute, "Who Could Object to a Carbon Tax?").

3.2 Katherine Hughes and Other Early Women Explorers

Critics have noted that, as a genre of early Canadian literature, travel and exploration literature is not only informative but also of high quality (Moyles 9). Memoirs from this period constitute a uniquely Canadian type of prose (Woodcock 249). As we have already seen with the United States-born Mary Lawrence, memoirs about northern Alberta's early years have a great deal to offer contemporary readers.

Katherine Hughes fused the travel and exploration genre with the memoir format to craft an important artefact. The title of Hughes's text, *In the Promised Land of Alberta's North* (1909), connotes biblical bounty. "Promised Land" suggests a sense of fate or birthright and evokes the chosen people of Exodus. Not only has the land been promised, but it also *holds* promise of future riches. Primarily a chronicle of Hughes's groundbreaking expedition through the region, many prominent landmarks and phenomena are described; the account also anticipated some of the looming exploitations yet to come. And of course, Hughes's trip – and text – preceded "Peace River Jim" Cornwall's trek and L.V. Kelly's newspaper articles by one year.

An Impressive Account

Born in Emerald Junction, Prince Edward Island in 1876, Katherine Hughes moved to Quebec in her twenties, and taught at the Akwesasne Mohawk Reserve for three years. Hughes then became a legislative reporter for the *Montreal Star*, and in 1906 she joined the staff of the *Edmonton Bulletin*, and wrote for the Minister of the Interior, Frank Oliver. Within two years, Hughes became Alberta's first provincial archivist, as well as

the province's first toponymist²⁴² (K. Hughes xi-xii). Hughes took some secretarial positions, but in 1915 she opted to tour Europe, Australia, and North America to promote the Irish independence cause. Before her death of cancer in 1925 at age 48, Hughes published biographies of Bishop Cornelius O'Brien, Father Alberta Lacombe, and Sir William Van Horne of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Hughes biographer Pádraig Ó Siadhail has remarked that Hughes did not have many intimate or lasting friendships because she was so committed to her work (xiii). As the lone woman among trappers, traders, and mounted police, Hughes cultivated a sense of trust from prominent men, and her adventurous spirit was reputedly complemented by her charming conversation skills and a Catholic background that reinforced her altruistic sensibilities.

By virtue of her interactions with indigenous people and immigrants new to Canada, Hughes was renowned for her evident "love for humanity" (xiv). Her interest in aboriginal peoples sparked her 1909 trip, especially her desire to uncover untold narratives and oral histories in isolated northern Alberta. As she collected local stories, biographies, and accounts from older citizens, the archivist's northern trip served as much for purposes of preservation and posterity as for adventure. In addition, seeking records that had a bearing on social conditions in Canada, Hughes insisted to the premier of Alberta that her archival documents had "a strong economic value for the legislator no less than the historian, reflecting as they do the conditions of people of all classes, giving in an intimate way the atmosphere of past days and throwing light upon the social

²⁴² Toponymy is the study of place names. Prior to the expedition, Hughes helped found the Canadian Women's Press Club (CWPC) in 1904 and served as the historian. Hughes also became involved with groups in Edmonton such as the Women's Canadian Club and the Catholic Women's League. Hughes was devoted to helping less fortunate women, girls and strangers: before her death, she sold a \$650 coat and the money was used to buy food for destitute and starving families (K. Hughes xiii-xiv).

development of the race, as affected by political changes, by legislation and other circumstances” (xv). Her daily journal described landscapes, portages, people, and companies – many of which had since folded or become obsolete. Hughes chronicled famous inhabitants such as “Peace River Jim” Cornwall (see Chapter Two), Sergeant Francis Joseph Fitzgerald, Allie Brick, Sheridan Lawrence, Colin Fraser, Frank Beatton, and Count Alfred Von Hammerstein.²⁴³ Like Mary Lawrence, Hughes also described the Beaver and the Cree First Nations, as well as HBC employees, missionaries, independent traders, farmers, and settlers. She even remarked upon Fred Lawrence and the Dominion Agricultural Experimental Station he established.

Although Hughes’s summer trip coincided with the increased promotion of the region, the author had somewhat different aims. As previously noted, a number of men were trying to promote Peace River as an ideal place for farming, hunting, and industrial pursuits. At the time, a senate committee session deemed the region to have commercial worth, and one participant boasted lakes and rivers that teemed with fish, and a “wealth” of minerals that were “ripe” for the taking, including coal, oil, silver, copper, sulphur, and asphaltum deposits (*Canadian Annual Review*, 1909, p. 542 qtd. on K. Hughes xviii).

Despite Hughes’s background in journalism, *In the Promised Land* is scattered, fragmented, and plagued by incomplete sentences and unclear pronouns.²⁴⁴ However, the author’s ability to capture everyday life in Alberta’s north transcends such compositional

²⁴³ Count Alfred Von Hammerstein established the Athabasca Oil and Asphalt Company in 1910, which was among the first companies to develop the bitumen sands (K. Hughes xxviii).

²⁴⁴ To be fair, Hughes’s journal was comprised of a notepad filled with quickly written observations (K. Hughes xx). Although she wrote upside-down and in the margins, Hughes had “a woman’s keen eye for the aesthetic and domestic detail as is witnessed in her descriptions of clothing worn at the time, her nights sleeping under the stars, and her comments on the various homes and churches she visited. This descriptive writing included opinions and observations which reflected the attitudes of the day, and would certainly be deemed inappropriate if written today” (Kaiser and Aubrey, K. Hughes xx).

shortfalls. Rather than depicting extraordinary events, Hughes's journal deftly chronicles simple moments. According to provincial archivist Leslie Latta-Guthrie, this unvarnished approach made Hughes a truly authentic pioneer, because she took a "grassroots approach to archival collecting" (vii), and also because she exhibited a great deal of stamina to finish the trip – especially as a woman during this era.²⁴⁵

When the 32-year old Hughes embarked upon her two-month long journey of thousands of kilometres, she quickly discovered she had to cross rugged terrain. Trails often proved impassable, and she even endured a harrowing experience over intense rapids. Among the places she visited or passed were Mirror Landing, Moose Portage, Sawridge Landing, Grouard, Peace River Crossing, the Shaftesbury Trail, Dunvegan, and the trading post held by "Twelve Foot" Davis (see Chapter Two). The author even reached Fort Vermilion, where she met Thibo (or, Thibeault) and Willie, two Métis men who accompanied her to Vermilion Chutes, Big Island, and Fort Chipewyan. Like Mary Lawrence, Hughes also met a treaty party, and even travelled with them for a while.²⁴⁶ The final leg of Hughes's journey included Fort McMurray and her eventual return to Edmonton.

In the Company of Men

Like other early texts from northern Alberta, Hughes's journal is the product of a short-lived exposure to northern Alberta. These are initial impressions by the author, rather

²⁴⁵ When men aboard freighters saw Hughes, the very sign of a woman to them was "a novelty" (K. Hughes xx). In the introduction, Kaiser and Aubrey emphasize how rare it was for Hughes to have made the trip on official business, at "a time when women were rarely involved in professional careers at all, much less ones that would take them on such an adventure" (Kaiser and Aubrey, K. Hughes xi).

²⁴⁶ The treaty party included Treaty 8's annuity distributor H.A. Conroy, and Indian agents Harold Laird and Dr. Donald, and Lucien Lamothe.

than the result of a lengthy stay in the area. Even when Hughes first departed from Edmonton's Imperial Hotel to Little Slave River, she felt she had crossed a "frontier-line verging on the wilderness" (3). Pre-existing information about the area was unreliable; unsuccessful Klondikers warned the terrain was poor or comprised mostly of muskeg, while others tried to paint and promote a more beatific picture.

Hughes took photographs along the way, which were accompanied by descriptions of rustic nature, and magnificent frontier scenery (14). The author marveled at the unions of technology and wilderness, particularly when "gleaming-white" steamboats, lit with electricity at night, made "a fine picture with the forest-scene behind it" (15). Hughes described plains, rivers, flowers, muskeg, and natural landscapes. She likened the hillsides to Europe's vineyards, and she employed the Elizabeth Barrett Browning-coined term "dimplement" (35). The influence of Romanticism was evident, as was the attempt to describe her surroundings in a realist vein. The author's language became increasingly beatific, including more references to fresh air, lush scenery, and long walks.

Initially, the author was accompanied by Mrs. Donald, who was from the United States. During her trip, Hughes enjoyed unique sights, such as gas wells and the former cabin and brush-filled garden of "old N—r Dan" (51; see page 125-126 above). She also listened to a priest who wore moccasins and who delivered his sermon in Cree (K. Hughes 27). At many stops, Hughes was thrilled by remnants from older times, such as Hudson's Bay Company posts, old journals from Dunvegan, Chipewyan, Resolution, and Fond du Lac, and a collapsed jail that once housed an indigenous man charged with murder. She even obtained a gun worm, with which she cleaned a musket.

The author absorbed as much as she could about the region's original inhabitants. Just like Mary Lawrence discovered she had much to learn from local indigenous people, Hughes's trip became a cultural and educational experience. At many stops, Hughes was welcomed and offered an excess of food, even though some of the indigenous residents had never even seen a white woman before. Like Lawrence, Hughes attended a treaty payment in Fort McMurray, where indigenous men counted new dollar bills while payments were recorded in a ledger (106). Hughes met indigenous men like Thibo [Thibeault] and Moise Richards, who was "a fine strong fellow" who spoke English. Moise's wife was "a pleasure picture" who also, remarkably, helped him shoot and kill a bear only a day earlier (69).

For readers, some of the more rewarding aspects of Hughes's text involve her encounters with – or observations about – prominent male figures, past or present. On the way to Fort McMurray, Hughes saw what was left of Peter Pond's fort, and at Fort McKay, she observed teepees and a white flag, which represented the camp of Von Hammerstein and the exact location where he struck fossil fuels (104). She encountered "Peace River Jim" Cornwall, who, while campaigning to be elected to the provincial legislature, costumed himself in frontier fashion and moccasins, in order to provide "an interesting contrast to his correct city attire." The outfit – or perhaps disguise – was a crucial component to his political aspirations; northern Albertans, who had for some time "told long tales" of Cornwall's "powers as a traveller and his good heart," knew him only in his non-city apparel (12). Hughes also met Count Von Hammerstein, who was "dressed in handsome riding costume with a fine Irish setter at his heels" (24). Such observations concerning the region-specific costumes worn by prominent local men were

accompanied by the comparably martial attire worn by the archivist Hughes, who was mistaken “for a female member of the Police” because of her “brown military tunic and skirt and gaiters” (26). In a pointed dig at another author, Hughes remarks that A.M. Bezanson would likely have “cashed in” at Moberly Lake after his horses had abandoned him if he had not been found by indigenous people (58).

Hughes’s account alternates between having to pull her own weight amidst many men and being pampered throughout the trip. For instance, a steamer wheel snapped over the muskeg, so Hughes and Mrs. Donald had to walk alongside the men. However, aside from such swampy treks or the constant buzz of mosquitoes, Hughes had little discomfort and even had satisfactory sleeping accommodations amongst the men. She started “to feel that the Company was taking care of me. Even in little things ... I was not allowed to think of anything” (33). In fact, although Hughes is now hailed in some circles as a quasi-adventurer, the author seems relaxed and well-attended throughout much of the text. For instance, Constable Angermann paddled a boat for Hughes, and she reclined herself “like the Empress of China with a keen delight in this newest experience” (26). Later, while men threw items onto the boat, Hughes lazily picked and ate strawberries, chatted with the captain, and had “a delightful hot bath before bed” (69). When she was shuttled by canoe, she decided that the outspread bedding in the centre of the boat made for “a very comfortable seat with my book” (77). As Hughes was “luxuriously enjoying the loitering near Peace Point, she felt “like Cleopatra going down the Nile” because the men had constructed “couches of boughs” while Hughes, “half dozing,” reclined in the canoe (85). For an entire day, Hughes stayed on this “comfortable Cleopatra couch,” and dreamed of travelling to Europe (86). Her only complaint was that she had to swat mosquitoes.

The biggest setback of the trip began at the Mountain Rapids. Hughes walked over wet sand in a slicker, while the men pulled through the rapids like Trojans (111). The lead boat got stuck on the rocks, and the Trojan-like men started “clambering about the steep sliding bank strewn with boulders.” As they used all of their bodies to pull, Hughes lamented for some kind of technology that might spare the men having to toil so hard. As the crew poled and tugged at the stern and bow, Hughes climbed some slippery rocks, and obtained “a fine view of the men working like Trojans” (114). Soon, Hughes would have to be carried to shore on the shoulder of a transport man. Another difficult tug occurred at Boiler Rapids, but the crew remained merry. Hughes, meanwhile, continued to pick berries. The group eventually reached the Brule Rapids, the Gas Springs, and the Grand Rapids.

A Lasting Impact and Two other Women Chroniclers of Note

After the trip, Katherine Hughes pursued other interests. From 1913 to 1920, she toured North America and promoted the Irish independence cause. According to the *Edmonton Bulletin*, when Hughes arrived in Edmonton, she encountered “a storm of catcalls, and jeers that has seldom, if ever, been equalled” in the city. She was accused of being neither a Canadian, nor a person with even “the breeding of an Indian” (172). Yet by the time her standing room-only event was over, Hughes had convinced the audience to reconsider the Irish question; indeed, the audience subsequently sang “God Save the King.” In retrospect, the sheer audacity of appearing before such an antagonistic and hostile crowd seems at least as courageous as any exploratory trip through Alberta’s north.

Ultimately, Hughes never returned to the region. She spent time in London and wrote a number of articles for Canadian newspapers that advocated for further settlement

in Canada's west. After her death from stomach cancer on April 16, 1925, the Canadian Press wrote that Hughes had actively participated "in the uplift of native Indian races" (178).

Some have argued that Hughes's most renowned achievements were her contributions for the Canadian Encyclopedia concerning timber and forests (179). As a catalyst for this lifelong interest, the publication of Hughes's writings may have helped solidify a relatively popular narrative over time, but in point of fact her expedition was preceded by two earlier trips taken by equally significant women. Elizabeth Taylor toured the region, followed by the "adventuress and lecturer" Emma Shaw Colcleugh (*Edmonton Bulletin*, "Telegraphic" 1). Like Hughes, both women sought to collect and chronicle data, artefacts and specimens for the benefit of others.

Darlene J. Comfort has written that Elizabeth Taylor, the daughter of an American consul, was "as emancipated, interesting and intelligent a young woman as one could find" (*Ribbon* 274-275). Sporting a brown camping outfit and a removable hood, Taylor arrived to the region in 1892. Taylor took passage aboard the *Grahame*, the *Wrigley*, and the *Athabasca* to travel to the northerly Fort McPherson and back to Edmonton, which made her "the first woman tourist ever to make such an epic journey." Some of Fort McMurray's earliest photographs, sketches, pastels, and diary entries have come from Elizabeth Taylor.²⁴⁷ In addition, Taylor gathered an array of natural specimens, and she used poetry, art, and "a special awareness for words to record with great individuality the

²⁴⁷ Much of the extant information on Elizabeth R. Taylor (1856-1932) comes from James Taylor Dunn, who rescued the *Elizabeth Taylor Papers* from destruction. Taylor's experiences aboard steamers that were headed to the Arctic – including her encounters with Inuit women – went unheralded after she returned to Edmonton. Her impressive voyage was not even covered in the *Edmonton Bulletin*. Upon her return, Taylor had an odd sensation when she slept in a real bed again. She felt "queer and bashful and over-awed" when she saw frontiersmen and "dudish cowboys" in the city streets (*Elizabeth Taylor Papers* qtd. on Comfort, *Ribbon* 276).

natural and unspoiled beauty of the north.” Taylor was described as a woman who was interested in preservation rather than hunting; she was also well-versed in ornithology and botany (275). Taylor’s ecologically-rooted interests in collection and conservation represent a marked contrast from the more dominant local narratives from the likes of Bezanson or Cornwall, which favoured the clearing of natural spaces in order to accelerate settlement.

Like Taylor, Emma Shaw Colcleugh also embarked on a historical journey. In 1894, Colcleugh became the second white woman to tour the far north,²⁴⁸ and her trip – which combined “pleasure and profit” – included a 300-mile detour along the Peace River and its rapids. Colcleugh saw Inuit huts firsthand and entered them (*Edmonton Bulletin*, “Telegraphic” 1). Upon her return, Colcleugh intended to incorporate the highlights of her voyage into lectures and magazine articles. She brought back with her over 200 photographs and a wide assortment of ivory ornaments (Comfort, *Ribbon* 278).

Taylor and Colcleugh were pioneering women who ventured north and, because they returned with an array of artefacts for posterity and the furthering of knowledge, made important contributions to northern Albertan culture. Although they did not write accounts, their travels have been recounted by historical societies and later authors like Darlene J. Comfort. Their historical contributions stemmed from their willingness to embark upon ground-breaking treks, and their narratives constitute two important voices from northern Alberta.

²⁴⁸ The *Edmonton Bulletin* remarked that Colcleugh’s trip “had never been heretofore made by any lady traveller, neither indeed has the trip to the delta of the Mackenzie,” with the exception of Taylor, who made the trip three years earlier (“Telegraphic” 1).

As authors like A.M. Bezanson and L.V. Kelly explicitly sought to promote northern Alberta to outsiders, their texts acted as invitations for settlers to come and transform the region into a developed, industrialized space. Women pioneers like Katherine Hughes, Elizabeth Taylor, and Emma Colcleugh were more concerned with the collection of artefacts and specimens, and the accumulation of much-needed data. Hughes's *In the Promised Land of Alberta's North* reflected a text that was less concerned with salesmanship or hunting than with the realistic transcription of everyday moments and personalities from the area. Her memoir is an important part of early literature from northern Alberta.

3.3 Dorothy Dahlgren

Dorothy Dahlgren's *Tales of the Tar Sands*²⁴⁹ was published in 1975. The author represents a rare deviation from her literary predecessors: Dahlgren lived in Alberta her whole life (she died in 2002). The Provincial Archives of Alberta has classified Dahlgren as a professional author because she wrote for many newspapers and magazines and published a second book, *People of Our Past in Northern Alberta*, in 1988. Her first book, *Tales of the Tar Sands*, remains an example of literary hybridity because of its juxtaposition of individual narratives with industry history. This section will examine a select few of Dahlgren's tales/chapters, including the Pelican Portage gas well; United States figures; critiques of the railway; advertisements in a regional newspaper; the different ideologies of Miss Gordon and Anna Whittle; Jimmy Clark, and Dahlgren's desire to give additional exposure and representation to ordinary local citizens.

²⁴⁹ The book's cover and dedication use the word 'of' in the book title; however, on a title page inside the book the word 'from' is used (i.e. *Tales from the Tar Sands*).

Flaming Flumes and American Influences

At the beginning of *Tales*, Dahlgren declares that ordinary northern Albertans were the bedrock of the frontier, but she also immediately frames the region as a preferred site of industrial development. The author links the bitumen sands to financial prosperity, when she notes that early explorers suspected that a “great treasure was stored under Alberta’s good earth” and adds that in 1973 the development of the sands cost \$600 million, which was more than the St. Lawrence Seaway (*Tales* 7).

More specifically, the first folk tale in Dahlgren’s book merges a popular local phenomenon with fossil fuels. A natural gas flume has burned in northern Alberta since 1893, when four geologists were drilling and struck a natural gas flow at Pelican Portage. The team was unable to “control the force they had unleashed.” Once lit, the well burned continually. Wild fowl and ducks clustered around it and took shelter there (9-10).

Dahlgren uses an array of rhetorical or metaphorical approaches to describe Pelican Portage. She recounts the fuel burst with language that resembles a children’s story: the gas “burst blithely through the stopper, every time. It gushed and gushed – and continued to gush.” Pelican Portage’s “Wonderful Light” also acted as a source of direction and comfort, born to be a beacon and a boon” for isolated explorers and trappers, as well as “a high, beckoning finger of flame” that promised hidden riches underground. For indigenous people who gathered round it, the gas flow was a source of wonder, superstition and even divine worship (9).

More and more trappers and travellers flocked to the site, and local residents also wanted to somehow reap the benefits of “this proven bonanza.” Some speculated that Pelican Portage’s lone well would provide for Edmonton’s energy needs permanently,

while others wrote ominous tales and “indignant letters to the editor” that protested “the poisonous properties contained in natural gas – to say nothing of the terrible explosions dangerous to life and limb which could be expected if its wide-scale use was allowed” (12). In other words, even more than a century ago, citizens expressed concerns about this natural gas and the potential harm of attempting to rein in fossil fuels.

Dahlgren’s analysis of Pelican Portage is preceded by a number of other references and descriptive accounts and references, including in the texts of Mary Lawrence and Katherine Hughes (Lawrence 12; K. Hughes 129-130). A doctor had shown Hughes the gas well, “which like a shrine was drawing a stream of worshippers” (K. Hughes 129). The author found the flame to be dream-like, as if Charon might “slip down the still black waters of Lethe just within the shadows” and become “lit up by this weird light” (130). The scene is described by Hughes as

a weirdly lovely one – with the yellow sands, the black water and the green tinged with gold, the stately poplars white-stemmed in dusky background – and the centre of it, pure as an altar flame – like the column of fire that led the Israelites by night – was this beautiful thing. For about three feet above the black iron pipe the flame [was] blue like a melted sapphire and above that a whirling mass of golden floss flame. (130)

The site became even more famous after the media visited the flame on a “hazardous trip” in 1912, and the newsmen had to retreat from the intensity of the heat. Upon their return to Edmonton, the writers published “breathtaking tales” about the flame site in order to provide “definite proof” of northern Alberta’s “riches” (Dahlgren, *Tales* 10). Sure enough, fossil fuel initiatives accelerated significantly in the years that

followed. Although Dahlgren's book includes an array of local tales, it is both fitting and telling that she decides to start with the Pelican Portage flame.²⁵⁰

Likewise, it seems appropriate that Dahlgren's next chapter focuses not on an Alberta-born resident but on a man from the oil-hub state of Texas. Tom Lusk was a "remarkable character" and heavy drinker who was often on the run from the law. Sporting a plaid shirt, spurs, a large Stetson hat, chaps made of leather, and "a huge, violently-red bandana" (14), Lusk resembled "a figure out of some wild west show" (15). Lusk reputedly knew indigenous trails by heart, never got lost, and often acted as an expert guide through mostly uncharted terrain (18). Like Billy Smith in Bezanson's text, Lusk's knowledge suggests a bioregional connection to the area. Yet clearly the Texan also imported problematic behaviours and actions; Lusk carved notches into his weapons for each human he killed, insisted on being "the absolute ruler" of any group he guided, and flew into wild rages if anyone questioned his authority (19). As an outsider of dubious merit, Lusk seemed to share more in common with the nefarious Peter Pond than with long-time residents.

While the Pelican Portage and Lusk accounts seem to reinforce some of the prior themes and preoccupations in the region, one way that Dahlgren subverts narratives from her literary predecessors is through her depiction of the Alberta and Great Waterways Railroad. Usually her male author counterparts depicted the railway as beneficent and essential to industrial expansion in northern Alberta. Dahlgren, however, shows how its origins were highly controversial.

²⁵⁰ At the same time, Dahlgren also diverges from other writers when she states – even as early as 1975 – that fossil fuels have a finite end date and are, "after all, a non-renewable resource." Although the region promotes "these commodities with all our might and main ... eventually they'll be gone" (*Tales* 64).

The initial “promoter of this scheme” was not a Canadian, but a banker from Kansas City (22) who offered bonds to the public. Charges of price gouging for these railways bonds escalated, and several government officials resigned. Dahlgren calls the ensuing public hearings “the best free show in the west,” as the legislative chamber overflowed with curious citizens and accusations and insinuations flew back and forth (24). Evidence revealed that the premier and the attorney-general had personal, financial interests in the project, but the investigating commission ultimately concluded the politicians were “honourable men,” and decided that their motivations were “completely honest” (25, 26). These early railway proceedings, clearly linked to claims of corruption, seem important to consider today, as politicians are absolved of conflicts of interest in official investigations. Unlike the commonly glossed and tidied depictions of the region’s early infrastructure, Dahlgren emphasizes a sobering, less well-known aspect of a popular master narrative.

False Cures in Print, Unchecked and Unregulated

With respect to narratives, Dahlgren is fascinated by the ways in which information was cascaded to northern residents. Some of the most intriguing material in Dahlgren’s text concerns the contents of early newspapers in the region, especially advertisements.

Athabasca Landing, located 150 kilometres north of Edmonton, was home to northern Alberta’s predominant source of information from 1909 to 1915: the *Northern News*. One of the north’s earliest newspapers and published locally, residents received new issues of the *Northern News* on a regular basis; however, the publication consisted primarily of “weird” advertisements and gossip (28).

Dahlgren notes that ads in the *Northern News* were fixated on health and miracle cures. The early years of patent medicines saw a profitable market in remote regions like northern Alberta, where citizens had limited access to general, externally-based information or reliable scientific and medical evidence. Such phenomena help to explain the ads for Hood's Sarsaparilla, which preyed on the widespread fear of illnesses and conflated such fears with the fear of "sneaking, despicable" pickpockets who are out to steal the reader's money.²⁵¹ Hood's Sarsaparilla claimed that loss of fortune was linked to ill health, and the product purported to have accomplished a number of "great cures" (28). The untenable claims included the company's use of a testimonial from a reverend named J.M. Pate who professed that the sarsaparilla

purifies and enriches the blood, tones the stomach and gives strength and vigor. Diseases cannot enter the blood fortified by Hood's Sarsaparilla. It also cures biliousness, obtainable at all druggists for 25c. ... I was spending all my money on doctors' bills, trying to get good blood. There wasn't one doctor that could do anything for me at all, and they had all given me up. Then I heard about Hood's Sarsaparilla and took it. Now I'm a new man, and all the doctors are amazed. They say I have the best blood they ever saw. Signed, Rev. J.M. Pate. (qtd. on 28-29)

At a time when such statements could not be appropriately debunked, sales for this particular product soared. Other suspicious *Northern News* ads included Putnam's Corn Extract, which argued that "the stinging pain of a bad and uneasy" foot callus was

²⁵¹ The unregulated advertisement reads: "A pickpocket is despised, dreaded and avoided. He is a sneaking, despicable foe who robs a man unawares. Men hate him worse than the bold highwayman whose attack is made in the open. There are some diseases like pickpockets. They are sneaks. Hood's Sarsaparilla guards you continually against all such sneaky diseases!" (Dahlgren, *Tales* 28).

essentially the same as “the stinging pain of a bad and uneasy conscience” (29).

Incredibly, some companies even advertised outright cures for paralysis and terminal illnesses.²⁵² Other patent medicine products included Paine’s Celery Compound, which boasted Nile-grown celery to prevent hardening of the arteries, pink eye, tremors, and the common cold; Antiseptic Spruce Healthy Coffee, which professed to fix blotchy skin, headaches, anemia, boils, and strained eyes; Wonder Worm Powder, which was “good for the nerves” since “worms in your body eat away at your nerve ends and destroy them”; Japanese Catarrh Cure, which worked magic on “bad blood,” scrofula, and painful ear secretions; Martin’s Cardinal Food, which cured itchy feet and was even recommended by three federal cabinet ministers; and Laxa-Liver Pills relaxed the liver as blood coursed “merrily through the veins” because it was now “happy blood!” (31-32).²⁵³

Neither scrutinized nor regulated, these charlatan schemes were completely unrestricted and were permitted to be untrue (32). Under the assumption that famous personalities would never encounter ads from a remote western newspaper, the manufacturers freely – often falsely – pillaged the names and reputations of prominent clergymen, cabinet ministers, and members of parliament. These fraudulent endorsements

²⁵² One article, titled “Young Girl’s Miraculous Escape!,” declared: “Miss Maude Williams, 23, of North Toronto had been unable to move for several days. She could not speak. She could only lie on her bed of pain and gasp for life-giving breath. Maude had suffered from heart trouble since she was a small child, and doctors despaired for her life. Then a friend told her about Mirade Miracle Cure, and within hours she was completely well for the first time. Miss Williams wept for joy and gratitude when she was asked to tell the world about Mirade Miracle Cure. ‘I owe my life to Mirade Miracle Cure,’ she said, through her tears. ‘And I want to tell the whole world about it!’ Ask your druggist for Mirade Miracle Cure for any ailment. 25c and a money-back guarantee.” Another ad claimed a mother in Port Hope tried Ripans for her “incurable” son: “‘He’d have been dead today if I hadn’t been told about Ripans by a friend who sits in the House of Commons.’ Ripans, the tale concluded, ‘Cures all the common, everyday ills of humanity’” (Dahlgren, *Tales* 30).

²⁵³ The most popular product in the *Northern News* was Quickcure, which was used for sprains, colds, diphtheria, head tumours, wart removals, “lumpjaw,” toothaches, and “garget in cows!” (Dahlgren, *Tales* 32).

served to replace the medical efficacy of the products that a literate population might otherwise call into question.

Not surprisingly, local drugstores saw the advertised products fly off their shelves (33). The rampant success suggests an early example of unregulated market and a need for heightened control of unsubstantiated cure-alls. The high visibility and success of these ads in one of northern Alberta's very first regular publications speaks a great deal, particularly with respect to how text and visual rhetoric influenced citizens. Today, as prominent government officials push for the relaxing of environmental regulation in order to accelerate resource development, fossil fuels have often been framed as miracle cure-alls for a healthy Canadian economy. Likewise, despite overwhelming scientific, peer-reviewed evidence concerning anthropogenic climate change, the omnipresence of junk science (and its unsupportable claims) continues to influence northern Albertans.²⁵⁴

Gordon v. Whittle

Readers who are eager to learn more about particular long-time residents have to wait until almost halfway through the text. Dahlgren shares the story of Miss Gordon, a local figure who had not been mentioned by other writers. Gordon was well known for her hospitality toward indigenous peoples (39-44),²⁵⁵ and she was often a threat to the Hudson's Bay Company because she helped indigenous people who then traded all of

²⁵⁴ Dahlgren herself employs salesmanship in the text, when she attempts to promote the salt industry, which was struggling to move the unwanted product. The author describes ordinary salt as "essential" and "indispensable" in the chapter "The Staff of Life" (*Tales* 62) and devotes significant space to itemizing the uses of sodium chloride – from water softening and refrigeration to toothpastes and pottery (62-63). The language and rhetoric here are similar to today's energy companies, who itemize the many uses of fossil fuels in the hopes of accruing social licence. The Texas-based company Kinder Morgan, for example, identified a range of uses (Kinder Morgan). Eventually, the salt industry folded in Fort McMurray, serving perhaps as an omen of bitumen ventures yet to come.

²⁵⁵ Gordon was apparently "the only white woman within five hundred miles" (Dahlgren, *Tales* 40).

their furs with her as a sign of gratitude. Miss Gordon sometimes provided food or clothing for families one hundred miles away and served home-made bread and tea all day long. She also kept a garden that sustained her and her indigenous friends (43).²⁵⁶

Gordon's collaborations with the indigenous community ran deep, particularly with her friend of many years, Chief Paul Cree. Using only a home-nursing book, Gordon tended to all the various illnesses of Chief Cree's people. In exchange, she learned a great deal about indigenous medicines and herbs. Whether mending broken limbs or curing fevers, she consistently ventured into all manner of weather conditions in order "to perform her acts of mercy" (44). When the 96-year old Chief Cree became blind, Gordon visited him every day in his small tent, brought him food, and tended his fire. Gordon

never failed to greet him with the respect due to a Chief in his prime, as she was very meticulous about such things. As a result, Chief Paul Cree made one last request on his deathbed – that his people go out to find the tallest spruce tree on the banks of the Athabasca River, and immediately erect a very special lobster to the best friend he – and they – had ever had in the northern part of Alberta. (44)

The lasting friendship between Chief Cree and Gordon reflects a veritable intermingling of value systems and cultures.

By contrast, another woman named Anna Whittle – the wife of Old Joe Whittle²⁵⁷ – was less receptive to neighbourly relationships and visits. Originally from London,

²⁵⁶ Curiously, Gordon was also renowned for her "hobby" of rearing bear and wolf cubs "by hand," and letting many of the cubs run free in her shack for months at a time. As a precursor to the onset of scientific and technological innovation in the area, it should be noted that Gordon was appointed by Ottawa to be the "Official Keeper of the Rain Gauge," but she deliberately omitted decimal points from the log book entries, and consequently altered the accuracy of the data (Dahlgren, *Tales* 43).

²⁵⁷ Anna was described as "the screamingest woman in the western world when things didn't suit her," and her brother "was the shoutingest man in the western world" (Dahlgren, *Tales* 45).

England, Anna Whittle felt “marooned” in her remote dwelling in northern Alberta. Likewise, Whittle’s brother was unfamiliar with homesteading or hard labour, and loathed “this God-forsaken wilderness.” However, Old Joe, Whittle’s husband, remained patient despite the constant complaints of Anna and her brother. Anna Whittle resented the Waterways residents who stopped by and gave her housewarming gifts of fruits and vegetables (47).²⁵⁸ Whittle’s irritation is reminiscent of Susannah Moodie’s aversion to people who entered her home. Moodie lamented the lack of courtesy shown to European settlers in Canada, particularly when locals “entered your house without knocking,” and violated the unspoken, but cherished, law “which considers even the cottage of the poorest labourer his castle, and his privacy sacred” (Moodie 197). Anna Whittle, unimpressed by housewarming gestures, was not expecting company, because in England “people waited till they were invited before they came calling” (Dahlgren, *Tales* 47).

Soon, Anna was no longer invited to social functions – especially after she remarked loudly in front of her church congregation that Western Canadians “were without doubt the most unfriendly on the face of the globe – not to mention they were also the scum of the earth” (48). Worse, Whittle launched her nasty comments only moments after the local rector thanked parishioners for their generous contributions to the community mission.²⁵⁹ The lack of civility was finally too much for Old Joe, and he proceeded to bite off the noses of Anna and her brother. Dahlgren claims that Old Joe

²⁵⁸ Whittle was also critical of the produce she received. She inspected the turnips, cabbages, tomatoes and carrots, and insensitively started “commenting on the state they were in – not very good, according to her – and wondering aloud how fresh everything was. The whole evening was something of a nightmare for the guests” (Dahlgren, *Tales* 48).

²⁵⁹ In Dahlgren’s words, Anna Whittle “ended up calling down the wrath of God on all those present, together with all those who weren’t present and should have been, for whom she could see nothing in store but eternal damnation.” Even after “the astonished reverend attempted to stop her she knocked him down and when Old Joe tried to stop her, she and Young Joe knocked him down” (*Tales* 49).

walked into the general store, placed the two severed noses on the counter, and repeated that he was sorry, “but human nature could stand just so much, and he’d reached the end of his tether” (50). Later that day, Anna and her brother left town by train – covered in bandages. The authorities looked the other way, and Old Joe was never booked. Of course, this conclusion to Dahlgren’s story broaches the terrain of tall tales, including the claim that the noses are still being held by the police as evidence.

Regardless of the veracity of this character study, the narrative of Anna Whittle and the aforementioned Miss Gordon demonstrate markedly different values. Although supportive of resource development, Dahlgren used these accounts to compare and contrast value systems and types of behaviour. Miss Gordon embraced indigenous principles and local habits and customs concerning helping, sharing, and altruism, while Anna Whittle was weary of community, preferred a sharp critique of local customs, and literally had her nose cut off to spite her face. By opening her text at a macrocosm level and then focusing on these two characters at a microcosm level, Dahlgren’s subjective content demonstrates and edifies favourable and unfavourable behaviour for the model northern Albertan.

Jimmy Clark and the Legacy of Dahlgren’s Tar Sands

Another particularly resonant chapter in *Tales of the Tar Sands* contrasts everyday pre-existing norms and values in the region with the forces that were on their way. Dahlgren tells the story of Jimmy Clark, who had been an abused orphan in England, and had suffered permanent brain damage. Eventually Clark found his way to Canada. Although it took him some time, he cleared some land between Athabasca Landing and Fort

McMurray into a homestead he called his own. Clark also sold firewood, which he transported using the wheelbarrow he made himself.

One spring, a group of men appeared and cut across Clark's land. As a survivor of past abuse, Clark chose not to speak out for fear of confrontation; however, a stranger eventually approached Clark and told him the land did not belong to him. Apparently, the railway company had assumed right-of-way, and plans were underway to have the area fenced off. Eventually Clark had barely any access to his field, and his shack was destroyed by a fire that had been caused by sparks from a passing train engine. Clark's intellectual capacity precluded his ability to formally complain with the railway's headquarters, and he simply moved into a dugout he had made for the storage of vegetables (55). Dahlgren pointedly links Clark's plight to the actions of federal and municipal governments, who were "forever expropriating people's land, willy-nilly," and using it for other purposes. Land seizure was a governmental "bad habit" that originated from railways who were "the worst offenders" for many years (52). Dahlgren's condemnation of industry's role in forcing Jimmy Clark to end up in a makeshift hole in the ground strikes a powerful image, and seems particularly relevant today, as inter-provincial pipelines potentially uproot and disrupt citizens and residents and wildlife.

Despite many hardships, Jimmy Clark kept a garden that supplied him with enough vegetables to last all year. He regularly cut his own hair, beard, and moustache, and faithfully swept his dugout. From his trusty dugout, Clark also conversed with nature; he befriended thousands of animals, including rabbits, deer, chipmunks, and birds, and he only lost his temper when hunters grabbed his rabbits. In essence, Clark immersed himself within his bioregion on many levels.

One morning in 1939, birds, cottontails, and deer waited for Clark to appear, but he had died the night before. Clark's tale faded on a quiet and muted note. Although his narrative seemed unremarkable "in Alberta's scheme of things," Dahlgren uniquely asserts its importance. Clark should be remembered, the author argues, even if he "never amounted to much" (57).

Dahlgren's devotion of space to a local ecocentric figure who faced hardship at the hands of industry invites rumination as to what constitutes the important "tales of the tar sands." Memorable and affecting, Clark's narrative challenges the monolithic heft of Alberta's often-suffocating master narrative. The author rehabilitates – or perhaps *reclaims* – Clark's importance as someone who was unknown or underrepresented in his lifetime. Such erasures only increased in subsequent decades as narratives and discourse promoted industrial growth as inherently beneficent. Dahlgren's account helps address a lack of publicity or textual representation for figures like Jimmy Clark.

The remainder of Dahlgren's text features some references to indigenous people like Fleetfoot, a hunter and trapper who came to the aid of Eric Borradaile, a British visitor who had "the spirit of adventure" in his blood but got lost en route to Fort McMurray (72). Fleetfoot offered Borradaile shelter and was later praised for his generosity; however, similar to Mary Lawrence's text, Dahlgren reframes the trapper in supernatural terms in writing that Fleetfoot had apparently turned up dead, close to his cabin, two years earlier. Dahlgren also remarks that Fort Chipewyan, which boasted a solid population and a reliable business model in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was home to a number of notable people, including George Loutit, who had settled in the area and married a Chipewyan girl. Loutit's two sons Billy and George Junior, who

reliably transported large amounts of freight and cargo, likewise “grew up to become legends in the north” (85).²⁶⁰

From 1948 onward, Dahlgren shared her gleaned tales on the radio station CKUA and, at the time of the book’s publication, Dahlgren lived in Edmonton. In the postscript, an uncredited author declares that *Tales from the Tar Sands* is intended “for believers and perhaps a ‘pause to think’ for any unbelievers who must have proof before they’ll believe anything. Though surely there can’t be too many of those in Fort McMurray – or why would we be here?” (91). This closing remark – likely from the publisher Bernard Jean²⁶¹ – makes a distinction between believers and unbelievers and suggests that readers should have faith in the veracity of these stories, rather than become overly concerned with verifiable facts, or historical authenticity. This dichotomy has potentially problematic repercussions, and will be examined again in the sixth chapter, when Bernard and Frances K. Jean’s impact on the region will be examined more closely.

Yet Dorothy Dahlgren’s writing was not always reliable; the author herself admitted she was renowned for playing with details. According to the postscript of *Tales of the Tar Sands*, Dahlgren had sometimes been “severely rapped on the knuckles” for “not sticking to facts” with respect to “the legends she’s also recorded.” This caveat aside, however, Dahlgren’s text is a welcome inclusion in northern Alberta’s literature because of her genuine concern with the “tales of the so-called ‘ordinary’ folks who have often proved to be so extraordinary” (91).

²⁶⁰ The tales of the Loutits are generally presented in laudatory terms, but the accounts of their pratfalls and saloon brawls potentially negate deeper impressions of heroism.

²⁶¹ Since the book lists Bernard Jean Publishing as publisher, the author of the postscript was likely Bernard Jean himself; see Chapter Six.

3.4 Alvena Strasbourg

In many ways, Alvena Strasbourg's *Memories of a Métis Woman: Fort McMurray, Yesterday, and Today* (1998) – an account that is personal, industrial, and informative – seems a natural evolution of the formative women writers who preceded her. One hears echoes of Lawrence and Hughes in the 77-year-old author's declaration that the text is “my story” and “my heritage to my children” (Strasbourg 5). Born Alvena Laboucane on June 10, 1921, Strasbourg's early years were spent close to nature and later in life she became an employment recruiter for Syncrude. These disparate elements represent two fascinating backgrounds; accordingly, as both a woman and long-time local resident, Strasbourg's unique, hybridized voice in northern Alberta's literature is a welcome one.

Unexpectedly Candid Opening Remarks and Strasbourg's Early Years

In her introduction,²⁶² Strasbourg notes that she wrote the text to help others who have been abused. Strasbourg explicitly thanks “Creator” for blessings and love, followed by her parents, and then, curiously, Syncrude Canada, who provided “financial support towards the completion of my book.” She adds “God Bless” (2), then describes her transition from a life of trap lines and sod-roofed shanties to a world of board rooms and condominiums, and a rewarding position as an Elder. The inner strength that once helped Strasbourg leave an abusive partner and forge her own destiny is today recognizable to her through the indigenous women she helps.

²⁶² Prior to Strasbourg's introduction, there is also a foreword written by M. James Penton of the University of Lethbridge, who worked with Strasbourg at Native Employment Services of Alberta (Board of Directors). Penton remarks that Strasbourg was a long-time “fighter for the right,” even as she struggled in northern bush country. A “true” Métis woman who makes Penton “proud” to be Métis himself, Strasbourg took care of her family, participated in provincial and Métis politics, and devoted herself to improving the lives of indigenous people. For Penton, Strasbourg's sense of altruism also demonstrates “the truthfulness of Jesus's words” – particularly how it “is more blessed to give than to receive” (Strasbourg 1).

Strasbourg's introduction is remarkable for an unexpected reason: the author levels a pointed critique at bitumen sands development. Strasbourg invites the reader to experience some of her fondest memories of growing up in Fort McMurray,

before they discovered the oil sands. They called it progress, prosperity and wealth. But I remember a Fort McMurray when people lived with clean air and pure water, working together, sharing and caring. There was no discrimination, crime, drugs, alcohol or welfare; just a plain and simple life. This is what I call true wealth and happiness, but those days are gone.

(5)

Despite giving thanks to Syncrude in the book's earlier acknowledgments, Strasbourg's blunt statement is expressed on the first page of the first chapter ("Memories of My Life") and she laments for a time that once boasted "true wealth and happiness" – when industrial activity was blissfully absent. Now, basic fundamentals such as uncontaminated water, clean air, caring and sharing are remnants of a bygone age. In this passage, Strasbourg's deliberate use of the word "they" establishes and demarcates an oppositional other – Big Oil and its supporters – as antagonist.

In terms of the author's family history, Strasbourg's heritage combined an array of European and indigenous influences and cultures.²⁶³ Rather than blaming this clash of disparate influences for the tragedies and hardships in her life, Strasbourg credited this heterogeneity in her background for the music, laughter and love she experienced (5).

Her grandparents cleared and plowed land and built a home under the assumption they

²⁶³ Many people from Strasbourg's grandparents' generation spoke multiple languages, including Cree, Dene Th'a (Slavey), Chipewyan, Beaver, English, and French (Strasbourg 9). Strasbourg also notes that her family and her fellow indigenous neighbours "gradually meshed their practices with the Catholic faith" in order to retain various customs and traditions (26).

owned the land (7); however, the government sought back taxes on their homestead. Without money, illiterate, and unaware of their rights, Strasbourg's grandparents abandoned their farm. Eventually, big businessmen from Lac La Biche seized this prime land (7-8). In almost an echo of Dahlgren's account of Jimmy Clark and his eviction, such traumatic experiences suffered by the Strasbourg family expose the cutthroat nature of white business speculators who were willing to evict families from their land for the sake of acquisition.

The Strasbourg family moved from Lac La Biche to Fort McMurray in December 1921. Strasbourg's mother convinced the local priest to allow the family to rent the cramped upstairs of the small log church until the spring of 1928. In September 1927, Alvena's education began at the newly christened Peter Pond School where, Strasbourg recalls, the indigenous boys were placed in a line against a wall and strapped by the male principal because they had gotten mud on one of the walls (19).

The recollections of indigenous abuse at the Peter Pond School, however, did not reflect Strasbourg's own childhood. The author spent time with her family, and enjoyed fiddling, dancing, playing with dolls, and playing in the snow. Her mother told her stories that had been passed down, such as the tale of Wesake chak, a Trickster or Coyote character who fooled many unsuspecting ducks into becoming his lunch (19).²⁶⁴

Strasbourg's recollections of the early days of the Wood Buffalo community are informative. Although indigenous people comprised most of Fort McMurray's population in 1927 (24), it was the non-indigenous people who were in control of "the businesses

²⁶⁴ Wesake chak "represented a Native philosophy about the twists, tricks and funny things that happen to our best laid plans. His stories taught us to watch out for such happenings and, [sic] then to laugh at our own folly when they did. Most of all, his stories taught us an acceptance of life with all its imperfections and humour" (Strasbourg 19).

and therefore the authority” (20). Regarded as uneducated, indigenous people were relegated to trapping, hauling freight, working as deckhands, or performing manual jobs. In Strasbourg’s case, her father cleared land, cut trees and railroad ties for Northern Alberta Railways, and trapped in the winter. Strasbourg describes a childhood memory of swimming in the bitumen-soaked Hanging Stone River. Her skin became

speckled with the black tar which oozed out of the sandbanks along the river and turned the water a murky gold brown. At that time, we knew nothing about black gold or tarsands. I just remember how mad Momma got when we came home covered in the stuff. She’d rub lard on our spots and we would wash them off with warm soap and water. (27)

Strasbourg’s pre-industrial account illustrates initial interactions with bitumen that were natural, and perhaps a hindrance more than anything else.

Strasbourg describes two major natural disasters that took place over the span of two years. On one summer night in 1934, Fort McMurray “burned to the ground,” starting with the Franklin hotel. The cause of the fire remained unknown, but the disaster proved to be an instant job creator. “For the first time in years,” Strasbourg writes, “all the men in town had work” (30). Within a year, a new block of buildings and stores were built, and the re-construction process triggered a genuine sense of community. The eight hundred local citizens “shared their troubles and cared for one another” (31).

The second disaster was the flood of April 1936, when the Athabasca river abruptly broke up.²⁶⁵ As large upstream ice blocks appeared and black water poured over the banks of the ice dam, Strasbourg’s language almost emulates a Hollywood disaster

²⁶⁵ A similar pattern occurred in recent years when the 2016 forest fire was followed by flooding in Wood Buffalo in 2016 and 2020 (Lamoureux; Snowdon, “Most”).

movie. Locals “grabbed whatever they could and fled the splintering ice shards and swelling waves. The hollow roar of shattering buildings and exploding ice floes followed us as we raced for home. People called out to each other as they scrambled towards the hill” (34).²⁶⁶ Strasbourg’s father was away hunting, so it was up to her mother to move the children to safety at the edge of the hill. Many homes were destroyed, and some filled with tar, sand, and mud. Once more, the entire town had to be rebuilt (35). Thus, in the mid-1930s, Fort McMurray had to be rebuilt twice within two years. The parallels between these events and recent disasters are striking, especially in light of the fact that these historical events could have served as cautionary tales with respect to planning and the perils of building on a flood plain (B. Stewart).

Like those of her female literary predecessors Strasbourg’s text has a number of references to notable local women. For instance, Cassie Owens, the trapper wife of Grant Owens, owned the town’s first truck, and was “a tough lady” who

drove her own dog team and cussed like a man. Later on, she owned and drove a taxi cab. She ignored the hotel’s bar rules about women, joined the men at their tables and matched them drink for drink. So did my Aunt Katie. She did it, not so much because she liked beer, but because it made the men so mad. (Strasbourg 32)

Strasbourg’s mother, Aunt Katie Bird, and Caroline Newsom all helped deliver babies from Fort McMurray to Uranium City. They even opened a hospital “for pregnant mothers from out of town” (33).

²⁶⁶ “It happened so fast,” Strasbourg recalls, “we had to run as fast as we could for higher ground, with little mice racing along with us! The wild river surged through our town’s streets. Powerful waves slammed jagged slabs of ice through wooden buildings, tossing tables, chairs, barrels and boxes around like toys.” Boats had to be used along Franklin Avenue until the water level receded three days later (34).

An Abusive Marriage and Strasbourg's Courage

Strasbourg met Ed Hopegood of Gregoire Lake when she was fourteen and married him two years later (37-38). The couple had a son, but when Ed insisted the family move to a cold, remote cabin, Strasbourg became anxious to visit her family in Fort McMurray, so just before Christmas she embarked on a 27-mile trip to see them. Although Ed cheated on Strasbourg and at one point even threw knives at her, she stayed with him for another fifteen years (46).

Here, the reader discovers Strasbourg's admirable tenacity and resourcefulness. While Ed was away, the author started trapping muskrats, bought and raised mink, and collected fishnets in order to feed the fur-bearing animals. In one harrowing passage, Strasbourg describes taking her children with her on the boat one morning, when a storm hit. Although the traumatic incident scared her "spitless," Strasbourg managed to get her family to shore (45). Additionally, despite ongoing abdomen pains, the author dragged brush and trees to her cabin for firewood, checked snares, and hauled water. Driven and resourceful, Strasbourg proved herself on equal footing with men, and taught her children to hunt and trap – a role traditionally performed by males (56). She also found time to help deliver babies in the region and teach her son Myles arithmetic and the alphabet.

Perhaps Strasbourg's bravest moment occurred when she faced a large bear singlehandedly (54). One day, her children ran inside screaming after a bear appeared in the yard. Strasbourg grabbed her 22 Winchester repeater, loaded it, and warned her children to stay quiet inside. Her shot went over the bear's head, and then the animal

stood on his hind legs, claws lifting, towering over me. Then he growled, a low snarl that rose in pitch like a tomcat ready to fight. I aimed for his

head and fired. When he fell, I ran up to him and emptied my gun in his chest. I got lucky with the first shot. Somehow, the bullet hit him right in the eye and penetrated his brain. Had I wounded him, he could have killed us all. A .22 calibre gun isn't much protection against a mad bear. (54)

Strasbourg ran to a nearby home for help, and in order to pull the bear corpse away, a horse and chain were needed. In the literary roster of local narratives, even though Strasbourg's bear encounter has not been recognized in the same manner as the dubious heroics of Bezanson, "Twelve Foot" Davis, or "Peace River Jim" Cornwall, her bravery is arguably just as worthy of recognition.²⁶⁷

After months of alcoholism, verbal assault, and violent threats with knives and guns, Strasbourg left Ed for good. She cleaned homes and worked as a school janitor, then moved to Edmonton. The author believed her lack of experience and indigenious appearance hindered her job prospects, but a dry-cleaning job soon provided her with a sense of stability and the prospect of better days ahead.

Industrial Inroads

At the end of 1958, Alvena met construction worker Albert Strasbourg. He was kind to Alvena's children, and the two were married. In a welcome example of equality and mutual respect, both husband and wife held jobs and saved to get a house in Edmonton.

²⁶⁷ Irwin Huberman describes a woman named St. Arnaud who rescued a man named Sven Peterson from a black bear mother that attacked him. Peterson was a trapper, but he was not mindful of his prey, and he found himself the target of the bear attack. Ms. St. Arnaud intervened and carried the trapper over her shoulder to safety. The stout woman then helped him mend, and Sven and St. Arnaud were married, having found true love (Huberman 93). In the years that have followed, this strong example of female heroism and independence has not achieved much renown; even her given name has not been identified.

Unfortunately, in 1963 tragedy struck when Strasbourg's son, who worked in the northern oilfields, was killed in a house fire (62).²⁶⁸

From this traumatic incident, Strasbourg changed her focus entirely. The author got involved with the Métis Association of Alberta, she became an employment counsellor for Native Outreach,²⁶⁹ and she worked with Social Services, employers, educational institutions, and indigenous people seeking jobs. Her team accomplished a great deal, including placing the first woman at a major Edmonton lumber company (Marge Pariseau), travelling to various northern correctional institutions, and holding workshops for incarcerated indigenous people so that they had living and employment options when they were released.

In addition to working on local projects and consulting unions, Strasbourg met with Syncrude president Frank Spraggins regarding the company's intentions and travelled to Fort McMurray to help with a test project involving indigenous people and Suncor that ultimately did not proceed (67). A bona fide recruiter, Strasbourg helped new hires attend appointments and training sessions, find apartments, and receive start-up assistance from Social Services. She facilitated the transition "from bush town to big city" and the re-prioritization of living independently and self-sufficiently, as opposed to some of the more traditional or indigenous tenets of community and collaboration (68).

Narratively speaking, up until this point in the text familial concerns were paramount for Strasbourg; however, with the chapter "the Syncrude Boom," the author

²⁶⁸ Another tragedy occurred in September 1995 when Strasbourg's great grandson was killed at the Syncrude site. Only 31 years old, the man left behind three young children and a wife; Strasbourg takes care to point out that "Syncrude took such good care of her" (77).

²⁶⁹ Strasbourg filled several unconventional roles at once. As an uneducated Métis woman who was perceived as "doing a man's job," she struggled to connect with businessmen. Yet Strasbourg refused "to be knocked down by anyone," and this persistence paved the way to professional interactions with government representatives, colleges, and labour unions (66).

abruptly redirects the narrative away from family details and toward a focus on industry. While her personal or individual accomplishments are clearly outlined, less space is devoted to Strasbourg's family; for instance, the author detachedly writes, "Momma had passed away," without further comment. Furthermore, Strasbourg left her husband in 1974, the same year she officially joined Syncrude.

Strasbourg's role in bitumen sands development should not be understated. The author helped support the training of new indigenous hires – most with no more than a sixth-grade education – who literally helped build Syncrude, at a pay rate of \$16 an hour (69). She and Alberta's Deputy Minister of Family and Social Services also side-stepped safety regulations just to keep men working onsite and manipulated official work gear rules for the new hires. Many employees were not accustomed to regular working hours or to being punctual every day. Some disappeared after they received their pay, and although a 10% quota of indigenous employees continued for a while, the numbers soon dropped off – especially after Syncrude's "original guilt of spoiling Aboriginal lands had faded" (71).

Yet some workers thrived. Syncrude's first labour foreman, placed by Strasbourg, was an indigenous woman: Mary Cardinal had completed the Industrial Workers course and soon was promoted to the position of foreman; she even drove the large trucks. Strasbourg also helped place Leona Quintelle, the first woman welder at Syncrude. Although she was under five feet tall and left-handed, male employees appreciated that Quintelle could reach right-handed welders on the other side of the large pipes (70).

Initially, Strasbourg loaned money to workers for return flights to Edmonton to get their pink slips, but some pocketed the money and never returned. She also personally

transported employees to worksites, but eventually stopped in order to encourage an ethic of individual responsibility. Gradually, Strasbourg's sense of trust eroded, even as her career accelerated. In 1975, she sat on the board of AOSERP (the Athabasca Oil Sands Environmental Research Project), an organization that checked for potentially damaging pollution and tested the water and the fish.²⁷⁰ She also commuted to Edmonton to help abused and battered indigenous women, organized a conference to promote indigenous employment, and submitted proposals to the government for young and at-risk women to get work training (72), and applied for new programs at Syncrude for indigenous people.

In effect, Strasbourg transformed from strong woman in northern Alberta's forested domain, to strong woman in the business sphere. This transition reads rather awkwardly, though, as when she remarks that Syncrude took over completely, but also was

so good to me. I picked out a house in Fort McMurray and Syncrude did the rest. They told me, 'The next time you see your stuff, it'll be in Fort McMurray.' They packed my belongings, hauled them to Fort McMurray and moved them into my house. They even hung my clothes in the closet, arranged my furniture and nailed my pictures to the walls. All I brought was my suitcase and my plants. Syncrude paid me one of the highest wages for a Native woman, including a wonderful benefit plan. They gave me a raise every six months. (73)

While the author's newfound success is certainly well-earned, the writing here seems an advertisement for Syncrude and its generosity – particularly since the company clearly

²⁷⁰ In order to attend the meeting, Strasbourg rode a helicopter for the first time, and she "floated over so many areas filled with my childhood memories. It felt like a summary of where I came from and what I had achieved as we slowly flew over the Suncor and Syncrude sites" (71).

benefited from the optics of Strasbourg's prominent, essentialized indigenous status. This promotional aspect culminated with Strasbourg's attendance at Syncrude's grand opening in September 1978. Acting as hostess to business officials, politicians, and shareholders, the author helped give the tacit impression that indigenous people were comfortable with the Syncrude project. Now an official recruiter of indigenous people, Strasbourg moved to the Fort McMurray office, while also making a number of presentations, and attending recruitment conferences across Alberta to lure prospects from nearby reserves. As she befriended these new recruits, Strasbourg also presented Syncrude's promotional films.

Ultimately, Strasbourg left Syncrude in June 1979, but she does not elaborate upon her reason – perhaps because of the aforementioned support in the publication of *Memories of a Métis Woman*. Her career changed abruptly from a high-ranking position at Syncrude to a string of failed business ventures. Yet this re-direction also proved to be the catalyst for a rewarding third act of her life story.

After the deaths of her brother Ambrose and her husband Albert, Strasbourg worked with MLAs to help seniors obtain housing in the Anzac area (76). The author sat on the Athabasca Native Development Corporation and was later elected its board president, served on Keyano College's Board of Governors, was a member of the ill-fated Alberta-Pacific Environmental Impact Review board,²⁷¹ and continued to work with Syncrude, Keyano, and the Opportunity Corporation to ensure indigenous people had the opportunity to take training programs. Too restless in her twilight years, Strasbourg joined the mayor's Crime Task Force, and co-chaired a steering committee that

²⁷¹ Ultimately, Strasbourg's contributions on the review board were in vain. While northern Alberta's indigenous people "did not want Al-Pac destroying their forests and polluting the air and water," their voices were ignored by the government and Al-Pac was allowed to proceed (Strasbourg 77).

redesigned services for families and children and submitted these plans to the Alberta Government. As an elder, she was inducted to the Métis Hall of Honour, and became a board member of Native Employment Services.

Parting Hopes and Conclusion

The nomadic Strasbourg moved dozens of times in her life, but for the most part she stayed in northern Alberta. The author intended *Memories of a Métis Woman* to be read as a cautionary tale concerning violent relationships, but was also dedicated to her kind, hardworking parents and grandparents who, “like the squirrels in the fall,” planned ahead for inevitable winters. These family members taught Strasbourg “how to survive off the land, how to be strong and how to live a good life” (78).

The author continued to help indigenous people, but she insisted that the best way to keep children from going astray was for them to be raised with “a strong Christian upbringing about morals and values” (79). Strasbourg’s legacy included at least 25 great-grandchildren and at least 7 great-great-grandchildren at the time of her death in 2016 at the age of ninety-four. Her text concludes with the words, “God Bless” (80).

After Strasbourg’s service on an array of boards and committees, readers are left to decide if some of the author’s appointments were the result of decades of hard work, or if they were partly prompted by corporations and organizations that sought to meet quota requirements of indigenous representation. The question seems a moot point though, because there is little doubt that the author used these positions of power to incite change at a transformative level.

The fascinating details of Strasbourg’s life invite renewed popularity and long overdue critical engagement. Yet there is an additional postscript that warrants further

praise: the publication of *Memories of a Métis Woman* came about after Strasbourg tried to find any books about northern Alberta and its history, but could only find one book (Gladue 9).²⁷² The author decided to write her book in secret, then took her manuscript to an editor, and then to Jean Publishing; the rest is history.

For the attentive reader, northern Alberta's women writers offer a great deal. Unlike previous dominant narratives, the works of Lawrence, Hughes, Dahlgren and Strasbourg made room for intriguing detail, alternative perspectives, and subjective context. Despite her awkward phrasing concerning indigenous residents and customs, Mary Lawrence avoided entrenching herself in a strictly colonial perspective; upon her arrival, she adjusted her perspective – and her narrative, for that matter – to confront many new challenges and realities to reflect a willingness to learn about this new region on its own terms. One may easily compare A.M. Bezanson with Lawrence, since both families were linked to numerous ventures in the region, had ties with industry leaders and policy-makers, and eventually left northern Alberta; however, the former devoted much of his text to depicting the region in the settler-based way he chose to see it while the latter devoted much of her text to depicting not only how she saw the region but how the local inhabitants saw it and lived it. Equally enlightening were Katherine Hughes's observations of an area that was previously unknown to herself; after the author literally passed by the properties of previously lauded figures, she wrote, emulated and appropriated early explorer narratives and male texts. The underlying purpose and

²⁷² The book was Darlene J. Comfort's *Pass the McMurray Salt Please!: The Alberta Salt Company As Remembered by Three Fort McMurray Pioneers*, published in 1975. Strasbourg published an article, "Life After Oil," in *Alberta Oil* circa 1999.

outcome of Hughes's expedition was decidedly different from Peace River Jim's sales-pitch-like expedition peddled to a select group of policy-makers and influencers.

As bitumen sands experiments and projects in the region accelerated, so did the number of industrial and outside voices. Fusing the tales of local people with personal commentary concerning industrial expansion, Dorothy Dahlgren brought a provincially-based perspective to Alberta's literature that was heretofore sorely lacking. Dahlgren opened with the tale of a natural gas flame but she also included examples of – and warnings about – false advertisements and misleading claims that were quite timely in 1975; readers further saw challenges to existing norms through the accounts of Miss Gordon, an ally of many indigenous people, and Jimmy Clark, an unsuspecting victim of unrestrained industrial domination. Finally, with raw descriptions of domestic abuse and relentless initiative, the fascinating chronicle and trajectory of Alvena Strasbourg's tumultuous life reconfigured traditional conceptions of heroism, sacrifice, and the power of persistence. Strasbourg's eventual transition toward a life of altruism and indigenous engagement ran contrary to many of the self-motivated intentions that continue to underpin bitumen sands development.

Yet there is still the question of how and when the current glut of technical and extraction-based literature came to be. It is time, then, to look back at some texts that are inextricably linked – in both favourable and unfavourable ways – to industry's early years. The next chapter will examine some of the formative bitumen sands-related texts that helped shape the region for decades to come.

Chapter Four

Key Texts from the Early Days of Bitumen Sands Development

In Chapter One, I outlined some important recurring themes and in the next two chapters I examined some of the men and women who have contributed to the historical, literary, and cultural context of the region. In this chapter, I examine a book that blends poetry and storytelling and also, surprisingly, is produced by one of the most prominent figures in bitumen sands development. Then I look at two industry-centred books from the early years of bitumen sands development that engage with northern Alberta's dominant narrative of resource extraction from rather divergent perspectives.

The first work, *Northland Trails* by Sidney (S.C.) Ells (1936; reprinted in 1956), contains examples of ecologically attentive observation, respect for and friendship with indigenous residents, admiration for early settlers and pioneers, and praise for bitumen sands inventors. These seemingly disparate elements are accompanied by images drawn by the author, and the result is a multimodal artefact that predates the official launch of Great Canadian Oil Sands – an event at which Ells himself was in joyous attendance (Fitzgerald 180).

The second and third works are Larry Pratt's *The Tar Sands: Syncrude and the Politics of Oil* (1976) and J. Joseph Fitzgerald's *Black Gold with Grit* (1978). Published in the 1970s, these analytical and practical texts provide illuminating perspectives concerning justice, manipulation, power, and influence. Much of today's industry-related literature – whether for, or against, extractive projects – owe an informational and literary debt to the Pratt and Fitzgerald texts.

Twenty years after Ells's text, Larry Pratt's *The Tar Sands: Syncrude and the Politics of Oil* was published. The book was an uncanny examination of the perils of implementing infrastructure projects too quickly and the ramifications of ceding preexisting principles and democratically-based processes to outside agents. This cautionary text teems with concrete, well-researched data that – under other circumstances in another region – might have been heeded and might have changed the trajectory of bitumen sands development forever. Instead, the popularity of Pratt's book dwindled over the decades.

In many ways, *Black Gold with Grit*, published two years later, was a calculated literary response to the significant negative publicity triggered by Pratt's text. Highly indebted to Big Oil and its key influencers (by his own admission), Fitzgerald employs an array of phrases, expressions, and talking points that are now commonplace in the rhetoric of today's policy-makers.²⁷³ If Pratt's *The Tar Sands* exposed a number of glaring flaws with respect to bitumen sands development, *Black Gold with Grit* helped to partly cover those flaws back up again.

4.1 Sidney Ells: Bitumen Pioneer, Bioregional Poet

As we have seen, much of northern Alberta's literature focuses on autobiography, non-fiction, and historical account. *Northland Trails* by Sidney Ells stands apart from these genres, however, because it is a mixture of poetry, hand-drawn illustrations, local stories, nature writing, and folklore. Such a hybridized text – past or present – is a rarity in

²⁷³ In perhaps a response to Fitzgerald's text, Rick Boychuk wrote a book 8 years later titled *River of Grit: Six Months on the Line at Suncor, Ft. McMurray, Alberta, 1986* (1996). Boychuk provided an account of a key standoff in 1986 and used "grit" to describe the plight of the bitumen sands workers who picketed at Suncor, while their employers – the benefactors and corporations enumerated in Fitzgerald's text – were re-framed as rivals or antagonists.

northern Alberta literature, and even more peculiar because it was created by one of the founding fathers of the industrial development of the bitumen sands.

Northland Trails was initially published in 1938 and re-published again in 1956. Both of these publications pre-date Ells' better known work, *Recollections of the Development of the Oil Sands* (1962). Although *Recollections* acts primarily as a summary of topographical surveys, exploratory research, paving experiments, and drilling and refining tests, the text is also decidedly subjective – particularly in the passages that present Ells's self-described hardships in a heroic light. The style of *Recollections* is more like a narrative than strictly a scientific account, and the text concludes with a reminder to readers that labour provides society with all of the things it currently enjoys, as well as what it needs (*Recollections* 100) – a sentiment that continues today (Petroleum Services Association Canada). Also significant is the fact that, as early as 1962, Ells was one of the first writers to insist that the term “tar sands” was inaccurate; the author specified in *Recollections* that “oil sands” should be used, even though he acknowledged that the term was “also open to criticism” (*Recollections* 1). The word “tar” is absent from *Northland Trails*, except in a footnote (*Northland* 77).

In recent years, *Recollections* has been the subject of critical analysis (Gordon; Gismondi and Davidson). Jon Gordon²⁷⁴ draws particular attention to Ells's propensity toward colonialism and self-appointed heroism through the inclusion of passages from Rudyard Kipling's poetry in *Recollections*. Northern Alberta's ties to Kipling have

²⁷⁴ Although his important text falls outside of the scope of my dissertation, the late Jon Gordon's *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions* (2015) merits special mention and acknowledgment. The comprehensive book represents the culmination of years of research and includes analyses of Ells's text and works from Rudy Wiebe, Thomas King, Marc Prescott, Warren Cariou, L.M. Shyba, among many others.

precedent. James G. MacGregor (see Chapter Two) cited Rudyard Kipling at length and also compared the region's first pioneers to Kipling (MacGregor 357-360) – likely because of how the poet's colonial themes struck a familiar resonance. Ells uses two Kipling poems, "Kim" and "If," to bolster a Dominionist position. With his reference to "Kim," Ells effectively presents himself "as one of the heroes worthy to be called a 'man' by Kipling's speaker" (Gordon 53). Like Kipling, Ells had a "vision of imposing order on self and otherness." He embraced the mindset that mankind rightly owned everything on earth, and that human freedom was contingent upon the domestication of nature (55). In 1962, Ells reflected back on his own contributions to bitumen development and thought of this era as a time when every part of Rudyard Kipling's "If" was being "lived" (*Recollections* 3). In the closing couplet of Kipling's 1910 poem, readers are assured that – provided they follow the speaker's list of conditions – "Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, / And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!" (Kipling 1153). As has been noted earlier, this dominionist worldview is problematic, particularly from an ecological perspective. In "If," readers are assured that even when a man fails in his attempts, he is still noble, regardless of the outcome.²⁷⁵ Since Ells had a number of setbacks in the bitumen sands, Kipling's dictum must have resonated strongly, and

²⁷⁵ Ells's advances and setbacks in bitumen sands development mesh quite well with Kipling's plea to watch the things you gave your life to, broken, And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
 And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
 And lose, and start again at your beginnings
 And never breathe a word about your loss;
 If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you
 Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!' (Kipling 1153).

provided solace from the setbacks and reputational damage that surely struck his ego.

In addition to the Kipling references, *Recollections* reprints two poems from Ells's earlier *Northland Trails*. Other than those two poems, however, Ells's original 1938 text has yet to receive substantial analysis. The following section outlines some of the unconventional and illuminating content in Ells's multifaceted work, including his edifying incorporation of bioregional content, proficient use of poetic and literary devices, extensive and diverse subjects, and detailed character studies for several little-known figures, including Walter Johnson and John "Playboy" Appleby.

"More Vital than Mere Statistics": Ells's Bucolic Bioregional Content

Ells's career in the region began in 1913, the same year that saw the publication of Charles Mair's influential *Through the Mackenzie Basin*. Upon his arrival, Ells surveyed, dug pits, drilled samples, and attempted a number of bitumen separation tactics (Gordon 54). He appreciated this outdoors work, and the author used this immersive experience as inspiration for the poems and stories that would become *Northland Trails*. For Ells, the time he spent in nature allowed him to observe "certain phases of life" that tended not to be "properly appreciated by those engaged in other forms of activity." Ells bemoaned the proliferation of specialized or niche careers in fields such as chemistry, physics or engineering, and he lamented that humans were increasingly withdrawing into their "own individual cells" (*Northland* 6).

The dedication inside *Northland Trails* is addressed to "old comrades of paddle, tracking line and trail" (4), but the book's content extends beyond this target audience and is accessible to readers of all backgrounds. For the younger set – and perhaps those with tenuous literacy skills – *Northland Trails* is filled with illustrations by its author (see

Appendix M to S). These home-made drawings mythologize or iconize representations of the area, and many of the images depict men shown from the book, their faces obscured. Such renderings give the impression of a universal[ized] male subject who has conquered his male surroundings. For those seeking creative writing concerning the region, the book features three dozen short stories and poems, all written by Ells. The strategy was deliberately cross-disciplinary; Ells hoped that people from an array of backgrounds and fields would be interested in his subjective impressions of northern Alberta. In fact, the book's preface emphasizes that pre-existing data and statistics were an "inadequate" way to describe the north; Ells wanted to show readers "something more vital than mere statistics – the atmosphere of the great North land and the spirit of its people" (5).

One example of how Ells attempts to depict the region beyond an analytical approach can be seen with "The Silver Fox," which is represented in three different ways: as a short story (13-22), as a poem (73-74), and as a set of illustrations (13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 73, 74). In the short story "Silver Fox," the speaker outlines the long journey and distance that one specific animal pelt makes, from the time the initial fox is trapped to the time the pelt reaches a wealthy purchaser. Here, Ells's rather unconventional consideration and contemplation of the life cycle of a specific object within a complex capitalist system is similar to the ecologically-grounded concept of encouraging people to chart a given object's history. Environmentalists, for instance, might encourage citizens to consider the trajectory of drinking water, from its initial form as precipitation to the moment that it comes out of a household tap; similarly, one could consider the trajectory of garbage from the time it is first thrown out to the time it arrives at its final destination.²⁷⁶ As the

²⁷⁶ These examples first gained popularity in "Where You At? A Bioregional Quiz" (Charles et al). For an example of the quiz applied pragmatically, see "Where You At? A Bioregional Quiz" (Gan).

trajectory of the fox's silver fur is recounted, Ells outlines a complex system of inputs, outputs and channels for this resource before it arrives at its final destination: a seemingly oblivious, upper-class consumer (Ells returns to this narrative strategy again in his poem of the same name, "The Silver Fox": 73-74). The wealthy patron's ignorance of the pelt's history is a microcosm of capitalism's ability to mask the means of production of a given object, and Ells's rhetorical approach urges an entirely new way of perceiving a northern animal's life, death, and transformation into a commodity.

Ells's short story also features a human who is strongly connected to his surroundings. In "Silver Fox," a trapper named Joe Pelequin reacts instinctively, and "as bird and beast," to the four seasons and their various natural indicators (14). Pelequin relies upon the patterns he discerns within his ecosystem, and his behaviour and mentality are necessarily biocentric rather than anthropocentric. The short story concludes with the death of the trapper, and the narrator insists that order has been restored with Pelequin's demise, because God reigns over trappers and wildlife alike (22). This incorporation of Dominionism suggests that a Judeo-Christian God maintains a sort of life-and-death equilibrium under ostensibly pagan nature and Métis people alike. Since the coda also returns to the dainty lady patron "absentmindedly" caressing her new fox fur (22), Ells's narrator seems to resent or criticize the frivolity of the steep price paid for a pelt.

In addition to Ells's unorthodox depictions of a fox pelt and the environmentally intuitive trapper Pelequin, the short story "Silver Fox" also announces Ells's use of lush diction that bears a striking similarity to the *sprung rhythm* technique found in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. For instance, when Pelequin descends the Athabasca River, the reader encounters: "Twisting paddle, thrusting pole, straining tracking line! Sluggish

backwaters, *dappled* with the woodland's tarnished gold, rushing streams flecked with gleaming foam, lonely lakes already fringed with young ice, slowly faded astern" (16; emphasis added).²⁷⁷ Like Hopkins' poems, Ells' words and their strategic placement create inevitable textual pauses; readers must wade through each word as if they were plunging through the icy waters themselves. Even in his prose, then, Ells's descriptions of nature are highly poetic, and inescapably lush. In this regard, the author is distinct from most other north Albertan writers up to this point who rarely experimented with form, language and means of expression.

Ells's Diverse and Topical Exploration of Northern Life

The use of sprung rhythm – as well as other techniques throughout *Northland Trails* – suggest Ells was familiar with, and perhaps studied, prominent poets and writers. Many of his poems seem inspired by Canada's Confederation poets (Ross vii-xii), and his diction shares commonalities with lyrical, Romantic, and Victorian styles (including Hopkins). Underlying many of the poems is a thread of hyper-masculinity – or, as bpNichol once put it, the “macho male bullshit tradition in Canadian poetry” (Nichol, “Some Words”). Although space limitations in this dissertation preclude in-depth examinations of each poem in *Northland Trails*, a brief overview provides helpful insight into some of the subjects and topics on Ells's mind.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Ells's use of the word “dappled” is a particular hallmark of Hopkins's poetry; see “Pied Beauty” and “The Windhover” (Hopkins 1047). Other examples of Ells's sprung rhythm include frost that “sparkled” and ducks and geese that are “[g]abbling” (*Northland* 14). Also, in James G. MacGregor's *The Land of Twelve Foot Davis* (see Chapter Two), the author is similarly influenced (see Appendix B).

²⁷⁸ Some examples of other subjects in poems include the “new El Dorado” (*Northland* 23, 75), campfires (91-94), cavemen (95), and dinosaurs (including illustrations of various dinosaurs drawn by Ells; 78-81). Some tropes recur: when describing life or nature, Ells uses the word “business” (i.e. the “real business of life”: 16, “the business of a frozen world”: 19, “the business of life”: 30); Ells also tends to employ theatre-based references, such as actors, characters, and the stage (30, 48, 169, 187).

From the first poem onward, Ells is comfortable characterizing northern Alberta as “untamed” and “[p]rimitive”; it is a place where men experience “spacious freedom” and a respite from the “tedious treadmill” of city-based life (“The North” 10). In some poems, nature poses tantalizing challenges to adventurous souls (“White Water” 12), and dares newcomers to show they are brave and strong (“The Pioneers” 43; “Canada’s Last Great North: THE CHALLENGE” 65-66). Nature even whispers, “Come, tame me if you will,” and “Harness me if you can” (66). References to the irresistible “call of the North” continue throughout the book (“The Siren” 44-45) (“The Call!” 164-179).

Ells often oscillates between a tone that is ecological or bioregional with a tone that is anthropocentric and favours capitalism and industrial development. A poem like “The Song of the Pine” is a formidable reflection on a natural object – even though the accompanying drawing depicts a white man standing while an indigenous woman sits at his side like a pet (see Appendix S) – while the next poem seems like a counterpoint; “Gold” is a short story about a northern Ontario man named Charles Duncan, whose research takes him to Egypt’s gold mines of Nubia. Such shifts in tone are dramatically different from previous local and ecological content, and the laudatory passages involving gold and wealth seem awkward and anachronous (126-130). A similar contrast occurs when the connected-to-place poem “The Woman Pioneer” (136-137) is followed a few pages later by “Oil Shale” (141-146) – a short story that reads more like a collection of scientific notes and industry facts that diverge from ecological or regional concerns in favour of promoting the merits of fossil fuel development. In the short story, Canada’s mining industry is referred to as a “lusty young giant,” oil shale experts wear khakis that are “beloved to the cult” and work to free humanity from monopolistic and “sinister oil

barons.” Meanwhile, underneath northern Alberta lies the “real treasure-house” of “black gold” that is both “the life-blood of industry” and “civilization itself” (141).

This classification of fossil fuels as civilization’s “life-blood” is accompanied by an elevation of the status of the groundbreaking men who help lay the framework for fossil fuel development. In the poem “The Seekers,” Ells characterizes those who work in oil and gas as noble “men of the new frontier!” (24) who are “the spiritual descendants of the restless adventurers of untold past generations, brothers of research workers and of seekers in every form of human endeavour, and sires of an industry on which modern civilization largely depends” (23). Ells’s language is unmistakably clear: bitumen sands researchers – a group of which he is a member – are “selfless,” vital men who have “scorned a life of sheltered ease” so that an imperial presence could be established in Canada, and because they have been “spurred by a purpose high” to join the north’s “mighty brotherhood” (24).

Ells’s fawning admiration continues when he later compares scientists to the men who left their castles and embarked on quests to find the Holy Grail (“Followers of the Grail” 147-152). Chemists who currently toil in their labs are effectively re-enacting the rubbing of Aladdin’s magic lamp; wealth suddenly “appears,” in the sense that products and inventions that come from these unlocked fossil fuels will enhance the “otherwise drab and sordid lives” of everyday citizens (147). After researchers wave a “magic wand,” factories quickly sprout up and multiply. Then – in an all-too-accurate prediction of how bitumen sands pioneers have been commemorated – Ells writes that future generations will “bless” the names of the original engineers and their innovative visions (149). The “Followers of the Grail” section is a particularly strong exaltation of inventers,

researchers and engineers, along with their so-called “knightly deeds” (148). When paired with Ells’s repeated insistence that the land beckons to be tamed, such accolades of innovators as chivalrous are fraught with ideological implications.

Walter Johnson and the Quest for the Authentic Self

Although many of Ells’s poems and short stories are high-level and relatively broad in scope, there are two more personal short stories: “Squawman” and “Playboy.” Ells devotes more textual space to these subjective narratives, and as a result the title characters are the most memorable figures in *Northland Trails*. Both stories merit examination here.

In “Squawman,” Ells describes an evening in 1927 when he personally visited the cabin of a white trapper named Walter Johnson and his wife Wasaya, who was of indigenous descent.²⁷⁹ Even as the trapper’s story begins, there are telltale signs of the language of adventure, quest, and exploration: Johnson was a city-dwelling man who left a “hard mechanized life” of superficial and “ruthless” competition in the south for a new life in the north (30). The bulk of Ells’s short story unfolds as it was relayed to him by Johnson. Ells’s intermittent use of frame narratives is another indication that the author was incorporating a wider variety of literary techniques in his writing.

When he first arrived by train at a settlement in northern Alberta, Johnson had just finished his first year of university. He was immediately lured by the “dark wall of forest” that lay beyond the community (31). “Bronzed and bearded” and “throbbing with

²⁷⁹ The year itself may be in question. In the preamble to “Squawman,” Ells writes that he met the couple in 1927 (*Northland* 29); however, in the preamble for his poem “Wasaya” Ells states that he met them in 1932 (67).

vitality,” he stood alone, immersed in nature, and “greedily” drank up the North’s spirit, which would become his “very essence” (32).

Initially, Johnson was lonely, but soon he befriended the trapper Grant Sanderson, as well as Sanderson’s indigenous wife, and their daughter Wasaya.²⁸⁰ During the time Johnson spent with the Sanderson family, he “developed new view points,” revised his “preconceived ideas,” and discarded earlier ways of thinking that seemed comparatively “trivial.” By watching Sanderson and his wife, Johnson began to understand how the basic fundamentals of teamwork, cooperation, mutual support, and equal distribution of tasks strengthened the couple’s affection for each other. Johnson comes to the conclusion that the women he had previously known were aimless and unaware of the true importance of a relationship based on reciprocity and mutual respect (34). As presented by Ells via Johnson’s testimony, these observations and conclusions expose his (ostensibly white) readers to an indigenous way of life, an alternative value system, and an example of authentic gender equality in practice.

Johnson’s exposure to indigenous values allowed him to become more “fully attuned to his new surroundings.” His “receptive mind” assimilated and absorbed nature’s beauties. As he taught himself trapping, Johnson (now “Squawman”) became “an intimate part of his new environment” (34). He observed the behaviour of animals and nature’s “moods,” he “absorbed” the Northland’s spirit, and he experienced “a feeling of kinship with the north and her untamed children” (35). He even listened attentively to the

²⁸⁰ Later in *Northland Trails*, there is a separate poem titled “Wasaya,” wherein Ells/the speaker recalls his first encounter with the indigenous woman and her white husband (Johnson) in 1932. The poem concludes with a sharp criticism of the “feeble” concept of “man-made marriage vows,” and the speaker argues that the “stronger” bond is courage, “cheerful hope,” and “mutual helpfulness.” In this relationship of true reciprocity, Wasaya and Johnson face the North side by side, “as one!” (71).

trees (36). These transformative encounters with the land, the plants, and the animals profoundly impacted Johnson's perception, mindset, and lifestyle. His bioregionally-motivated engagement with nature is significant because, as described to Ells by Johnson, this transformative experience is in turn relayed to Ells's readers *by* Ells – one of the principal architects of bitumen extraction – and reads as a kind of endorsement of biocentric values.

One particularly interesting facet is Johnson's development as a writer. After the trapper became Wasaya's husband, he wrote a poem about his experience hearing the song of the North Wind. When Wasaya read his poem, she wept at her husband's "true" words and the way he imagined himself floating down the Athabasca alongside aboriginal and Métis voyageurs (37). Johnson continued to write, but when he completed a short novel, he told his wife he wanted to leave the region to determine his publication prospects. The decision sent Wasaya into profound despair; nevertheless, Johnson left for New York City.

At this point in the story, Ells's narrator pauses to differentiate between urban and northern ways of life, and criticizes greed and capitalism, while endorsing community-focused lifestyles. Apparently, city life fosters mob mentality, while northern life encourages individualism, strength and reliance (38); city-dwellers engage in nasty competition, and the best candidates often fail, but in the north, mutual cooperation, respect, and commonly shared goals elevate society; southern culture is heterogeneous and "parasitic," whereas the north is "homogeneous and free from sharp cleavages" (39); finally, even the snow in the south seems more "polluted" and the human-made environment appears to be a manufactured place where "mechanical routine" supplants

independence, but the snow in the north is an “unstained virgin blanket of white” and the natural environment is naturally graced with unfettered wilderness sounds (39). While the numerous contrasts in this section of the story seem to unambiguously praise a remote, rural living, note that this way of life explicitly entails a push *away* from the ecological principles of heterogeneity and multiplicity.

Lured back to civilization, Johnson spent months in New York City, and soon stopped sending letters to his wife. Northern Alberta, “and all that it had once stood for,” faded from his memory. Johnson’s new writing career kindled an interest in money, and sometimes he “prostituted his genius by dashing off flamboyant, distorted tales of a fictitious northern life” (39). Johnson’s willingness to take liberties with how northern Alberta is depicted aligns with liberties similarly taken by other writers we have already examined in this dissertation – and Johnson’s distortions and fictions are doubly metatextual, in the sense that Ellis also presents *Northland Trails* as a series of short stories and poems about the region.

The reader discovers during the story’s climax that Johnson attended a masquerade celebration for the rich and influential, where he expected to further celebrate his literary works. At the costume party, Johnson saw a girl dressed in buckskin and fur, and he was suddenly reminded of his wife Wasaya and the northern life he had abandoned. Unsettled by the sight, Johnson stood on a chair and the costumed crowd awaited what the mysterious “wild man of the north” would say. Amidst the party guests who dressed as characters, Johnson told the crowd that he felt like Judas for his “Great Betrayal” (40); he had intended to come to New York to “inscribe a name on the literature of the city,” but now his more important ambition was “to erase a name.” This decision to erase the

Johnson name from the literary sphere is a striking and intriguing metaphor for the rejection of his urban persona and an embrace of his northern, rural identity.

The story concludes with Sidney Ells's arrival into the region, and how he comes to learn all of these details from Johnson and Wasaya, the "happiest" couple north of the railroad (41). Impressively, in addition to the meta-textual elements, Ells's story includes an indictment of capitalism and greed, some bioregional encounters, a prospective template toward an indigenous way of life, and a pronounced emphasis on equality between the sexes. One of the most important elements of this short story is Johnson's aforementioned decision to erase his own name. "Squawman" wrote about the north, left the region to socialize with wealthy urbanites, and ultimately decided to return to the north and a life of trapping. Today, there does not appear to be any record of Johnson's poems or short stories; therefore, his name does seem to have been effaced. All that remains is Ells's account of Johnson, as it appears in *Northland Trails*. Conversely, Ells – a self-professed nature-lover – has been christened the father of the oil sands (*Recollections* 101), and his name has been immortalized. In effect, this bitumen sands pioneer wrote a short story about another author who initially wanted "to inscribe a name" for himself (*Northland* 41), but Ells's name has endured while the trapper/author's name has all but disappeared.

The Union of Two Cultures in "Playboy"

In addition to Walter Johnson and Wasaya, Ells introduces another interracial couple in *Northland Trails*. In the short story "Playboy," the characters of John Appleby (the titular "Playboy") and his wife Abidaska seem like Adam and Eve. Much like Johnson and Wasaya, the Applebys are presented as masters of their destinies, particularly after they

enter into nature together as newlyweds and discover they must mutually depend upon each other in order to face every wilderness challenge (51-53).

Originally from California, John was a “true son of the northern race” who wanted to pit “his young strength against the forces of nature” (48). Believing his California friends to be slaves to convention, he left California and went to northern Alberta. There, he witnessed a bustling outdoor community that was “bound together by a spirit of mutual helpfulness, united in the pursuit of common interests and a common cause.” Local residents ignored pettiness and etiquette and prioritized the shared goal of domesticating the land. John became “inoculated with the contagious spirit of this new frontier,” and northern Alberta’s “virgin forest” (48) seemed “fresh from the hand of nature,” because it was pleasantly devoid of garish monuments that glorified the conquest of civilizations. Instead of sweeping epics, the only link to the past came from “quaint Indian legends” (50).

John severed the shackles of artifice that had tethered his life, and six years later he married Ojibway woman Abidaska – a “dusky daughter of the northern wilderness.” By now, John (Playboy) was renowned in northern Alberta, a place “where the strong survive and the weak go to the wall, where a man’s deeds are his sole press agent” (52). John’s face also grew darker, and “only his features belied his race.” His simple marriage ceremony with Abidaska at the Mission Chapel was the last step in a lengthy initiation that merged “his life, body and soul, with that of a native woman” (51). At the post-wedding festivities, all races and sexes were treated equally. Afterwards, Playboy and Abidaska departed for their honeymoon free from the traps, conventions or inhibitions of

civilization, and they planned to “live the normal lives intended by the Creator” (53).²⁸¹

In Ells’s description of the honeymoon, Playboy and Abidaska are transformed into archetypes of Adam and Eve. Along “nameless” waterways and “uninhabited hinterland,” the couple idled at their leisure, and camped wherever they wished. Animals and fishes were plentiful, and the two humans enjoyed boundless, youthful health. At the same time, the couple also forged a “foundation of mutual helpfulness,” because they shared burdens and common goals; together, they shared a dependence as they confronted nature with complete confidence in one another (53).

Unfortunately, tragedy struck. Just as the couple was beginning their symbiotic journey together, Abidaska hit her head on a branch, and then a rock, and she was killed. Her death was a reminder that northern Alberta was “a stern mother” (55). After he shot at a policeman who was investigating a trapping quarrel (61), the devastated Playboy went into hiding like a hunted animal. Ten days later, the authorities caught up to Playboy and the law got its revenge.

There are a number of similarities in the “Playboy” and “Squawman” short stories, but the examples of collaboration with respect to culture, race, and gender – reflected by the two marriages – are particularly striking. Ells’s real life encounters with these couples made an impression on him; the unions represented a sense of partnership between the urban and the rural, man and woman, and white and indigenous, while also offering a glimpse into how the relationship between industry and nature – or, for that matter, capitalist and community-based value systems – might coexist.

²⁸¹ As a white man entering the region and embracing indigenous culture, Playboy’s immersion into an indigenous way of life differs from the appropriation-based “Playing Indian” counterculture movement in North America during the 1960s and 1970s, as chronicled by Philip J. Deloria (1998).

Conclusion

As with many other literary works from northern Alberta, the author inserts himself into *Northland Trails* at certain points. In “Squawman” and “Playboy,” Ells refers to himself directly as a kind of objective narrator. In “The Athabaska Trail,” Ells places himself into the historical moment when a crew of indigenous and Métis men personally followed the first bitumen sand shipment as it departed Fort McMurray and headed south (25). In other poems and stories, he compares scientists and resource developers to modern day knights and pioneers (165) – thereby *indirectly* praising himself and the company he kept, as well as the industry that would soon characterize the region at large.

When *Northland Trails* was published, *Canadian Mining Journal* remarked that geologists, explorers, and fur traders were expected to be “practical men,” and that it was rare for such men to express their thoughts and ideas creatively – whether in verse or in fiction. Preexisting regional writing usually originated from outsiders who only spent a short time in the north, but *Northern Trails* was a pronounced exception to the rule. The journal heralded Ells’s “great book” as a text that transcended “the ordinary ruck of books into the level of literature” (*Canadian Mining Journal*). Of course, such praise should be taken with a grain of salt, as Ells himself was affiliated with the Department of Mines for years.

Nevertheless, Ells’s ability to write about nature and aboriginal culture as well as bitumen extraction and development was unique. According to Jon Gordon, Ells could express his scientific proficiency in his industry writing, while simultaneously being cognizant of the ecosphere and the limitations of what humans could conquer. Rather sweepingly, Gordon also argues that Ells “was instrumental in achieving our

contemporary freedoms in Canada through both his scientific expertise and his representations of that expertise in discourse,” but he was also partly aware “of an order beyond that imposed by human conquest” (55). Notably, the conclusion of 1962’s *Recollections* barely mentions the impact of industry: Ells downplays conflicts or clashes that may occur between wilderness and modernity. In fact, for his epilogue he reproduces the same poem that concludes *Northland Trails* – a passage that does not allude to industry at all (*Recollections* 105; *Northland* 189). Instead, the epilogue focuses on nature, and how a “rugged twisted pine” will be Ells’s natural tombstone after he dies (189). Gordon perceives the concluding poem as a reiteration that Ells was convinced that nature would not be affected by fossil fuel extraction – even long after his death (57). Although he was an environmentally attuned poet, Ells often presented nature as subdued. He confidently presented the forest, muskeg and climate “as human trials” or “obstacles to be conquered” by the “hardy men” tasked with the development of Canada (Gismondi and Davidson 46). Ells may have loved the land, but his pivotal role in bitumen development also threatened its well-being. The author’s epilogue in *Recollections* – an otherwise technical document – only addresses nature, and therefore seems like Ells repressed or perhaps denied the threat posed by his coinciding industrial actions.²⁸² Like Ells’s epilogues, today’s industry advertisements tend to minimize visual reminders of resource development’s formidable impact, and leave viewers with the impression that nature has been accounted for, and perhaps will even thrive.

According to the daughter of bitumen sands pioneer Karl Clark, Sidney Ells had a

²⁸² Describing Ells’s diction in 1962’s *Recollections* as “ideological” and “hegemonic,” Jon Gordon argues that Ells’s two poems “glorify” modernity’s impact on the region (58). Ultimately, engineering was Ells’s chosen public role, and the author avoided depicting technology’s consequences “by imagining an upwardly counterfactual future free from [these consequences]” (59).

great deal of power (Clark Sheppard 9). As we have seen, this power stemmed not only from his pivotal role in the development of the bitumen sands, but from his role as an author and storyteller. Beyond its poetic content, *Northland Trails* was an endorsement of industrial development of the bitumen sands, and Ells's illustrations reinforced the impression of a wilderness region that would remain untouched for the foreseeable future (see Appendix M to S).

Ells controversially presumed himself to be the “only expert” on the topic of the bitumen sands (Parker and Tingley 49), and like A.M. Bezanson and “Peace River Jim” Cornwall, Ells was not afraid to use “great rhetoric” when it came to bitumen-related projects (124). Like Robert Fitzsimmons and other bitumen pioneers, Ells was not always friendly with his contemporaries. Apparently, he loathed Karl Clark so much that he wrote an attack on Clark which was published in 1925; Ells even continued to hate his rival after Clark had died (Clark Sheppard 11, 27). There is also a river named after Ells; the waterway originally had an indigenous name, but it was subsequently changed to Ells River (Clark Sheppard 13).

As a text that is concerned with the region's past as much as its present, *Northland Trails* is unique in northern Albertan literature. Bioregional content stands alongside industrial content; nature writing bookends technical language; and personal character accounts contextualize and illuminate early life in Alberta's north. Ells's subjective elements balance with ostensibly more objective elements, and the end result is a complex, diverse, and multi-faceted artefact.

4.2 Larry Pratt: A Prescient but Stifled Voice

By most accounts, Alberta was heading on a different track when bitumen sands development first began. The provincial government wanted to keep the resource within the public line of sight and was already working with reliable data and information in terms of environmental assessment, fair royalty compensation, and access to important research and technological developments. After the launches of Great Canadian Oil Sands (1967) and Syncrude (1978), however, such standards were abandoned or diluted as Big Oil established that it would determine policy and change regulations requirements immediately. Alberta's willingness to reverse course on its once-promising standards, metrics and priorities marks a key turning point in the province's values.

More than anything else, Larry Pratt's *The Tar Sands: Syncrude and the Politics of Oil* represented a factual intervention against an otherwise beloved organization. From the beginning, Syncrude has been a major player in the bitumen sands but the corporation has also propagated a narrative of feel-good prosperity and community beneficence (*Syncrude*). The company's actual history, however, is much more complex and problematic. Even before Syncrude's well-publicized initial launch, the company's success was contingent on a guarantee of significant federal tax subsidies, while local residents were expected to quickly and amenably forfeit key stakes in the project and quietly relinquish any civic or social control to multinational interests. Ottawa complied with Syncrude's unprecedented demands because it had no other option, and because Peter Lougheed, the premier of Alberta, insisted that the deal was in the nation's interest (L. Pratt 20). In the company's early days, local citizens were unable to voice their concerns about Syncrude's irregular royalty scheme, looming environmental impacts, or the potential consequences of rapid industrial development in the region. These

suppressive strategies marked a shift toward private interests and away from earlier procedures in which citizens engaged in large-scale decisions that affected the community, even well into the 1960s.

Such dubious activities were meticulously outlined by Pratt. Syncrude sought to avoid payment of royalties to Alberta, used Bermuda tax shelters, and even failed the very environmental assessments they conducted themselves. Whenever the company wanted to dig in on a given issue, it threatened to pack up and leave the region. Meanwhile, during the petroleum crisis in the 1970s, it ran advertisements worth millions of dollars – which were often tax deductible – to promote an image of innocence in the face of gas prices, even as it drew record profits (81).

The Tar Sands exposed these important facts, and Pratt outlined the numerous warning signs that preceded Syncrude's inception. Pratt's book represented one of the first times an author targeted bitumen sands policy, the fossil fuel industry's impact on northern Alberta, and the insufficient role played by elected officials. After the book's publication in 1976, Pratt's severe warnings represented a threat to Syncrude's reputation, and industry swiftly pushed back.

Surprisingly, Pratt's detailed arguments were primarily sociopolitical and financial; environmental concerns occupied only a portion of the book.²⁸³ Yet Pratt's worries, cogently and eloquently deployed, were prescient harbingers of problems that would plague northern Alberta for decades to come. Journalist Andrew Nikiforuk considers it "astounding" how Pratt's urgent call to action "very, very clearly" predicted so many industrial and political problems (Henton). I agree with this assessment; *The Tar Sands*

²⁸³ As Robert Page confirms, Pratt's text "is not a book for those who are seeking a detailed discussion of environmental or technological issues" (Page 246).

was indeed a canary in a *bitumen* mine. In the same way that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) was a fact-based, cautionary account of the imminent dangers of pesticides that eventually became a catalyst for stronger industrial regulation and more stringent monitoring, Pratt's book outlined and itemized the inevitable consequences of Syncrude's development plans with similar hopes that changes would ensue.

It was, of course, a different time. In the 1970s, fossil fuel giants did not have to contend with petitions, local pushback, or environmental protests, yet a literary text like Pratt's still posed a threat. In printed form, the cumulative impact of so many damning facts, presented through an unexpected counter-discursive narrative, all had the Rachel Carson-esque potential to upset problematic practices before they became habits or the status quo (i.e. what they ultimately became). Not through newspapers, radio or television, but through literature, Pratt spoke with a clear voice that stood alone, since there do not appear to be any other prospective voices of opposition from that time that have survived.

Putting Big Oil's Priorities First

While Sidney Ells's *Northland Trails* presented a region where community and indigenous ways of life coexisted alongside fossil fuel extraction, *The Tar Sands* demonstrated how political priorities and pre-existing principles changed after government began to partner with industry. These alterations were significant: initially the Alberta government sought a diversified economic plan and insisted that bitumen sands development should constitute only one part of the strategy; conservation requirements and stringent regulations were supposed to have been implemented immediately; Canada and Alberta expected to receive fair resource royalties; growth and

expansion were intended to be methodical and “orderly” and multinational interests were not supposed to dictate how the region would proceed (L. Pratt 27). Although a development strategy clearly identified these and other requirements, Syncrude drew up its own list of demands, and Ottawa eventually agreed to each one (28-29). In recent times, similar lists of environmental concessions have been granted to the fossil fuel industry by Ottawa.²⁸⁴

In the decades that followed, the province retreated from technical reports and findings. According to a recent University of Alberta study, the Alberta government used to requisition detailed, scientific studies in the 1970s and 1980s in order to better understand prospective bitumen sands policies, but eventually “abandoned that role” altogether in order to promote, market, and popularize the industry (Paskey et al. v). Where once Ottawa and Alberta spent millions on impact studies, the evidence collected in the 1970s was ignored and now the research gathers “dust on the shelves” (Henton). Since that time, over 100 projects have been greenlit.

The prioritization of industry interests can partly be traced back to 1951 when, at the inaugural Oil Sands Conference, a cabinet member in Premier Ernest Manning’s government told businessmen that, in earlier days, the “primitive red men” welcomed newcomers like Peter Pond and Alexander Mackenzie. The minister in question, Gordon E. Taylor, then proclaimed, “May the words ‘welcome’ and ‘oil sands’ ever be closely associated” (L. Pratt 31). This declaration that two of the region’s early colonizers had been greeted warmly to the area was doubly ironic because the 1951 conference room

²⁸⁴ There is a lengthy history of quid pro quo between Ottawa and Big Oil. Keith Stewart notes that industry fabricates pro-fossil fuel organizations under the pretense of grassroots origins, such as the CAPP-invented “Energy Citizens” group (K. Stewart).

demarcated the starting point when international fossil fuel companies and businessmen likewise would subsequently arrive to develop and colonize the region. For Pratt, who likewise feared that northern Alberta would be treated like “a resource rich colony” (112), this crucial moment effectively signified the “sell-out of the tar sands” (30).

The Language of Colonization

The pathway to Syncrude’s substantial clout had been made easier not only because the Great Canadian Oil Sands (GCOS) had already been running for some time, but because the new value system represented by GCOS – the endorsement of capital, wealth, and expendable resources as inherently good – was tacitly accepted. When he spoke at the inaugural launch of GCOS in 1967, J. Howard Pew – a profoundly conservative, rich, “religious and paternalistic” patriarch – remarked that free enterprise was “right,” and was crucial for “the North American Way of Life” (44).²⁸⁵ Apparently this was the message that endured, and not the fact that GCOS lost \$90 million from 1967 to 1974, including \$7.1 million it received from Alberta, and \$6 million from Ottawa (45-47). Such early bitumen development failures would likely have folded permanently without significant financial support from government. Today, similar subsidy and tax break arrangements continue; recent reports estimate that subsidies have reached \$2.74 billion (US) or \$3.3 billion (Cdn) annually (Hamilton; Milman), and some of these are locked in for at least another decade (International Institute for Sustainable Development).

In the wake of the GCOS example, Pratt effectively depicted Syncrude’s arrival through the lens of colonialism. Energy promoters, like the region’s early settlers and

²⁸⁵ In Pew’s mind, the development of the bitumen sands played a key role in “the global struggle against Godless Communism” (L. Pratt 44).

explorers, believed themselves to be “rugged individualists” – even though their projects were paradoxically dependent upon government support during the first decade of operations (L. Pratt 85). As they happily watched Canada “cash in” on fossil fuel resources, these energy promoters and corporate executives were in an ideal place to implement a “profoundly colonial” view of the world. Located far from Canada’s “vulnerable hinterlands,” these men made large-scale decisions that had significant ecological and social consequences, including leaving the area altogether after the drilled holes dried up and the pipelines were no longer used (64). Since these men helped the United States meet its fossil fuel demands, Pratt called them “[g]ood colonials to a man” (65).

Syncrude owes its existence to the supply and demand needs of the United States, but it was indebted to one man in particular. Walter J. Levy, a corrupt oil consultant from New York, was paid a great deal of money to influence energy strategies on both sides of the border. Known as the “Kissinger of oil” (53), Levy wanted all fossil fuel development choices left to the oil industry (69), and he advocated for barring the public from becoming engaged in policy considerations or discussions. Primarily, Levy wanted Canada’s fuel resources to help the United States “recapture her slipping hegemony” (56). Accordingly, an array of dishonest and misleading tactics were deployed to influence the Lougheed government (54), such as using “highly debatable” sources in briefing reports and deliberately omitting crucial content (69-71). Two choices were presented: subsidize foreign energy companies or watch bitumen sands development fail (60). Since the United States was already re-directing \$510 billion of its taxpayer money

to fossil fuel corporations via “Project Independence” (57), the perceived threat was too great for Alberta’s anxious politicians to refuse.

Levy’s ploy seems even more impressive in light of the company’s origins. In its early days, Syncrude was intended to serve as nothing more than an expense account of sorts, or “merely a cardboard, store-front company” (119).²⁸⁶ However, the lure of untapped bitumen reserves catapulted a theoretical name into very real operations and activities that had little to do with Canadian interests. Syncrude was “the hybrid offspring” of four United States-controlled petroleum companies (118); as such, the company was “about as Canadian as the stars and stripes” (122). Plans to employ Canadian personnel, capital, technology, and materials were stymied, and when the Lougheed government tried to protect Canadians from foreign domination, Syncrude’s representatives put a halt on negotiations because they insisted on full disclosure and discretion over any present or future research (123). In due time, Peter Lougheed’s government capitulated to every ultimatum, including preventing unions from the right to strike, permitting multinational companies to dictate royalty rates at very low prices, and sacrificing environmental protections (115-132). Syncrude’s demands were tantamount to what the federal minister of Energy, Mines, and Resources called a “sweetheart deal” (127). In order to ensure the project went ahead, Syncrude also routinely made threats and concocted tall tales about the supposed scarcity of fossil fuels (156). Few words seem as apt a descriptor for northern Alberta during this period than *colonized*.

Endless Growth and Expendable Space: Disrupting Fallacies

²⁸⁶ Today, many smaller companies regularly change names in order to shift legal responsibility or to induce economic and financial loopholes (see Stastny for a list of companies).

Crucially, Pratt's book confronted a number of popular fallacies – some of which continue to be inaccurately invoked today. For instance, in 1974 Ronald S. Ritchie of Imperial Oil Ltd. erroneously claimed that fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources were inexhaustible. When Ritchie made these comments at a symposium titled “Our Disappearing Resources,” he clearly spoke in direct contradiction to the basic scientific tenets outlined in Malthus's *The Limits of Growth* (L. Pratt 65).²⁸⁷ One newspaper editorial remarked that Ritchie's claim – that resource extraction can “continue indefinitely” and that the planet's resources “will never really run out” – was likely to have been music to many ears, and must have been received by attendees “like a ray of light” (*Lethbridge Herald*).²⁸⁸ In Pratt's view, Ritchie, the “anti-Malthusian” (L. Pratt 69) who also ran in the 1974 federal election as a Conservative candidate, was clearly parroting the “self-serving” rhetoric of the fossil fuel industry, embracing a “myopic, technocratic perception of the world,” and promoting an ideology that was “profoundly colonial in nature” (67-68). Such cognitive denials concerning the limits of growth persist to this day, and are especially visible in advertisements that tout “abundance” and the benevolent development of natural resources (these types of ads are accessible at the extensive and essential online database mediatoil.ca). According to Pratt, in the 1970s Albertans were likewise “obsessed with growth” and had accepted the “doctrine of open-

²⁸⁷ These remarks, and Pratt's response to them, anticipate the writings of Tom Wessels (see page 15-16 above). For Pratt, Ritchie's claim of never-ending fossil fuels, and the blunt denial of *The Limits of Growth*, symbolized all that was wrong with energy policy in Canada. Pratt resented how Ritchie's “glib, facile optimism” did not even pause “to consider the heavy human costs and the ecological degradation” that would have to be accepted “as the price of his technocratic solutions. Energy substitution is an extremely arduous, time-consuming and expensive process which has very definite limitations.” Although crucial, Pratt clearly states that the transition away from fossil fuels will not be “magical, swift or painless” (66).

²⁸⁸ This sanguine and inaccurate message is also important in light of the fact that Ritchie served as the inaugural head of the Institute for Research on Public Policy, one of Canada's first think tanks (65). In subsequent decades, many right-leaning think tanks have adopted similar positions concerning unfettered growth as they attempt to popularize extraction-based agendas.

ended progress through individual initiative” (97). The notion that industry was vital to the region had become a popular “fixed belief” (98), but Pratt wanted citizens to question the benefits of growth compared to its long-term consequences (98).²⁸⁹

Ronald Ritchie’s comments also demarcate a turning point of sorts, as Alberta’s natural spaces were increasingly perceived as commodities rather than as integral parts of complex ecosystems. For Pratt, this paradigmatic moment occurred at the moment when “a true hewer of wood and drawer of water” stared into a crystal ball and perceived only limitless forests and oceans, free to be culled and gleaned in perpetuity (68). This shift toward the large-scale commodification of nature paired well with the tacit belief in endless growth as well as “the mindless assurance that technology will always provide the answer” (66). Pratt, however, was critical of this new way the private sector perceived the Albertan landscape, and how it ignored the aforementioned limits of growth; his preference was for a more manageable, common sense option with respect to bitumen sands development.

Ritchie’s flawed statements concerning limitless growth anticipated similar remarks from Herman Kahn of the Hudson Institute, a right-leaning U.S.-based think tank. Under the belief that the bitumen sands should be owned by international interests and not Canada, Kahn perceived northern Alberta to be “a relatively undesirable environment” in the first place (qtd on L. Pratt 75). Kahn assumed that no amount of restoration could make the area aesthetically pleasing, so he minimized the severe impacts of strip-mine

²⁸⁹ In his book *Justice* (2009), Michael Sandel similarly argues that citizens must ask themselves what kind of world they want to live in, and communities must identify the values they consider to be essential before they pursue any potentially polarizing issues. The blueprint for shared values should be debated and determined first, because otherwise the market may attempt to “rewrite the norms that govern social institutions” (265).

surface reclamation, wastewater disposal and pollution. Remote “undesirable” areas like Fort McMurray were ideal locations for development because they were unlikely to receive any pushback or opposition from environmentalists or others (75). Again, such rationalizations bear the traces of a colonial mindset.

Swift Backlash and Attempted Suppression

Eventually, major energy companies obtained leases, and they enjoyed “an absolute stranglehold” on this “prime mineable area” (95). These land leases were parsed into arbitrary large and rectangular shapes; however, as Pratt observed, from an environmental perspective it would have made more sense to establish borders that followed the paths of watersheds or natural markers, or that took into consideration where plants tended to join or thrive (104). In other words, Pratt advocated in 1976 for a more bioregional division of the land.

Industry also sought to conduct its operations in private; however, as Pratt noted, unconventional fossil fuel extraction is an inherently public undertaking and there is no such thing as “private” activity with respect to major bitumen projects (84). People’s lives are impacted in countless direct and indirect ways, so terms like “private enterprises” and “private interests” remain inaccurate at best. Yet even in the 1970s, important facts and data were increasingly hidden from the public, regardless of their potential social impacts and consequences. This newly privatized environment helps to contextualize Pratt’s efforts as he used his writing to thrust these private elements into the public sphere.

The unexpected public exposure of *The Tar Sands*, then, posed a very real threat to Big Oil because the major impacts of large-scale development were outlined so clearly

and persuasively. Significantly, Pratt uncovered startling information from provincial and federal sources, who admitted that most of northern Alberta's forthcoming bitumen sands projects were all but guaranteed to cause widespread damage. These comments were substantiated by the findings of top-level organizations; when Syncrude attempted to compile and release its own environmental impact assessment, Environment Canada classified the corporation's documentation as "deficient," determined there was "a likelihood for major environmental damage" (107), and accused Syncrude of using insufficient data and relying on conjecture.²⁹⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly, Environment Canada's scathing document has become scarce compared to other reports issued by the department.²⁹¹ Any attempts to access the 1974 material online redirect users to a hyperlink for Syncrude's corporate website, and a web page titled "More 2 the Story" – a strategic, counter-counter-discursive phrase that suggests only one side is being heard, and Syncrude wants readers to hear its side. Clearly, Environment Canada's condemnation of Syncrude failed to dissuade large-scale development in the 1970s. Likewise, present-day projects are allowed to proceed despite the certainty of major damage. The Kearl bitumen sands mine for example, located 70 kilometres north of Fort McMurray, was approved in 2013 even though Environment

²⁹⁰ In the department's report, Jeanne Sauvé, the federal Environment Minister, revealed that she and her staff were constantly obstructed from obtaining basic information from Syncrude. Moreover, the company did not address the formidable challenges of environmental protection in either a satisfactory or realistic manner (L. Pratt 107). Syncrude's assessment lacked qualitative and quantitative ecological data, the content was opaque and "conjectural," and the general absence of substantive detail led Environment Canada to conclude that "major environmental damage" was likely to take place (107-108). Even at this early juncture, then, Ottawa was already "concerned" that Syncrude was likely causing major environmental damage, taking a "glib approach" to wildlife, not addressing emissions through technologies, and not providing reliable documents or evidence to prove that their reclamation plans were feasible (108).

²⁹¹ Although Environment Canada's 1974 document is scarce, Pratt does mention a decade-long \$40 to \$50 million research program – co-announced by Alberta and Ottawa – that began in February 1975.

Canada explicitly acknowledged that the Kearl project was expected to cause “significant adverse environmental effects” (Environment Canada 1). For decades, development has rarely been delayed, and this phenomena can be traced back to the 1970s, as great lengths have been taken to suppress uncomfortable content.

Upon its publication, *The Tar Sands* sold a respectable 13,000 copies and was turned into a CBC docudrama. In other words, the facts and the information uncovered by Pratt were *out there*. People began to question the downside of rapid expansion in the bitumen sands, as well as Syncrude’s true motives. Pratt’s urgent message of moderation and prudence was not kindly received by all – especially those who judged the book solely by its cover. The jolting image selected for the book jacket depicted three men stuck in place by oozing bitumen – Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed, and Mississippi-born Syncrude president and lobbyist Frank Spragins, for whom a Fort McMurray high school is named (see Appendix T). The response was swift. In bookstores, the jackets for *The Tar Sands* were removed and to this day they no longer cover copies of the book – even in libraries.

After the CBC piece was televised, Larry Pratt was slapped with a \$2.7 million lawsuit. Peter Lougheed apparently took issue with the way he was depicted in the piece.²⁹² This intervention would have ripple effects. No new or revised editions of *The Tar Sands* were ever published. Without re-circulation of Pratt’s uncovered content, his findings quickly faded from the public sphere.

²⁹² “The Tar Sands” was an episode of *For the Record* that was written and directed by Peter Pearson. The program depicted interactions between Alberta politicians and the fossil fuel industry and triggered a libel suit for the CBC (See *Museum of Broadcast Communications*). In May 1982, the CBC reached a settlement and agreed never to air the “The Tar Sands” again.

Industry's lobbying efforts were so persuasive that all of their objectives between 1972 and 1975 went unchallenged. A book like *The Tar Sands* could not be permitted to intervene; by 1976, any criticism of development, or the dissemination of any unfavourable facts, was viewed as "treasonous" (L. Pratt 11). It was Larry Pratt's wish that every Canadian would learn about Syncrude and the oil lobby's formidable political power (9). "The tar sands concern us all," Pratt wrote. Every Canadian, "and every Canadian's children and their children, have a direct stake in the future development of our energy resources" (23). *The Tar Sands* exposed "the astonishing clout of the Big Oil lobby" (Henton) and illustrated in plain language the ease with which industry accessed and influenced politicians at all levels. Had it not been so fiercely suppressed, Pratt's book could have had Rachel Carson-sized impacts.

Diction Differences, Enviro Concerns, and Final Forfeiture of Control

For as long as there has been development in northern Alberta, great pains have been taken to cast industry activity in positive or negative lights. With respect to a high-stakes project like Syncrude, these rhetorical distinctions were often stark. For example, in *The Tar Sands* Pratt reproduced a paragraph from a report written by Alberta's civil servants which explicitly cautioned that, unless preventative steps were executed, eventually there would be "partial to total denudation of the surface vegetation," the flow of waterways would be altered, the surface hydrology would be "totally obliterated," and fauna and flora would be disrupted on a "massive" scale. In 1973's only major environmental survey there were clear warnings of "enormous" and anticipated impacts to Alberta's ecology if the Syncrude project was to proceed. Senior provincial officials even went so far as to admit they believed Fort McMurray would turn into "a lunar landscape" and a

“biologically barren wasteland” if development occurred (L. Pratt 102-103). Although uttered decades ago, these terms call to mind present-day aspersions about northern Alberta from noted public figures such as musician Neil Young and filmmaker James Cameron.²⁹³ These celebrities used nearly the same language as the 1970s provincial officials to describe what indeed has come to pass with respect to the region’s landscape – yet they were fiercely lambasted (see page 123 above).

Such apocalyptic language from Alberta figureheads was countered by organizations like the Energy Resources Conservation Board, who envisioned the future landscape of their province as “dotted” with coal gasification plants, “huge” petrochemical plants, widespread extraction operations, new strip mines, “and myriad other *blessings of industrialism* – a veritable *New Jersey of the north* crisscrossed with energy corridors and roads to nonrenewable resources” (L. Pratt 48; emphasis added). The Conservation Board’s use of “blessings” presents an image of large-scale projects as divinely sanctioned. The effort to restore the language of beneficence toward bitumen sands development was underway.

Although environmentalists were not yet an existential threat, the environment itself may have been showing early signs of wear and tear. Even before there was a rudimentary understanding of the ecological makeup of the region, rapid development was occurring. Extraction operations at Tar Island almost defied description, and GCOS looked “like it came boiling out of the imagination of some early surrealist painter with a fascination for monstrous earth-moving machines and smoke-belching factories – a celebration of the triumph of technology over wilderness” (15). Since GCOS had already

²⁹³ After viewing bitumen sands surface mining from above, James Cameron called the sight “appalling in its scope and scale” (Lehmann); see also Abid.

turned its original lease into “an ecological disaster” of “black, scarred earth” (16), Pratt worried that ecological considerations would be diluted by the politics of bitumen sands development, and that environmental liabilities or damage costs would be offloaded to the public sector (103-104). He also chastised Syncrude for the way it treated resources and even people as expendable.

As it turned out, Pratt’s environmental concerns were well-founded, even in the mid-1970s. The author accurately described the highly contaminated water that contributed to tailings ponds, and which posed a “threat of serious pollution” to the atmosphere and nearby water supplies. Since extraction operations required a formidable amount of fresh water, Pratt was unsettled by the proximity of the tailings ponds to the Athabasca River. These ponds, he noted, would irreparably change the surface of the land and turn it into “a worthless, lunar-like habitat.” Much like today, industry provided a “stock reply” to the situation: not only would the surface be reclaimed, but government officials declared that the surface would be “more biologically productive after reclamation than before its disturbance” (105-106). Even in 1976, Pratt correctly predicted that reclamation would take generations. Further, the author pointed out that industry tended to drill large holes and then leave without sufficient cleanup (64); this trend also continues to this day (Ward).

Prior to the eventual approval of the Syncrude project, executives sensed public pushback because of their considerable influence on government. They decided to publish a “slick” brochure titled “1973: Year of Decision.” In effect, the company relayed its own account of the tense negotiations that led to the project’s eventual approval (L. Pratt 117). Pratt, however, described the Syncrude negotiations as a series of one-sided

demands for Alberta to obey. Alberta would not be allowed to develop or own technological innovations (124), and Syncrude insisted it would not pay resource royalties on any year of loss (129). Further, Syncrude demanded immediate notification prior to any potential changes to the Clean Air and Clean Water acts. During its first five years, the corporation also faced no environmental regulations, and was exempt from acting on environmental problems in a timely manner or even spending too much money on them (131).²⁹⁴ These and other threats culminated in a secret meeting at the Shangri-la restaurant in winter 1975, when several key decision-makers participated in what Pratt calls “the great \$2 billion Syncrude poker game” (150).

In the end, Alberta conceded to every demand, and assumed “the humiliating posture of a supplicant literally begging Syncrude to proceed” (132). The \$500 million project ballooned to \$2 billion by the end of 1974 (134), and when Lougheed’s government conducted audits of the Syncrude project, three of the four consulting firms that were recruited had previous ties to the petroleum industry, so most of Syncrude’s figures were accepted sight unseen (168). The corporation was also permitted to “write off” more than \$500 million of investment (176).

Over time, the government seemed to forget altogether about the possibility of public ownership, particularly as industry fomented an atmosphere of “ideological distrust” toward anything that threatened to impinge on private interests (170). Ideally, the extensive facts and details in Pratt’s book would have translated into an invaluable

²⁹⁴ The Lougheed government also had to promise that no strikes or labour lockouts would take place during construction of the Syncrude plant, and back-to-work legislation would be enforced on Syncrude’s behalf if necessary (L. Pratt 132). Publicly, Peter Lougheed made it appear as if his government was deciding the terms, but there is extensive evidence that industry was the only one calling the shots (133). Pratt outlined a number of additional benefits and lucrative tax breaks granted to Syncrude, and these are only the publicly known concessions – other costs and compromises may have remained hidden.

learning opportunity – and potential course of action. As journalist Darcy Henton asks, “Where was everybody during those three decades?” (Henton). This question encapsulates the obvious elephant in the room – the basic inability, or unwillingness, of Alberta and Canada to handle the inconvenient realities exposed by Pratt.

Larry Pratt’s evisceration of the Syncrude project was evidence-based, pointed, and methodical. The development of the bitumen sands necessarily involved “massive environmental disturbance” (35), and the author presciently noted that northern Alberta’s “tranquil, untouched wilderness” was not so much “tamed” as it was “devastated” (14). Extreme energy implied “gigantism,” and in 1976 the act of transforming bitumen into a marketable commodity was a costly and “appallingly dirty business” (15-16).

With clear, accessible diction, Pratt identified and explained the significant problems associated with a project that was still comparatively new. These facts and truths however were scuttled from public visibility. After thousands of Canadians were exposed to these sobering warnings, public awareness and civic pushback posed a real threat that necessitated immediate action. Consequently, authors like J. Joseph Fitzgerald decided to publish books of their own.

4.3 J. Joseph Fitzgerald: A Counter-Pratt’s Narrative of Success

J. Joseph Fitzgerald’s *Black Gold with Grit* (1978) was published soon after Larry Pratt’s scathing account of the Syncrude ordeal. Pratt’s dissection of the shortcuts and abuses of power threatened industry’s master narrative of stability and progress. Fitzgerald’s book therefore presented bitumen sands development as the end result of a sequence of industrial milestones, where even the failures helped contribute to an overall narrative of success. Fitzgerald’s recontextualized interpretation of history has continued to be

iterated today in places like the Oil Sands Museum in Fort McMurray, and this subjective revision was reinforced by his personal involvement in the field itself.

Unlike Pratt's text, *Black Gold with Grit* was state- and corporation-sponsored. Fitzgerald opens the book with a special thanks to a minister with the Government of Alberta, and then in a Patrons list, he thanks 38 businesses, including Alberta Oil Sands Technology and Research Authority, Alberta Syncrude Equity, The Bank of Nova Scotia, Chevron Standard, Great Canadian Oil Sands, Healy Motors, Imperial Oil, Petro-Canada, Sun Oil Company of Canada, and Syncrude Canada. In light of these benefactors, Fitzgerald's diction often reflects an understandable bias toward industry. In the preface, his praise for fossil fuels and their capacity to meet man's present and future needs reads like an extended advertisement (Fitzgerald xiv). In the wake of Pratt's incendiary findings and cautionary warnings two years earlier, *Black Gold with Grit* emphasizes that the prospects for bitumen sands development are solid and bright.

Fitzgerald even claims that indigenous people put northern Alberta's bitumen directly into non-indigenous hands (12). In 1719, an indigenous man named Wa Pa Su "placed in Henry Kelsey's hands the chunks of oil sand, and a non-Indian had, for the first time, what would become the exhilarating experience of feeling oil ooze from the sands of the Athabasca ... The groundwork of equitable and friendly trade with the natives of the unknown region had been laid" (11-12). Fitzgerald's language tacitly suggests a fair and willing transfer of control and ownership of the resource.

The narrative of success in northern Alberta is similar at times to the strategies used by other writers discussed earlier in this dissertation. This section will begin with Fitzgerald's focus on early explorers in the region, and how he personally followed in

their footsteps. The analysis then shifts to Fitzgerald's praise of bitumen sands pioneers like Alfred Von Hammerstein, Sidney Ells, and Robert Fitzsimmons, and concludes with a reminder that the author acknowledged environmental problems but ultimately advocated for extraction to continue.

Praise for Historical Figures ... and Himself

Unlike Pratt, who grounded much of his argument in recent events, Fitzgerald appeals to the history and tradition of the region as a strategic starting point. Fitzgerald cites the groundwork laid by explorers like Peter Pond, John Richardson, and others, and then writes about himself as if he too is a similarly influential pioneer who has contributed to the region's overall master narrative. In the foreword to *Black Gold with Grit*, Fitzgerald provides a description of himself walking into the north and carrying an oar shortly after he received a naval discharge (xi). The "magnificent" bitumen sands practiced their "magic" on the author (xiv), and, like the explorers who preceded him, Fitzgerald's arrival to northern Alberta was marked by bitterly cold winds, muskeg expanses, and lonesome campsites. For Fitzgerald, these hardships were

the stuff of Jack London and Robert Service. In my heart, I had discovered the north as surely as had Peter Pond and Alexander Mackenzie. It is an endless, silent land where the few people one encounters are, of stark necessity, self-sufficient. *They are hardly people*, conveying in manner and speech the openness and friendship that are the natural reward of independent existence. (xiv-xv; emphasis added)

Like that of the early explorers he invokes, Fitzgerald's perspective rests upon a sense of colonial superiority. Although the author praises the independence of the region's inhabitants, he nevertheless distinguishes them as "hardly people."

Upon his arrival, Fitzgerald establishes that his participation in the bitumen separation process has been predestined and unavoidable because of his masculinity. From his first day in the region onward, Fitzgerald and "the cold, willful Athabasca ... became involved in a romance she would never discourage me from" (xvi). The new "romance" is initiated by Fitzgerald, the *subject* who acts as innovating male, who dominates the land, the *object* that acts as obstructive female. This representation of northern Alberta as subjugated female calls to mind a similar experience described by Renée Hulan, an ethnographer. Hulan writes that the relationship between a country and an individual "can be emotional, even erotic" (22), and every writer and critic who perpetuates the image of "a masculinist, engendered north" into the national consciousness simultaneously magnifies the country's status as an official, unified state (12). Hulan also noted that when she wanted to explore the popular belief that Canada's north had its own unique identity, she first had to engage in a masculinist act of "penetration" into the subject culture, and then dominate it; such an act of domination effectively feminizes the subject culture (26). Fitzgerald's use of masculinist language and diction in his introduction and elsewhere in the text is reminiscent of E.J. Pratt's "Towards the Last Spike."²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ Frank Davey once observed that the narratives in E.J. Pratt's poems "are of the objective kind" (Davey 33), and the "overwhelming tone of confidence" and omniscient perspective in "Toward the Last Spike" helped the poet create "the impression that he is totally in control of the substance of his narrative" (37).

During his first visit to a work camp, Fitzgerald encountered tall evergreen trees, and he had a near-sublime experience within this “silent cathedral” of nature (Fitzgerald xvi). This sense of awe changed once industrial operations began. From that point onward, the bitumen sands were perceived “strictly in monetary terms,” and as highly beneficial for Canada’s economy (6). By Fitzgerald’s estimates, the dollar value of the sands could theoretically provide each Albertan over \$1 million apiece, and at least twenty or thirty more bitumen sands plants could easily be built (7-9). Like the region’s early explorers and settlers, all of the people who contributed to the story of the sands possessed both “an indomitable spirit of daring and adventure, and energy well matched to the exigencies of a wilderness that throws deep boreal forests, impassable muskeg and white-water rapids in the path of even the most determined” (10). Evidently, boreal forests were nature’s impediments to adventurous, industry-friendly spirits.

Like James G. MacGregor before him, Fitzgerald introduces several historical figures, and then, like A.M. Bezanson before him, integrates his own experience – albeit in the development of fossil fuels – into this larger narrative. Originally from the Maritimes, Fitzgerald remarks that he is indebted to the “enigmatic,” “engaging,” and “colourful” Peter Pond for charting the bitumen sands. In order to quench his “yen for excitement” (12), Pond traveled to the region in 1778, in search of “new land” (13); however, as Fitzgerald points out, the “rather romantic picture of Peter Pond struggling into the promised land of the fur trade” was popularized by authors like Douglas Hill or Harold Innis, and this rhetorical tactic seemed to have paid off because it has endured (14). Pond attempted to chart the locations where he saw tar; however, as has been established, Pond’s maps were flawed (15-16; van Herk 41-42). Despite these

cartographic errors, Pond christened a great deal of the area, since he considered the Athabasca region to be his personal empire (Fitzgerald 15). Pond's presence continues to linger in the Wood Buffalo region; today, his name appears on the Peter Pond School, the Peter Pond Hotel, and the Peter Pond Mall.

Turning Pioneers into Heroes: Von Hammerstein, Ells, and Ball

After paying deference to the likes of Pond and John Richardson, Fitzgerald turns his attention to early bitumen sands personalities. Whereas figures like A.M. Bezanson and "Twelve Foot" Davis achieved renown through local word of mouth, Fitzgerald tries to reify and promote a legacy for bitumen sands figures like Alfred Von Hammerstein (spelled Hamerstein by Fitzgerald), Sidney C. Ells, and Max Ball. Even though the actual successes of these figures remain in question to this day, Fitzgerald bestows these men with noble qualities and credits them for having shrewd insight.

Similar to A.M. Bezanson's reports to Ottawa, much of the initial information concerning northern Alberta's bitumen projects came from the observations of "Count" Alfred Von Hammerstein. For the 1907 Canadian Special Senate Committee investigation into the region, the Count's report was the only point of reference, even though his optimism and enthusiasm "often exceeded his measurement of the practical and real." Originally from Germany, Von Hammerstein went to Ottawa with the goal of advertising "the wealth of the Athabasca" (36), even though his "glowing picture" was in fact "exaggerated" (37), and his argument – that all minerals could be developed – was an unqualified leap "from reality to fiction" (38). The Count's name is synonymous with the legacy of early bitumen sands development, partly because of the sizable money he spent on machinery, and partly because of his 1907 testimony to Ottawa. Yet his mythic status

can also be attributed to the heroic tale of Von Hammerstein's narrow "scrape with death" in 1905 when a cable tool rig was lost along the Grand Rapids. All hands perished, except for the formidable Count, who made it to shore and then walked back to get a second vessel (40).

As noted earlier in this chapter, Sidney Ells's publications were filled with informative and intriguing content. Despite the fact that Ells once derided Fort McMurray as a "three dollar" settlement (41), Fitzgerald praises Ells's temperament and character, as well as his singular focus on the development of the bitumen sands. Eventually, little else mattered to Ells but the sands, and he came to respect men and women who demonstrated similar devotion to the resource. Ells and his protégés were to be thanked for ensuring that the bitumen stories could "be written – in detail and with a successful ending" (44). Fitzgerald's wording transforms early endeavours – including failures – into stepping stones that led to the trope of the present-day success story.²⁹⁶

As with Count Von Hammerstein's cable tool rig incident, Fitzgerald likens Ells's struggles with bitumen to the struggles faced by early explorers like Alexander Mackenzie and Peter Pond. Fitzgerald is particularly captivated by Ells's 250-mile-long journey from Fort McMurray to Edmonton in June 1915, accompanied only by a cocker spaniel. "It took incredible courage even to consider such a trek," writes Fitzgerald, "but Sidney Ells was a man of courage and of self-sacrifice." Ells developed blisters on his feet, and eventually had to wear moccasins (48). Ells also faced bitterly cold winds and

²⁹⁶ In her poem "In the Tar Sands, Going Down," Mari-Lou Rowley addresses this tendency to present the bitumen sands as uniformly successful – despite the complex history of their development – by blurring tenses in the poem and noting that extraction processes have necessitated large quantities of slurry and toxic waste. The poem's speaker directly addresses the "by-product of the infernal machine" (slurry) and asks to be made "perfect, past / tense and release, past / learning from mistakes / past-present, future-perfect / oh perfect of defects" (Rowley 63). The familiar phrase "learning from mistakes" is particularly important for industry supporters, who tend to reframe the bitumen narrative as one of success.

went numb, with only a rabbitskin blanket to keep him warm. It took the geologist four days to recuperate in an Edmonton hospital. This particular incident ensured that Ells would forever be ranked “high among the pioneers of the oil industry” (46). In one fell swoop, Ells is established as a rugged pioneer in the history of the bitumen sands, while his literary output is minimized or essentially ignored.

Fitzgerald chronicles other figures, such as Thomas Draper, James Mason McClave, and Karl Adolf Clark (52-69). In 1929, Max Waite Ball, who was from Denver, secured leases on the Horse River Reserve and in the Ruth and Mildred Lakes region and formed Canadian Northern Oil Sands Products Limited. By 1931, the company changed its name to Abasand Oils Limited, and, in Fitzgerald’s words, extractive operations were “courageously carried out in the face of prejudice and skepticism ...” (72) – that is, until the plant caught fire in November 1941. The facility was rebuilt by August of the following year, and the company declared itself to be ready to withstand “the obstacles of nature and the oil sands” (78). Yet shutdowns continued to occur, so in 1943 the federal government assumed control of the plant’s lease (83). In less than two years, Ottawa spent up to \$2 million on Abasand (85). After another fire in June 1945, the Abasand experiment ended for good. Nothing is left there today, and the federal government stayed away from bitumen investment for thirty years.

Other men started projects but “lost interest and left,” yet J. Joseph Fitzgerald praises these men because they “challenged others to follow and succeed” (91). Some of these unsuccessful men include Dan Diver, Bill Georgeson, J.D. Tait, and Jacob Owen Absher, who formed the problematic Bituminous Sand Extraction Company. Absher “was too determined and diligent to take ‘no’ for his answer,” and he handled his many

setbacks with “characteristic enthusiasm” (92). This “indomitable Absher spirit” was put to the test in 1928, when the cauldrons he had created “began to turn on their master” and proceeded to give Absher severe burns (93-94). Physically marked and disfigured by his own process, Absher was hospitalized for an extended period. Nevertheless, he resumed drilling attempts, even though the pipes kept melting. Fitzgerald admires Absher’s devotion and especially Absher’s willingness to accept stocks in the extraction company in lieu of a salary. Despite the discouraging experts and naysayers, Fitzgerald argues that Absher’s plight inspired future bitumen sands figures to maintain a singular focus on the cause (96).

Robert Fitzsimmons: Manufactured Legacy, Contrarian Writer, Poetic Muse

Fitzgerald recontextualized Ball’s setbacks with words of admiration, which is a tendency that has continued in the decades that followed. The next figure to be praised in *Black Gold with Grit* is Robert C. Fitzsimmons, who is considered to be “an eight-year veteran of the oil sands hope-and-despair cycle.” Originally from Prince Edward Island, Fitzsimmons was a farmer in Washington and Manitoba before he “set his hopes on recovering oil and wealth from the Athabasca country” (72). Similar to “Twelve Foot” Davis, Fitzsimmons came to Fort McMurray in the 1920s because he had been “chasing a real estate deal” (Barnes). Once he took over the lease for the Alcan Oil Company in Fort McMurray, the entrepreneur taught himself hot water separation techniques, since he had limited scientific experience of bitumen’s challenges (Fitzgerald 74). Fitzsimmons built his own plant, and spent only fifty dollars on equipment. The International Bitumen Company was formed by 1927, and the new plant used the *in situ* process (i.e. below ground, rather than above ground), but did not perform as well as Karl Clark’s plant. The

struggling Fitzsimmons asked the ruling Social Credit party of Alberta for a loan of \$50,000, but was turned down (79).

Fitzsimmons sold control of his assets, including the refinery, the plant, and the lease, to Lloyd R. Champion, a financier from Montreal who refused to update the existing equipment. In a rather blatant example of favouritism and cutthroat capitalism, Champion received significant government funding for the same set-up; merely the company name had changed. The poor treatment of Fitzsimmons signaled a change from some kind of tacitly understood, mutual respect for entrepreneurial dreamers to the singular pursuit of profit (80). As has been the case with other northern Albertans of note, Fitzsimmons died alone in Edmonton in September 1971.

Despite these glaring failures, Fitzgerald believed the story of Robert Fitzsimmons should be memorialized and commemorated. “It is doing great injustice to Canadian initiative, imagination and determination to allow the courage of men like Robert C. Fitzsimmons to be forgotten,” Fitzgerald argued. Even though there has been praise for breakthroughs in bitumen sands production, citizens should “save a place of respect for those who went before” (80-81). Here, the use of words like “courage” and “determination” evoke early explorer narratives and serve to advocate for additional narrative space to be set aside for Fitzsimmons.²⁹⁷

In general, this retroactive inclusion into the success narrative of the bitumen sands has been facilitated with little pushback; however, Fitzsimmons – that “colourful tar

²⁹⁷ Another author that elevates Fitzsimmons’ past is Irwin Huberman, who bestows Fitzsimmons with a kind of prescient capacity to anticipate the future success of the bitumen sands. Although he was genuinely enthusiastic about industrial prospects, Fitzsimmons could not even afford to pay his employees for months at a time. Nevertheless, Fitzsimmons “succeeded in capturing the imagination and loyalty of his staff and of financial backers” (Huberman 104). Like Fitzgerald, Huberman retroactively circumscribes a narrative of success to Fitzsimmons.

sands pioneer” – later accused the Alberta government of sabotaging his refinement operation in order to hinder competitive development. This accusation was accompanied by extensive litigation and prolonged legal action (Provincial Archives of Alberta, “Robert C. Fitzsimmons”). In 1953, Fitzsimmons published “an angry pamphlet” called *The Truth about Alberta Tar Sands: Why Were They Kept Out of Production?*, in which he argued that bitumen production was deliberately hindered by the Alberta government itself (L. Pratt 40). More precisely, Fitzsimmons claimed that the processing plant he had initially developed was prevented from continued production so that a new, untested plant could be built in its place.

At times, the language in Fitzsimmons’s text is incendiary. The author accuses the Alberta government of “double-crossing” his company (*The Truth* 4), blocking his attempts to secure financial aid from other sources, committing slander, and ignoring the inquiries they had been making (6). Publicly, provincial officials avoided mentioning Fitzsimmons’s work or his company; this tactic seemingly proved the government’s “insincerity and determination to hide the facts” (11). The decision to build a new plant was “utterly ridiculous,” nonsensical, and actioned by men who were “unreliable, irresponsible, or “motivated by a sinister purpose.” According to Fitzsimmons – as well as a number of testimonies from workers that are included in the pamphlet – the plant could still produce but was shut down anyway, and the author was told it was never intended to produce again. The government did not act in the public interest, Fitzsimmons exclaimed, and “[s]uch stupidity by men in high places” was incomprehensible (17). So although Fitzsimmons’s legacy has been massaged into the overall history of bitumen sands development, the entrepreneur’s open criticism of the

same industry clearly has been glossed, if not silenced.²⁹⁸ Furthermore, the title of the pamphlet, *The Truth about Alberta Tar Sands*, introduced the idea that current operations may have been dishonest, or that citizens were not receiving an accurate account of this industry or events affiliated with it. “Truth,” in Fitzsimmons’s case, diverged from the dominant narrative that the province was transparent, productive, and fair.

There are indications, however, that Fitzsimmons’s hallowed place in the history of bitumen sands development is being re-evaluated. Recently, the poet David Martin has dramatized Fitzsimmons’s saga in his book *Tar Swan* (2018). The narrative resembles a long poem, and Fitzsimmons is one of four speakers – the other three speakers are: a mythical swan; an archaeologist named Brian K. Wolsky; and a plant mechanic named Frank Badura, whom Fitzsimmons accuses of sabotaging his equipment. The text is impressionistic, but also filled with potentially elusive historical references for readers unfamiliar with the saga of bitumen sands development; for instance, Martin coyly mentions seminal figures like Count Von Hammerstein (46), Alexander Mackenzie (20), and Karl Clark, “Diviner Extraordinaire” (34).

In *Tar Swan*, the Fitzsimmons character – also called “Fitz” and “Fitzzy” (17, 27) – states that influential bitumen sands pioneers must be dragged “into the Future” because, as participants and commemorators in the legacy of the bitumen sands, it is “our Duty, our Burden, our Weight.” The character then lists – and characterizes – some of these

²⁹⁸ The website for the province of Alberta dismissively characterizes Fitzsimmons and his ordeal as “his views” (Alberta Culture and Tourism, “The Truth”). The site emphasizes that Fitzsimmons was neither an engineer nor a scientist, and that – even though *The Truth about Alberta Tar Sands* provides an outline of the method he used – no evidence exists “in his voluminous records that the method he devised was based on fundamental principles of chemistry or an understanding of the microscopic physical characteristics of the oil sands” (Alberta Culture and Tourism, “Robert Cosmas Fitzsimmons”). Thus, on the one hand, Fitzsimmons is tacitly acknowledged to be part of the legacy of bitumen sands development; on the other hand, his name generates few online results, and his plight is either sanitized or downplayed.

figures: “Karl Clark: Traitor. Lloyd Champion: Scoundrel. Sidney Ells: Madman. Max Ball: Obscene. Jim Tanner: Bolshevik. Premier Manning: Purlblind to what I’ve exhumed and sacrificed at his feet” (61). At different points, the Swan character interacts with the three men, and acts as both observer and commentator on extraction projects, as well as the “coke-drowned patch clowns / who pray for forgiveness” as they leave town en masse (18) – the critic Melanie Dennis Unrau likens the ageless Swan to a trickster figure (Unrau 2). Meanwhile, Fitzsimmons writes correspondences to his beloved wife Wilhelmina, and even asks her for money and oil when he and his plant hit hard times (Martin 76). Throughout the text, the reader discovers that the present-day archaeologist Wolsky has excavated artefacts from Fitzsimmons’s time, including items belonging to the characters. *Tar Swan* concludes with a fight between Badura and Fitzsimmons (81-82), but the Swan has the final word, and speaks to the reader in the form of a sonnet (89). David Martin’s creative approach to the subject material humanizes Fitzsimmons while de-mystifying his mostly unquestioned place in the bitumen sands pantheon.

From Authorial Bias and Insider Status to Environmental Concern

Fitzgerald’s examinations of early explorers and bitumen sands pioneers provide the groundwork for what follows. Although it takes several chapters to be revealed, Fitzgerald admits that he played a role in bitumen separation technology himself, worked on developing an ultrasonics process, and even registered Sonic Oil Separation Limited in 1957 (134). With this acknowledgment, the author establishes himself as an active participant in the history of the industrialization of the region.

In *Black Gold with Grit*, Fitzgerald frequently invokes the language of risk and thrill to describe extraction milestones – for example, the word “adventure” (10, 58, 164,

168). Like many of his predecessors, Fitzgerald seeks to link his impact on bitumen sands development to the new era of resource development adventures, as well as early settler moments, by describing a “heart pounding” encounter of his own. One day, on a McMurray-bound boat loaded with heavy buckets of bitumen sand samples from GCOS, Fitzgerald realized there was a bear on the front deck. The boat struck a sandbar, and the author jumped out and tried to dislodge the vessel. When the boat moved, Fitzgerald’s head was suddenly “buried in a wet mass of very live bear pelt.” The frightened Fitzgerald slipped away and eventually the bear disembarked and returned to the bush (169-170).²⁹⁹

Fitzgerald admits that although his personal story “has nothing to do with efforts to uncover the mysteries of the Athabasca oil sands,” the details serve as “a reminder that for all our scientific advances, we are still subject to the natural rules of the Athabasca country” (170). While perhaps true, it could be argued that Fitzgerald’s subjective account serves to make the author appear heroic and akin to the northern Alberta settlers who preceded him. The passage also demonstrates that, even in technical or industry-centred texts, there is still room for authors to include a personal voice.

In perhaps the most eager and fawning part of the book, Fitzgerald shares that he had personal interactions with prominent bitumen sands figures. For example, the author was assigned the task of hosting the “impressive,” “remarkable and wise” J. Howard Pew (180, 164) during a formal visit to Fort McMurray, and he made lavish arrangements to present the town in a glowing light. Fitzgerald assured Pew he had already been working

²⁹⁹ Fitzgerald’s transition from previous extraction projects to his experience with a wild bear calls to mind recent bear confrontations at industry sites, as when Suncor employee Lorna Weafer was attacked and killed by a black bear in May 2014 (Harper, “Suncor”; The Canadian Press, “Coworkers”).

with “the sticky black bitumen first-hand” (167), and he promised Pew, who possessed a “spirit of adventure,” that he would continue to do his part to “see the adventure through” (164, 168). Fitzgerald continued to entertain key decision-makers and was made the official representative of GCOS in Edmonton, where he participated in process demonstrations and congratulatory ceremonies. This insider status not only established an element of authority and facilitated Fitzgerald’s inclusion into the canon of bitumen sands development but also rehabilitated and validated the merit of extreme energy practices, especially in the wake of uncertainty caused by Larry Pratt’s incendiary 1976 text.

Yet these experiences with industry leaders are not uniformly presented as occasions for backslapping and nepotism; surprisingly, Fitzgerald acknowledges in *Black Gold with Grit* that industry had a problematic track record. The author calls industry planners shortsighted and finds their actions “disturbing” because they accelerated the “destruction of irreplaceable and life-sustaining ecological balances” (202) – even as they tried to fill modern society’s needs.

Among his unexpected acknowledgments, Fitzgerald notes: even in the 1970s, project planners were calculating how northern Alberta’s fossil fuel projects were impacting global temperatures; the Athabasca region required protection “from destruction at human hands”; northern Alberta – already ecologically sensitive – was irreversibly impacted by bitumen sands development and “massive” pollution was already highly likely (203); future provisions needed to be implemented so that extensive environmental research would continue to be financed, even when bitumen sands projects suffered financial losses (206); pollution threatened the health of employees and their families (202); chemicals that were injected into water supplies could cause

contamination; and tailings ponds posed a danger to wildlife, birds, and nearby ecological systems (66). Ever the industry apologist, Fitzgerald insists that all tailings ponds and surrounding areas would be returned to natural and productive states (207). As history has shown, tailings ponds in fact increased in number and size in succeeding decades.

Despite these warning signs, Fitzgerald believes that open pit mining operations should continue because “nature has not in fact done such a perfect job of sealing the dangers within,” and she “has not kept a perfectly clean house” (204). Humans must “clean” this messy “house” through bitumen recovery projects – a perspective that remains popular in today’s industrial and political discourse. Further, Fitzgerald explicitly links the bitumen sands with national identity; he argues that the growth of the fossil fuel industry will simultaneously foster “a greater consciousness of Canadian identity” – particularly as northern Alberta’s processing plants meet “the need” for an energy source that will be used by Canadians (223).

Fitzgerald further defends large-scale operations when he claims that pollution levels were already “critically high” long before humans – indigenous or otherwise – came to the Athabasca region. Accordingly, men simply “compensated for this ancient accident” by developing technology that collected the overflowing bitumen for future use as a fossil fuel. Such extraction projects were essential, Fitzgerald argues, because smaller animals and birds “suffocated” in pools of bitumen and “unfortunate fish” swam “too close to floating oil slicks” (204). Here, the author effectively transforms ecologically diverse, plentiful and thriving areas into bituminous areas that are ominous, inherently dangerous and existential threats to wildlife – until human ingenuity came to the rescue.

One key rhetorical strategy employed by Fitzgerald is his belief that critics of bitumen sands development simply do not understand that pollution is one of the “natural conditions” of the Athabasca region (204). For instance, when a GCOS tailings pond leaked into the Athabasca in spring 1976, there was significant public outrage; however, investigators audaciously declared the seepage to be relatively “natural” and blamed the overburden that formed the walls of the tailings pond for the leaking (206). Fitzgerald also relays an account of a time when he personally interacted with the river’s “natural pollution” when he had the opportunity to swim near the Snye. Upon stepping in, he found the water to be “anything but clean,” and his feet were covered with bitumen, and he had to use large quantities of soap to remove the substance (207). Fitzgerald’s subjective account reinforces the impression that northern Alberta is not pristine, but instead a naturally contaminated area.

New Literary Directions: Influencing Future Writers

Fitzgerald predicted that as soon as 1979, industry and government would share responsibility for ensuring the protection of the environment for all future bitumen sands projects. Suffice to say, in the ensuing decades these expectations have not been met. In the closing chapters of *Black Gold with Grit*, Fitzgerald re-emphasizes his wish that regulatory safeguards had been in place prior to operations commencing; for the time being, however, the author remained confident that such shortcomings could be addressed down the road.

The overriding message was clear: large-scale bitumen development must continue to be supported. Texts that were penned by industry insiders or bitumen sands pioneers held authoritative power, but disruptive texts like Larry Pratt’s *Tar Sands* should not.

Fitzgerald writes that he has tried to remain factual and objective, but he trusts that diligent readers will be able to identify any errors (224).³⁰⁰ As an industry insider, the author's overriding goal is to help provide "ordinary" readers with information – even as he admits his bias with respect to Sun Oil's "pioneering" efforts, and expresses his full support of Syncrude's collaborations with provincial and federal governments (224).

Fitzgerald's endorsement of rapid and extensive bitumen extraction in northern Alberta laid the groundwork for future writers. As is the case with many publications today, Fitzgerald's publication was funded by industry and – again, just like today – the implicit goal was to sway public discourse, to justify a more privatized approach to resource development, and to gloss over unfavourable corporate practices and actions. A few of the subsequent pro-industry books that found eager audiences in Alberta include Barry Glen Ferguson's *Athabasca Oil Sands: Northern Resource Exploration, 1875 to 1951* (1985), Sydney Sharpe's *A Patch of Green: Canada's Oilpatch Makes Peace with the Environment* (2002), Paul Chastko's *Developing Alberta's Oil Sands: From Karl Clark to Kyoto* (2004),³⁰¹ Ezra Levant's *Ethical Oil* (2010), and Alastair Sweeny's *Black Bonanza* (2010).

It would not be until the mid-2000s that bitumen sands-related texts would reflect a counterpoint to the petro-narrative and a return to Larry Pratt's counter-discursive criticism of extreme energy development in northern Alberta (and to a lesser extent Fitzsimmons's *The Truth about Alberta Tar Sands: Why Were They Kept Out of*

³⁰⁰ Frances K. Jean (see Chapter Six) introduces her book in a similar manner: "I would encourage anyone who criticizes my book to write a better one" (Introduction to *More than Oil*).

³⁰¹ Sydney Sharpe devotes much of her book to fossil fuel company executives and managers, while Paul Chastko provides a historical account of extractive innovations that culminates in a criticism of the financial consequences of the Kyoto Accord (222-245). For Alberta's policy-makers and industry/representatives, an antagonistic stance toward Kyoto was a prerequisite during the early days of climate change awareness (see Clarke 66-67, 150-157).

Production?). Future authors influenced by Pratt include William Marsden (*Stupid to the Last Drop: How Alberta Is Bringing Environmental Armageddon to Canada (And Doesn't Seem to Care)*, 2007), Tim Murphy (*Journey to the Tar Sands*, 2008), Andrew Nikiforuk (*Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, 2008), Tony Clarke (*Tar Sands Showdown: Canada and the New Politics of Oil in an Age of Climate Change*, 2009), and Gordon Laxer (*After the Sands*, 2015). In fact, the last three authors (Nikiforuk, Clarke, Laxer) have specifically mentioned Larry Pratt and his long-lost research: Nikiforuk's book incorporates pivotal governmental information uncovered by Pratt; Clarke's preface cites Pratt as an inspiration for his on-site research and methodology; and Laxer's introduction is dedicated to Pratt.

The works written by industry insiders like Sidney Ells, J. Joseph Fitzgerald and R.C. Fitzsimmons have mostly become forgotten over time; however, each of these texts contain important observations and content for the contemporary reader. An examination of how these authors rhetorically and creatively framed the origins of industry, its inaugural activities, and its importance in the region reveals that these have been long-standing subjects awaiting literary expression. Although these bitumen sands pioneers already had an insider's perspective in their respective narratives, over time these works gave way to Big Oil's more powerful and hegemonic master narrative of success.

Chapter Five

Regional Works of Fiction in Northern Alberta

My earlier chapters have focused primarily on historical personalities and non-fictional accounts. The primary purpose of these texts has been to inform readers about local residents, important events, and noteworthy landmarks. Beyond informative content, however, it should also now be apparent that these works also contain creative and literary flourishes, poetic language, and in some cases unexpected perspectives.

While the remoteness of northern Alberta and its bountiful landscape might seem fertile ground for a similar number of works of *fiction*, there has been a scarcity of locally-based or locally-written novels. Indeed, aside from Alistair MacLean's *Athabasca* (1980), I have not been able to find any novels or novellas from the 19th or 20th centuries. Additionally, MacLean's novel itself has not received much critical attention – although in academic circles there is a general shortage of analysis for all of MacLean's novels, despite their intriguing ideological insights.

This dissertation chapter explores three works of fiction concerning northern Alberta. I begin with an analysis of *Athabasca* by MacLean and in particular I focus on the author's reliance on the detective genre to create a sense of verisimilitude as well as a patriarchal, near-chauvinistic style, which the author had already helped popularize in his earlier works. I then examine two more recent northern Alberta novels that were written by bitumen sands workers who have opted to self-publish their material: *Dead Cold* (2012) by Roddy Cross and *The Mystery of Glass Island* (2013) by Randy S. Burton, which typify works written by authors who, like MacLean, rely heavily on pre-existing

tropes, genres, and archetypes – notably zombie fiction and Hardy Boys adventures respectively – in order to entertain their readers.

5.1 Alistair MacLean

The 1980 novel *Athabasca* remains one of only a few works of fiction that is set in, or that features, northern Alberta. At the time of its publication, Alistair MacLean was renowned for wartime and adventure fare such as *HMS Ulysses* (1955), *Ice Station Zebra* (1963), *Where Eagles Dare* (1967),³⁰² and, most famously, *The Guns of Navarone* (1957) – which was also made into a film starring Gregory Peck and Anthony Quinn (1961).³⁰³

Author of over two dozen books prior to his death in 1987, the Scottish-born MacLean at first glance might seem an unlikely candidate to utilize northern Alberta as a primary backdrop for his whodunnit yarn. *Athabasca* leans on a number of elements from the adventure genre to build a sense of mystery, but it also includes passages that detail the development of the bitumen sands, the workers who extract the bitumen, and the pipelines that transport the product.

In some ways, *Athabasca* represents the culmination of years of perfecting a reliable template. The novel’s promotional insert boasts that MacLean, “the most popular adventure writer of our time,” is considered by some writers to be responsible for “establishing his own literary brand” (J. Charles). Upon its release, *Athabasca* reached as high as #3 on the *New York Times* bestseller list – the highest sales position attained by any of MacLean’s works, surprisingly. Although the text is barely discussed today, critics

³⁰² In 1968, a film adaptation of *Ice Station Zebra* was released, starring Rock Hudson; that same year, the film version of *Where Eagles Dare* was released, starring Richard Burton and Clint Eastwood.

³⁰³ In 1965, there was also a hit song called “The Guns of Navarone,” performed by the Skatalites.

from Western provinces published favourable reviews during its initial run.³⁰⁴ The book also enjoyed numerous print runs and featured over a dozen different book cover designs (See Appendix U).

With respect to the novel's setting, each chapter alternates between Alaska and Fort McMurray. The protagonists in *Athabasca* investigate a bitumen sands pipeline that links northern Alberta to the United States, where murders and deliberate explosions have threatened to shut down production. The two primary investigators are hired by an oil baron from Texas, and the trio travels to various work locations in order to eliminate potential suspects before the saboteur strikes again. While the northern settings provide an element of atmosphere and mood – one could even argue these settings paint a mental picture of the region for those who have never been there and may never go – MacLean relies primarily on copious dialogue and dozens of stock characters to pad the novel.

Playing to the Target Reader: MacLean's Male Characters

In fact, over thirty characters appear in *Athabasca*, and few of these transcend one-dimensionality. As John Charles writes, the characters in MacLean's books often appear "in two flavors: good or evil." Further, his books are usually set in "a man's world" (J. Charles). This authorial tendency to simplify morality into a good-and-evil binary, and this predilection for male dominance, are important considerations in light of the already scarce number of fictional works based in northern Alberta. As *Athabasca's* copious male

³⁰⁴ At the time, *Athabasca* received rave reviews from the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Regina Leader Post*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Outside of Western Canada, however, reviews were mixed. Today, the book is generally considered a weaker entry in the MacLean canon.

characters interact against the backdrop of bitumen sands projects, they seem to anticipate the region's future demography.

As with MacLean's earlier novels, men are granted much of the agency in *Athabasca*. Such attention to power and masculinity may have been rooted in MacLean's real-life struggles and challenges. According to Jack Webster's biography *Alistair MacLean: A Life*, the author frequently blamed women for many of his setbacks, misfortunes, and failures.³⁰⁵ MacLean drank copiously, endured mental health issues, and spent a great deal of his savings. He lived "a lonely life" (Chudacoff) and ultimately died alone. The author's descent into reckless spending, alcoholism, and depression shares similarities with the lives and lifestyles of many northern Albertan men (Hannaford; A. Ferguson; Cull; Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands*). *Athabasca* presents men valiantly and favourably compared to women, and, although the book does not manifestly praise the fossil fuel industry, it is large-scale resource development – a male-dominated field in the 1970s – that anchors the text.

Athabasca's two main investigators are Donald Mackenzie and George Dermott. They are part of a 14-member industrial sabotage unit. Like MacLean, the character of Mackenzie – perhaps named after the explorer Alexander Mackenzie – has Scottish Highland ancestry (MacLean 144). Donald Mackenzie's counterpart is Dermott, who is "naturally cagey" (137). The two men are presented as makeshift detectives, but they are first and foremost oilmen and field managers (23). Despite their large size and stature,

³⁰⁵ MacLean's closest friends suspected that his Calvinist roots caused him to have "a deep-seated fear of sex" (Webster 172-173). He was shy around women, but eventually MacLean married a withdrawn German woman named Gisela Heinrichsen (52-53). Years later, MacLean met an extroverted French film producer named Marcelle Georgius, with whom he had an affair. The author eventually married Georgius, who helped him get "out of his shell" (177); however, she also behaved erratically and suffered from chronic substance abuse for many years, until her death in 1985. Jack Webster suggests MacLean was occasionally violent toward both Gisela and Marcelle (150, 188-190, 203).

Mackenzie and Dermott are interchangeable and indistinguishable throughout the first half of the novel. The blurring of these two characters extends to how they converse with other characters: long stretches of dialogue often go unattributed, and it is difficult to determine which character is speaking. Worse, MacLean introduces characters with similar names, such as Blake and Black, and Finlayson and Ferguson. This process of anonymization of men in the bitumen sands reflects the trope of the hard worker/worker bee upon which extreme energy projects depend.³⁰⁶

Eventually, MacLean allocates more dialogue to the character of Dermott as the story progresses. In his investigations, Dermott's no-nonsense approach allows him to back adversaries into a corner, take "ruthless advantage" of his victims, and impose utter "domination" if he does not receive full co-operation (139). However, as I will discuss in the next section, this machismo and veneer of control is challenged later in the text when the frightened Dermott ends up "crying like a baby" when faced with almost certain death (225). By the conclusion of the novel, however, Dermott reverts back to form when he tells his new "honey" (Corinne) that she can come and work for him after they head south – since apparently there are "[n]ot many good jobs in Fort McMurray" (283-4).

Perhaps the most well-rounded and memorable character in *Athabasca* is Jim Brady. Wealthy, white, and boisterous, Brady hails from Texas, and his familiar origin story – a boy who is born into poverty but grows to become an adult millionaire (56) –

³⁰⁶ The tendency to incorporate unidentifiable sequences of dialogue, especially at the expense of character development, is a hallmark of MacLean's writing. The editor Milton Waldman considered MacLean's opaque dialogue "difficult" (Webster 90), and he remarked that MacLean tended to slip technical information into his novels in order to try to make his characters and their actions more plausible (89). Upon reading one of MacLean's books, the head of the English department where MacLean once taught noted that he could not recall a single character from the book (82).

reflects the ubiquitous United States trope of the self-made man.³⁰⁷ In the *Kirkus* review of the novel, Brady is unflatteringly described as “a short, fat gourmand” and “a man given to Olympian know-it-all rhetoric” (“Kirkus Review”). Indeed, the character seems to court contradiction: Brady fervently believes that his operatives should stay physically fit (MacLean 53), yet is obese himself. During the day, Brady also wears “shocking heliotrope pajamas” that “accentuate his massive girth” (145).

While Brady’s girth may not call to mind the body type of the conventional male hero, other characters essentialize masculinity in MacLean’s text. Dr. Parker, for instance, is “lean” and “white-bearded like an Old Testament prophet,” and even calls two of his assistants “namby-pambies” when he learns that they have called in sick (162). John Carmody, an undercover policeman, is “large and formidable” (242). A senior police officer named John Ffoulkes is characterized as burly, big, and “high-colored” (160).

Amidst the parade of alpha males in the text, however, one particular character is used to conflate the local inhabitant with the land itself. John Finlayson, a “wild” local field operations manager, is described as a Jack London or Robert Service type (16). Dressed in a racoon-skin cap, mole-skin trousers, and seal-skin gloves, Finlayson literally wears the region – in this case, Alaska. For city-dwellers like Dermott, Mackenzie, and Brady, the “oddly staccato” dialect of Finlayson identifies him as someone with only limited “contact with civilization” (17). After Finlayson dies, the investigators speculate

³⁰⁷ As if to supplement his aggressive pursuit of wealth, Brady is often comfortable cutting corners. For instance, he reveals that his company failed to test the viscosity of bitumen and how it reacts to low temperatures (MacLean 96). This admonition suggests a precedent of cutting corners, and is reminiscent of other industrial short cuts, as outlined by Larry Pratt and Andrew Nikiforuk. Likewise, the field manager Dermott omits facts and details when it suits him (89). Again, as established in the previous chapter, this pattern of industry attempting to gloss over key information will continue to increase over the decades – particularly when omissions can benefit corporations.

that he may have been stranded “in a gully or by the roadside” (133); in other words, Finlayson could have been left to die within nature itself. In *Athabasca*, each appearance of the ragged, uncivilized Finlayson contrasts with the tycoon Brady’s extravagant, urban indulgences and this dichotomy emphasizes the inherent disconnection between the natural character of the region and the new industrial presence that has made its mark. That the Finlayson character is killed while Brady thrives through to the conclusion offers insight as to how MacLean perceives these two characters interact with the region and how these interactions can impact their fates.

In addition to the rustic depiction of Finlayson, some other male characters in MacLean’s whodunnit are described with unflattering or exaggerated qualities that suggest ethnic stereotypes. Hamish Black, the rich general manager of Alaska’s Sohio/BP operation, has a “bony face,” and is a “[b]it of a cold fish – not much given to showing his feelings” (134). Black, who is “crafty, cagey, cold and unco-operative” in his encounters with Brady and the others (155), is also “a specialist in wintry smiles” (174). The Scottish origin of the given name Hamish – coupled with the fact that the character does not drink (174) – suggests Hamish represents the antithesis of Alistair MacLean (a Scot and an alcoholic). Another suspicious character, Dr. Blake, is described with language that potentially approaches ethnic stereotypes. With “an almost cadaverous face and a hooked nose,” the doctor is “a tall, swarthy man” (135) who resembles Dracula’s “first cousin” (143). Blake, later described as possessing a “beaked nose, hollow cheeks and sunken eyes” (158), is the recipient of some awkwardly phrased descriptions; however, passages such as these might just as easily be interpreted as innocent and exaggerated red herring character traits in a whodunnit mystery. Regardless, the chilly

depictions of the introspective Hamish Black and the ghoulish Dr. Blake are stark contrasts from the vainglorious and buoyant Brady.

“At Arm’s Length”: The Women of Athabasca

The target audience for *Athabasca* is unquestionably male; however, the novel’s female characters merit some brief analysis. With respect to depictions of gender, Jack Webster has observed that the women in MacLean’s novels are “kept at arm’s length,” and men are usually “vulnerable” (173). The critic Alastair MacNeill notes that Maclean had a “tendency to push his female characters into the background,” and was plainly “ill at ease with women in his books” (Webster 297). As if in a continuation of this trend, the three women in *Athabasca* – Stella Brady (Jim’s daughter), Corinne Delorme (a secretary), and Jean Brady (Jim’s wife) – are either objectified or minimized.

The first female character, Brady’s daughter Stella, serves primarily to be kidnapped and then rescued by the intrepid investigators. Stella is described “as cuddly as a polar bear cub” (MacLean 56), but also as a woman with an “easy, loose-hipped walk” (116). Pervasive restrictions are placed on Stella and she is not allowed to question any of the circumstances in northern Alberta. Like a servant, Stella is frequently tasked with pouring and handing drinks to her Texas tycoon father, to which she sarcastically notes that she is only allowed to “fetch and carry, mend and clean” (118). Under the guise of keeping her safe, the investigator field managers also exert control over Stella; when she dresses up in order to go dancing in Fort McMurray, Dermott paternalistically forbids her to go (126). As a compromise, two policemen are assigned to watch Stella, but Mackenzie warns the two guardians that, although she seems on the surface to be beautiful and innocent, he believes the young woman to be “a conniving young minx”

(127). Stella's subservient status, as well as the need to keep her monitored, reinforce the trope of Fort McMurray as a dangerous place for unsuspecting young women.

Faring little better than the objectified Stella is the 22-year old secretary Corinne Delorme, who is referred to as "that lovely lassie" at the management office. MacLean's third person narrator remarks that Corinne looks "good standing up" whenever she enters the room and is always willing to sport "a smile for everyone" (106). In the first half of the book, Corinne's presence distracts the men and makes them anxious. For instance, Corinne is questioned by the investigators, but after she leaves the office the men tell a joke so that "some of the tension that had grown in the room" begins to subside (109). In the second half of the book, Corinne's role in the story expands as she assumes greater control over her fate. This agency is evident after she escapes from a group of kidnappers headed by a security shift employee named Frederick Napier. Corinne jumps from a moving helicopter into a snowbank and somehow survives. Then at the climax she heroically steps up to rescue the hand-tied Dermott from an approaching unstoppable dragline. Corinne uses a jeep, a pair of cutters, a hacksaw, and finally an axe, to break Dermott free from almost certain doom just in the nick of time. Immediately afterward, however, the presumable heroine collapses "in a heap on the ground" (228), and Dermott picks Corinne up "tenderly," lays her "gingerly over his shoulder in a fireman's lift" and carries her to safety (229) – thereby restoring a sense of male control and dominance in the book. Corinne subsequently spends much of the remainder of the text recuperating.

The last female character in *Athabasca*, Jean Brady, is described as an elegant, tall, and "strikingly handsome woman" with "lovely, naturally blond hair and intelligent gray

eyes” (115). Often, Jean³⁰⁸ proves herself to be wise and insightful in her encounters with her Texan husband; however, Jim believes himself to possess a greater intellect, particularly when he condescendingly tells his wife that most of his business “is cerebral, my dear” (116). Although Jim asserts that only he and his investigators can rationally evaluate the current crisis, Jean considers her commanding husband to simply be “a fearful old hypocrite” (119). As tensions escalate, Jean acts as a voice of reason when she warns that becoming upset is not helpful and that everyone must remain logical (121).³⁰⁹

Ultimately, the three female characters in *Athabasca* can only tentatively challenge the male-dominated apparatus. In MacLean’s otherwise male-dominated story, Stella, Corinne and Jean occupy marginal space in a perfunctory and dismissive manner. Such representations align with, and perpetuate, MacLean’s pre-existing antipathy toward female characters; they also may be reflective of male-female relations in the region itself – at least, as MacLean perceived them.

Unexpectedly Authentic Representations of Northern Operations

One important facet of *Athabasca* is the usage of real-world terms, technologies, and procedures. Throughout the novel, MacLean incorporates authentic financial and business aspects, and includes operational methodology. In the prologue, the author even includes a brief description of how fossil fuels are recovered, as well as a historical overview of the process by which natural elements transform into oil over time.

³⁰⁸ The Jean family name is well-known in the region, as I discuss in Chapter Six.

³⁰⁹ This insistence on level heads extends to handling the crisis in a mature fashion. Jean and her daughter Stella announce they will not allow the recent acts of sabotage and murder to force them to leave the area, and Brady responds by uttering, “Monstrous regiment of women” (121). Of course, in MacLean’s plot this sense of determination by the women becomes a moot point after they are kidnapped.

The detailed descriptions of daily regional operations allow MacLean to establish a sense of verisimilitude. The setting of *Athabasca*'s second chapter, for example, is the Peter Pond Hotel (43), which at the time was a real location in Fort McMurray. In the next chapter, MacLean contextualizes the large scale of bitumen sands operations through the “dark, saturnine,” and “almost piratical” character Jay Shore (43), the engineering construction manager who explains to the investigators that close to “a quarter of a million tons of tar sands a day” must be processed in order for the Fort McMurray project to be viable (61). There are also descriptions of the highly expensive pieces of equipment, which are anthropomorphized: the large dragline “[w]alks” and “shuffles,” and the reclaimer has a “spine” (57).³¹⁰

A rather pertinent representation of fossil fuel operations in the north can be seen in the text when resource development in Canada is presented as paltry and quaint, while development in the United States is presented as superior and robust. Brady and the two investigators, for instance, note that Fort McMurray's overall production reaches 130,000 barrels a day but Alaska achieves 1.2 million barrels. Similarly, the conveyor belt in Canada spans 16 miles, but this length is eclipsed by Alaska's 800-mile-long conveyor belt. Even comparisons concerning investment costs reflect a difference in funding priorities: although Canada committed \$2 billion to bitumen development, Alaska invested \$8 billion (62). As these David and Goliath comparisons unfold in MacLean's text, Canada's presumed inferiority to the United States is reinforced. Here, Alberta's north – acting in *Athabasca*'s late 1970s as an inferior or subordinate economy compared

³¹⁰ Other passages employ language that calls to mind MacLean's aforementioned tensions with women: the draglines and the computerized security systems seem “impregnable” (59, 92), and Dermott becomes worried that the area around the project might become “penetrated” (58).

to the United States – has yet to establish the dominance and prominence it will acquire in real life. The commensurately larger Alaskan operations in *Athabasca* also signal an emphasis on United States ideals, priorities and values, as I have remarked in earlier chapters. The success of the pipeline and the product inside are of paramount importance. As one of the characters in the novel confirms, the main priority will always be the corporation, and not individual people. Dermott declares there is a “hierarchy in oil companies,” and within this framework one must always remember that “the good of the company comes first” (39).

By this logic, if the company’s well-being is the overarching priority, then the continued safety of a pipeline is crucial. MacLean’s text continually articulates potential threats to the bitumen sands operations that are susceptible to terror attacks and potentially dismantled in a matter of seconds (18). In the novel, there is even a division within the fictional Sanmobil corporation that is specifically designed to handle incidents of sabotage. Such fictional measures reflect the real-world anxiety, caution, and uncertainty that characterized the bitumen sands during the 1970s. This sense of suspicion and mistrust is further heightened by MacLean’s use of real companies in the text, such as ARCO and Exxon (25), BP (British Petroleum) (26), Alyeska (29), Valdez (32), Sohio (Standard Oil of Ohio) (174), and Bucyrus-Erie (232).

Another element that evokes a sense of verisimilitude is the representational map of northern Alberta and Alaska that is included at the start of the book (see Appendix V). The simple map suggests a sense of authenticity; however, a number of artistic liberties are taken. To the west of Fort McMurray, MacLean’s rendering depicts “Swamps,” rather

than bitumen sands or muskeg (Appendix V).³¹¹ In addition, neither British Columbia nor its cities are identified – these names are effaced altogether – yet the diagram specifies Alaskan locations. To the novice reader, the book’s map appears to be relatively accurate, but the selective touchstones hearken back to earlier, selective cartographic representations of the area (see Appendix I regarding maps drawn by Enbridge).

In addition to being technically accurate, the climax of the book is particularly symbolic, as the aforementioned unstoppable dragline – described as a “monster machine” that weighs 6,500 tonnes (222) – threatens to flatten Dermott, who is in manacles. Valued at \$40 million, one of the iconic pieces of equipment used in bitumen sands development and extraction has become a menacing weapon unless it is stopped. Ultimately, the “[p]onderous” “dinosaur” (227) falls into a pit, but millions of dollars will be required just to retrieve it. The “sight of the crippled monster” is traumatic for Shore, the contractor who initially oversaw the construction of the dragline; he appears “ashen-faced” and “stricken,” and finds himself “strangely reluctant to leave the fallen giant.” Shore looks as if he “were abandoning an old friend” as the crestfallen construction manager takes “one last look at the dragline” before he turns and leaves (230-32). The inclusion of this unexpected human connection to machinery, along with many other authentic details concerning northern Alberta operations, make *Athabasca* a unique read. Clearly, MacLean’s work of fiction extended beyond a cursory knowledge of ongoing operations in the region.

³¹¹ This general classification of the region as “swamp” extends to how MacLean’s characters perceive the region. In the book, the construction manager Jay Shore refers to overburden (i.e. above ground material, such as soil, rocks, or biota that exists above ore deposits) as “rubbish” that is “useless to us” (MacLean 56). Over time, this reductive designation has been called into question (see Appendix C).

Pipeline Sabotage and Suspicion of the Other

Among the more intriguing elements of *Athabasca* is the fact that the book includes extended discussions on potential methods one might employ to sabotage a pipeline. Equally surprising is the fact that MacLean's fictional characters speculate on possible ways to shut down bitumen sands production – in 1980, no less – and also these speculations appear to be presented in plausible terms. The character Bronowski laments that along the pipeline, “every damned mile is virtually a sitting target” (90), and even the back cover of *Athabasca* refers to the dragline as “a sitting duck for sabotage” because it is the “biggest thing that ever moved on earth” (*Athabasca*).

The men in the novel characterize pipeline sabotage as a “childishly simple” act (60), and they delineate a half dozen vulnerable places where damage could occur (99), including the conveyor belt (61) and the bucketwheels – which could be smashed or significantly disrupted. Lengthy and vulnerable, the pipeline is uniquely identified as a focal point for damage because of its fragility in cold temperatures. With only a hammer and just “a few taps on the pipeline” (93), a prospective saboteur could cause extensive harm. The general susceptibility of pipelines to extreme temperatures might be a theoretical scenario that industry supporters of the late 1970s and early 1980s would prefer not to spread in popularity. Curiously, even though pipeline susceptibilities are discussed, the protagonists in *Athabasca* uniformly dismiss eco-terrorism as a possible motive for sabotage in the book (31, 37).

As MacLean's characters ponder various potential methods of sabotage, speculations begin to transcend mere hypotheses. The character of Tim Houston, for instance, declares that he would not “attack the pipeline directly” if he were in the shoes

of the hypothetical saboteur, and would instead “attack the structures that support the pipeline.” Houston adds that there are 78,000 vertical metal support posts that run the length of the pipeline, and each one represents a potential target. If only 20 of these posts were to be removed, Houston remarks, the pipeline would likely collapse under the massive weight and require weeks of repair (94).

The men in the novel are highly fixated on the potential consequences of disruption to bitumen production. In fact, the field operation manager John Finlayson “treats the pipeline as his favourite daughter” (69). Such affection for fossil fuel infrastructure contrasts with a general ambivalence toward the characters in the text who end up getting killed. After the James brothers are murdered, for example, the reader is provided with very little information, aside from the fact that they were both engineers.

This preoccupation with the well-being of the pipeline is accompanied by a steadfast belief that its design and operations are infallible. Even after the first explosion occurs, the security chief Sam Bronowski declares that large fossil fuel spills are not possible because the sensors are configured to detect and isolate pipeline problems, and then close down the affected sections. On the rare occasion that a repair is needed, it usually does not present a problem (71). Such a declaration of confidence in pipeline technology of the 1970s anticipates talking points in subsequent decades, delivered by eager industry representatives who promote the image of an error-free industry – even when the actual track record indicates otherwise. It is essential to maintain the perception of infrastructure that is foolproof because, as Dermott plainly states, “pipeline people aren’t just the biggest employer of labor around here,” they are “the only one.” Brady agrees, and calls the pipeline “the sole means of life-support in those parts” (73). Even in

a work of fiction, the notion of such a monolithic hold on the region and the absence of alternative industries or prospects is disconcerting, particularly as long ago as the 1980s.

Of course, despite the claims of infallibility, pipeline sabotage occurs in the novel, and it takes at least one week for oil to flow again (86). Major security is implemented, and tank farms and tanker terminals are placed under heavy guard (92). The investigators then employ some rather dubious logic when they conclude that saboteurs would not dare to shut down the pipeline, especially if their intention was to blackmail the fossil fuel companies. Dermott argues that fossil fuel companies would scoff at the threat of a pipeline closure because they “would have nothing to lose” (96). The remark seems rather unusual, since corporations stand to “lose” a significant amount of potential profit during a potential shutdown.

As the investigation unfolds, mistrust and suspicion increase, while the unidentified attacker remains at large. Even before the motive or intent of the attacker has been determined, Dermott declares with certainty that an unnamed enemy will strike again (90). The investigators deftly attempt to put themselves in the places of the unknown “villains” (113): in order to solve the sabotage case, Dermott urges Houston, Bronowski, and Mackenzie to take off their “security hats and put on those of the enemy” (90). After they have switched hats with this enemy, they can then speculate about places that may be a potential target (91).

Although Alistair MacLean may not have fully realized it at the time, the pairing of the murder mystery genre with fossil fuel industry operations in northern Alberta seems a natural fit. Since its early days of extraordinary financial investment, suspicion, caution and anxiety have been prevalent in the region. The same may be said of Alaska perhaps,

as Dermott assures Brady that Prudhoe Bay's residents constitute "a close-knit community" who "live out of each other's pockets" (146). As such, it is anticipated it will be easy to secure alibis. At the same time, Dermott is later accused of classifying the north as "an international hotbed of espionage" (170-1).

Gradually, an element of xenophobia and fear of unfamiliar people or faces emerges. Amidst the paranoia and mistrust, even the Trans-Alaskan pipeline employees become prime suspects. Terry Brinckman is a young security chief who insists the sabotage must be an inside job because any "stranger" would be identified immediately (102). When the FBI is called in, the agency announces it will investigate the pump station boss and his co-workers. With respect to the operation of the pipeline itself, Dermott plainly states that every worker "is a suspect until his innocence is established," and Brady adds that every operator "is as guilty as hell until proved otherwise" (98). Such statements from the likes of the United States citizen Brady are clear inversions of the axiom of "innocent until proven guilty."

These problematic approaches to the investigation are accompanied by the implementation of actions that verge on the unconstitutional. Specifically, the investigators make the rather invasive decision to fingerprint all workers (113), and consequently the murder(s) and the threat of sabotage become automatic justifications for the curtailing of basic civil rights. "Sure, they're going to stand on their civic rights and yell blue murder," the investigator Mackenzie admits, but any workers who refuse to cooperate will serve only to "point the finger of suspicion at the refusee" (113). By deducing that refusal indicates guilt, Mackenzie – who, incidentally, keeps a bugging

device on his person at all times (111) – employs dubious logic and judgment instead of simply pursuing facts and evidence.

One intriguing development in the investigation occurs when the protagonists discuss the possibility that members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) caused the explosion. If pipeline production was disrupted, the investigators theorise that OPEC would benefit “immensely in both profits and power,” and the organization could strangle the supply of petroleum from North America, since Canada and the United States go to great lengths “to shake free once and for all” their “crucifying dependence on OPEC oil.” Mackenzie insists that OPEC wants to hold its “foreign friends” over “an oil barrel” so that it can retain its “position of almost dictatorial power” (156).³¹² The investigators ultimately dismiss OPEC as a suspect under the assumption that its members countries would not be able to rise above their differences to attack a common foe.³¹³

Dermott adds that suspects with OPEC ties would be identifiable immediately by virtue of their skin colour, and he has not yet seen anyone in Alaska or Fort McMurray who might resemble “an Arabian or Middle Eastern terrorist.” This absence of Middle Eastern suspects in the region prompts Dermott to conclude that the real cause for the sabotage is “good old-fashioned capitalistic free enterprise,” and therefore the prospective threat must be examined from within, rather than from outside (157). Here, Dermott’s tangled process of deduction hinges on the assumption that, because he has not

³¹² Although Mackenzie calls Saudi Arabia a “relatively moderate” country, he cautions that some OPEC rulers are “certifiable loonies who would stop at nothing to achieve their own ends” (MacLean 157).

³¹³ Dermott suggests, however, that individual OPEC nations might offer saboteurs increasingly more money in order to “destroy the supply lines for keeps” (MacLean 158).

seen racially identifiable outsiders in the area, a number of alternative motives can be discounted altogether.

The investigators also conclude that oil companies and governments are likely willing to pay *any* high ransom; in MacLean's text, the attackers demand \$1 billion (238). The problem, of course, is that theoretically any payment made to the blackmailers would not preclude further acts of sabotage. These hypothetical scenarios of potential blackmail and sabotage – including the fictional price tag of \$10 billion for the Sanmobil pipeline, or the narrator's estimate that delays would cost millions of dollars in losses each day – seem realistic, in retrospect.

Despite his reputation for creating stock characters, MacLean presented pipeline sabotage and blackmail in an authentic and believable manner. Both the methodology and the potential consequences are not merely glossed over, as one might expect from novelists who are concerned that such details might slow the pace and burden the reader with an extensive amount of technical information. MacLean's mastery of such content is also paired with a coinciding suspicion of the other that flows through the text, and these two aspects seem particularly pertinent if one considers the anxious way that many northern Albertans see themselves and the region in the decades that follow.

The historical legacy of Alistair MacLean's novel is difficult to gauge. The book's content clearly reflects the white, dominant discourse to which it belongs and emulates, and its detective-style plot and stock characters have not held up well. MacLean's unflattering representations of Alaskans and northern Albertans may not have been appreciated by local residents or bitumen sands workers in 1980.

Understandably, *Athabasca* fell short of becoming a landmark regional text, if for no other reason than its central theme of industrial sabotage. Nevertheless, MacLean incorporated technological and industrial details into his novel, which likely struck a chord for at least some northern Albertans. For outsiders, the subject matter might even have been an informative means of learning about ongoing work in the region. With its vivid descriptions of draglines, pipelines, and bitumen extraction, *Athabasca* remains an intriguing fictional work for the way practical aspects of northern Alberta's fossil fuel development are incorporated into its plot, and for its candid depiction of potential risks to the region as it aspired to the status of a potential energy superpower.

5.2 Roddy Cross and the Undead Fort Mac

Like MacLean's *Athabasca*, the fictional world created by Roddy Cross in *Dead Cold* (2013) uses Fort McMurray as a primary setting. Cross's text is self-published – an example of expression that calls to mind A.M. Bezanson's promotional pamphlet (Chapter Two), Sidney Ells (Chapter Four), and others (albeit self-publication has different implications today). Accordingly, without the guidance of an editor, there are numerous typos and grammatical errors; there are not even page numbers (therefore, references in this section are not cited by page number). Nevertheless, as a bitumen sands worker himself, Cross's nihilistic representation of the Wood Buffalo region provides an intriguing perspective.

As a zombie novel, *Dead Cold* is influenced by popular culture touchstones like *The Walking Dead* graphic novels and George Romero's *Living Dead* films: one of Cross's characters is a security guard named Rick (the protagonist in *The Walking Dead*), and eventually the West Edmonton Mall becomes an important location (1978's *Dawn of*

the Dead is primarily set in a large shopping mall).³¹⁴ There are also *Walking Dead* terms such as a “horde” (i.e. a herd of zombies), and these inclusions allow Cross to take some shortcuts in terms of having to establish familiar tropes within the genre – for instance, the characters already seem to know many of the implicit “rules” of zombie transformation.

Cross’s reliance on well-worn zombie lore allows the author to devote space in the text to Wood Buffalo as a setting. Some of the specific locations include Beacon Hill, Timberlea, Thickwood, and Lac La Biche. In order to situate the reader – and in order to give a sense of place – there are references to a number of uniquely local or distinctly Canadian stores such as Zellers, Superstore, Mac’s Convenience, and Outdoor Essentials (which has since closed, but was previously located on Timberline Drive in Thickwood).³¹⁵ These touchstone locations provide a sense of verisimilitude, and Fort McMurray itself is occasionally depicted unfavourably. In the sixth chapter, for example, a character named Crystal casually calls the city “Fort Crack.”

Dead Cold’s plot is centred around the protagonist Roland Castle, a bitumen sands worker who juggles long shifts and takes sleeping pills to catch up on his rest. Roland’s erratic sleep schedule results in the sobering discovery that he has “slept through the evacuation” of Fort McMurray. This depiction of a lopsided work-life balance that has vital ramifications amplifies the real-world havoc experienced by the typical Fort McMurray employee.

³¹⁴ Fittingly, the reader discovers that the day is December 24 (Chapter 11). Later in the text, a group of people end up “guarding a Wal-Mart like it was the last bastion of humanity” (Chapter 25).

³¹⁵ Other Fort McMurray stores referenced by Cross include the 7-Eleven and the Dodge dealership.

Perhaps the most incongruous facet of *Dead Cold* is its general air of nonchalance. The book is mainly concerned with painting an apocalyptic picture of undead creatures running rampant in the northern city, but the fictional characters rarely appear to grasp the severity of the situation. Despite the outrageous doomsday circumstances, Cross's characters frequently stop to casually smoke cigarettes. This apparent lack of urgency extends to the lackadaisical manner in which characters deal with the fact that their former neighbours and co-workers have become zombies. For instance, in the unsettling chapter "Death Bites," Roland comes across a former girlfriend who has been zombified. Unflinching, the protagonist takes out a large, "glistening" black gun, shoots her, and exclaims, "I'll see you in hell, bitch."³¹⁶ On another occasion, Roland shoots the head off a zombie woman, and then proceeds to break into a Superstore to eat some Pop Tarts.

These casual approaches to such an apocalyptic event are even more disarming in light of Roland's shocking admission that he has "always wanted" a catastrophic scenario to take place in Fort McMurray because he has major debt, hates his job, and has generally "sucked at life." In fact, Roland begins "hoping for the end of society" just so that he does not have to pay his bills or face a girlfriend that has rejected him. Perhaps readers should not apply too much pragmatic meaning to these passages, but one nevertheless wonders how much of Cross's own ruminations overlap with the nihilistic ruminations of the protagonist.

To underscore the novel's sense of verisimilitude, *Dead Cold* reinforces – and perhaps even embraces – stereotypes that have characterized the region. Roland is a smoking, swaggering male bitumen sands employee who is obsessed with weapons, and

³¹⁶ Elsewhere in the novel, when Roland comes across a gun that has laser sight, he calls the weapon "incredibly sexy."

his quest to shoot zombies comes across as both natural and pleasurable for him. He also has an exaggerated love of vehicles that reflects an affinity for consumption in a region already enamored with cars, trucks, and other motorized commodities.

In retrospect, there are some images and plot points in *Dead Cold* that have since proven to be eerily prescient. In particular, one passage in the novel describes a steady line of cars leaving the city to head south to Edmonton. This image calls to mind the actual evacuation of Fort McMurray in May 2016, when a panicked exodus of cars and people could be seen along the bottlenecked Highway 63 (Thurton, “Fort McMurray”). The doomsday atmosphere of *Dead Cold* also has correlations with extreme wildfires in the region; when the town of High Level had to be evacuated in May and June 2019, one resident said that the skies resembled “a post-apocalyptic movie scenario” (Small).

Just like Alistair MacLean’s *Athabasca*, Cross’s book introduces dozens of characters who come across as interchangeable, non-descript, and difficult to identify. Over the span of 31 chapters, most of these characters meet a grisly fate – including Roland, who confesses to his true love (tellingly named Destiny) that he “always wanted to die being a hero.” As a real-life bitumen sands worker who decided to write about a fictional bitumen sands worker, Roddy Cross’s self-published work presents an opportunity to create a narrative on his own terms. Like MacLean’s novel, Cross’s idea to pair Fort McMurray with a disastrous event seems a natural fit.

5.3 Randy S. Burton and the Longing for Treasure

As with Cross’s novel, Randy S. Burton’s *The Mystery of Glass Island* (2013) is a self-published book that has not been professionally edited. Just as Roddy Cross is heavily influenced by tropes in zombie fiction, Burton is influenced by the popular *Hardy Boys*

series attributed to Franklin W. Dixon (see Appendix D).³¹⁷ The book's chaste and proper two siblings, Rick Brown (the narrator) and his younger brother Bob, suggest a sense of nostalgia for more traditional times, yet the author also instills his protagonists with a strong desire for material wealth and fortune. Similar to Roddy Cross, when Burton is not writing, he works in Fort McMurray as a safety specialist for a fossil fuel company.

In Burton's book, Rick and Bob are taken to "the Island of Legends" for the summer by their parents, Jim and Betty (Burton 1). The family's rest and relaxation is upended when Uncle Frank announces that his son Dwayne must go to a children's hospital in the United States in order to receive medical care. Uncle Frank plans to sell his house to pay for Dwayne's medical expenses, but Betty offers up the Brown family's savings instead (58). In the book, the Uncle Frank subplot is often accompanied by sharp criticisms of the perceived lack of medical possibilities within the Canadian health care system, and socialized medicine in general.

The book's title refers to a visible phenomenon that makes Glass Island sparkle like precious stones. A family member named Uncle Abe tells the boys that stories have persisted for generations concerning this sparkling wonder; townspeople would stand on the hill and ponder the inexplicable island. Much like in earlier times when the bitumen sands posed an unsolved problem for frustrated entrepreneurs, the glittering island is an unexplained phenomenon too.

Indeed, the ominous mountain on Glass Island begins to share common qualities with the sublime, and this indescribable sensation becomes the catalyst for Rick and his

³¹⁷ At times, the dialogue and plot in Burton's book almost seem to be set during the same time as the famous brotherly sleuths. However, there are contemporary indicators: *Glass Island's* two brothers carry energy bars with them, for example, and they consult Google for research purposes.

brother to confront and conquer this natural phenomenon. After Uncle Abe's folk tales, the brothers go out that night to see more of the mountain's "majestic wonder" and Rick gets an "eerie feeling" (37). The mystery surrounding the sparkling gnaws at Rick, and he tells his mother the next day that his "curiosity about this island will kill us inside," and that he will simply not be able to "go through life wondering if we really could have solved this mystery or not" (40). When the brothers finally embark on their trip to Glass Island, they feel "as if the mountain itself was staring down upon us, watching our every move" (69). This depiction of the mountain as an agent of surveillance suggests its unspoken power over humans under an ever-watching eye. In their decision to climb the mountain, the boys conquer their fears and unease, but also earn a psychological victory when they, as human beings, victoriously confront this natural obstacle and its quiet stare.

These passages aside, the plot primarily revolves around a stash of hidden treasure and a nefarious smuggling operation on Glass Island. The prospect of treasure dominates the narrative,³¹⁸ as heroes and villains alike covet incalculable wealth. After Rick reads a library book titled *Alone with the Treasure* (63), he becomes convinced that he and his brother "may have stumbled upon the biggest treasure find ever" – which is presumably hidden in the mountain (64). Later, on the island, the boys finally see a large, overflowing treasure chest of pearl necklaces, gold coins, and jewel-studded swords, and Rick thinks to himself that it is more wealth than he had ever imagined (90).

The book's antagonists are George and Joe, two smugglers who are under orders from "The Boss." Yet George and Joe tell the Brown brothers that the reason they covet

³¹⁸ A general preoccupation with treasure, of course, recurs in northern Alberta's non-fiction. As noted earlier, Sidney Ells and J. Joseph Fitzgerald (Chapter Four) wrote about inventors and scientists who tried to unlock the ways in which bitumen's "treasure" can be used by men (Fitzgerald 158).

the treasure is so that they can support their families. “We’re just a couple of men trying to make a decent living,” Joe argues. “We have families too, you know, and in order to feed them, sometimes you have to do things you don’t like,” he protests (92). Such reasoning also tends to be invoked by real-world bitumen sands employees and supporters who insist that their potentially disruptive work is necessary in order to support their families.

Of course, Burton’s novel concludes with the comeuppance of the smugglers at the hands of the brothers; however, one aspect of the outcome bears scrutiny. The boys receive a reward cheque for \$250,000, but when a sergeant learns that cousin Dwayne will need surgery in the United States, he decides to give the boys an additional \$300,000 worth of gold coins (114). In other words, Rick and Bob will still be able to keep the \$250,000 for themselves, rather than feel obliged to use it to pay their sick cousin’s medical bills. In Burton’s world, there is room for sudden, significant wealth while not having to spend or sacrifice income on personal, familial, or unexpected factors.

On one level, *The Mystery of Glass Island* is harmless fun. Unfortunately, some of the passages and idioms are unintentionally comical. For instance, Bob exclaims that a stranger gives him “the creeps” (71), and later Rick gets an idea that is “so crazy that it just might work” (82). Such expressions may emulate Leslie McFarlane’s / Franklin W. Dixon’s books, but seem disconnected from present-day vernacular.³¹⁹ The archaic phrases are paired with dubious investigative skills on Rick’s part. For instance, when he stumbles onto a tunnel, Rick somehow deduces that an inscription “looks like some sort

³¹⁹ According to the *Kirkus* book review, all of Burton’s characters “young and old, sound like senior citizens.” The review also notes that the story “hearkens back to an earlier era” of young adult fiction “by showing an earnest appreciation for simple activities such as hiking and camping, a love for animals, and a wondrous appetite for nature and mystery” (“Kirkus Review”).

of pirate engraving,” and that another tunnel resembles “what seems to be an old pirate’s cave” (47, 48).

These moments in the text approach the level of eye-rolling but clearly stem from an earnest desire to entertain and tell a specific kind of story. Just as earlier writers like A.M. Bezanson were inspired by the explorer tales of yore, so too is Randy Burton influenced by the mystery-solving hijinks of Dixon’s Hardy Boys. On a deeper level, however, Rick and Bob – motivated by the prospect of a hypothetical treasure – long for wealth and riches, and the book’s conclusion allows them to enjoy their reward money without having to altruistically spend it on a member of their extended family. As ideological influences and values shifted in northern Alberta in the decades since bitumen sands development first began, such shifts manifest themselves even in works of young adult fiction.

Although few in number, works of fiction that are from, or about, northern Alberta shed insight by virtue of the genres that influenced them. The respective genres adopted in *Athabasca*, *Dead Cold*, and *The Mystery of Glass Island* allowed underlying themes of masculinity and latent suspicion to be explored. Alistair MacLean incorporated facts and a sense of verisimilitude to heighten suspense in his detective yarn, Roddy Cross reproduced a fallen Fort McMurray using a zombie template, and Randy S. Burton penned a traditional adventure for young adults in the style of the Hardy Boys. As labourers in the bitumen sands, Roddy Cross and Randy S. Burton represent a segment of northern Alberta’s working population who wish to express themselves through fiction.

Only recently have more local voices eventually joined these authors, and the region’s literary output has finally expanded beyond content that revolves around

bitumen sand development or has been written by industry workers (see Appendix A for list of authors). Some of Wood Buffalo's current non-fiction writers include Patricia Marie Budd, Inge Bremer-Trueman, Therese Greenwood, Julie Rowe, Isabella Michelle Trempe, children's author Sheila Chartrand and playwright Luay Eljamal. In Cold River, Judith Greaves (penname Judith Tewes) has written a handful of books, and in Peace River, former judge Hal Sisson – who regularly organized open air “12 Foot Davis Nights” back in the 1950s (Peace Players) – penned at least ten books, including a burlesque novel (*The Big Bamboozle*, 1999) and a conspiracy-laden treatise about how 9/11 was an inside job involving a new world order (*Modus Operandi 9/11*, 2007).

Although these authors have attempted to explore imaginative worlds beyond realms dominated by industry, their texts have enjoyed very little visibility in northern Alberta. Across the board, their works are as obscure as some of the previous ones we have examined (e.g. Chapter Three). This phenomenon, while perhaps not the result of direct suppression, seems an important consideration when compared to the local dominance and success of the two authors we look at in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

Huberman and Jean: Powerful Authors, Narrative Gatekeepers

In Fort McMurray, two books have become commonplace, crucial staples of local stores and visitor centres: Irwin Huberman's *The Place We Call Home* and Frances K. Jean's *More than Oil* are the go-to texts concerning the Wood Buffalo region. For the novice reader, these two titles serve primarily as an entry point with respect to local traditions, history, and culture. Unfortunately, their exclusive, ubiquitous places on local store shelves have come at the expense of other voices and literary texts – including works that have been examined in previous chapters of this dissertation. In this chapter, I will illustrate some of the consequences of the widespread promotion of the Huberman and Jean titles. First, however, it is important to revisit Barbara Eckstein and her theoretical work concerning stories and authorship, as these ideas may apply to northern Alberta.

6.1 Named/Unnamed Voices & Newspaper Legacies in Northern Alberta

As has been established in earlier chapters, northern Alberta has a diverse history of stories and narratives. Barbara Eckstein argues that written and oral stories not only have profound power but can be used to reinforce boundaries and perceptions of a given space (13). In this way, as we have seen, certain local stories from northern Alberta – the Peter Pond myth for example – have been instrumental in shaping how northern Alberta has been represented and generally perceived. Although storytelling has always held an important role in the regions of Peace River, Fort McMurray, and Cold Lake, in recent years printed collections of local narratives have expanded to also include bitumen sands

development in some way, or at least some aspect of its history. In almost a revisionist manner, many local texts now include bitumen extraction in some way or another, either in terms of a narrative arc, or in terms of content and influence. In many cases, the fossil fuel industry has even become the author itself.³²⁰

This phenomenon of industry-as-writer allows monolithic corporations to be anonymous authors of documents and brings to the forefront the issue of authorial identification. Eckstein notes that when plans are made for a specific place, it is important to identify all of the authors who seek to tell stories about the land. This identification of individuals is integral, because often the local stories – detailed and subjective – will differ from more high-level or generic narratives that are invoked and popularized by planners. Eckstein believes that distinct, local voices are especially important when development projects move from preliminary discussions to implementation phases.

The identification of authors also helps increase the likelihood that a story will remain intact and will not be co-opted or altered. For each story that planners tell and ultimately use, Eckstein argues that citizen-readers must identify the corresponding author in order to effectively scrutinize any presumed claims to authority (17). This process is important because project planners frequently document and catalogue citizen stories in transcript form as author-less. On their own, the unidentified stories assume a kind of authority that will dictate how a place is represented and perceived; conversely, if deliberate focus is applied to the act of naming the storytellers, generalizations are less

³²⁰ *The Syncrude Story: In Our Own Words* (1990), for example, is a hardcover book published by Syncrude Canada Ltd. The company also produced *Syncrude 1973: Year of Decision* (1974), which likely anticipated some of the controversies and problems and that were later exposed in Larry Pratt's *The Tar Sands*. There also tangentially similar titles such as *Dusters and Gushers: The Canadian Oil and Gas Industry* (1968), which credits its various writers as "outstanding authorities in the petroleum and related industries."

likely to occur and these stories are less likely to devolve into the same overarching, presumptive truths that hegemonic forces may wish to keep in place (14).

In a way, the act of anonymizing local storytellers has already occurred with respect to some of northern Alberta's literary output. For instance, in *Stories My Granny Told Me* (1980) a number of story submissions were compiled, but these narratives did not have the important aspect of authorial identification. Subtitled "Stories, Tales, Legends, Poems Collected by the Young People of Fort McKay," the small collection lists twenty authors as well as the members of the Grades One and Two classes of 1980. While the text was not intended as a forum for weighing in on matters of regional planning, the book itself provides the opportunity for these stories that otherwise may not have been exposed to the content – even though the author of each story and poem is not identified (see Appendix W). It could be argued that having access to at least some of these regional voices is better than to not have them at all; however, Eckstein might argue that the lack of author identification dilutes the efficacy of the text as an agent of storytelling power. More importantly, *Stories My Granny Told Me* is one of the *only* extant texts from Fort McKay.³²¹ As northern Alberta continues to be impacted by resource development, and industrial development, other small communities, territories, and wildlife areas are liable to continue to have only limited representation in terms of storytelling or authorship.

An important question then becomes how a voice or a chorus of voices might potentially gain traction or viable representation. Ordinarily, one of the seemingly obvious outlets for underrepresented voices and stories would be through the press and

³²¹ Now over 4 decades old, *Stories My Granny Told Me* is the only book listed on the "Arts and Culture" tab at the Fort McKay virtual museum website. See www.fortmckayvirtualmuseum.com/arts-and-culture.

local journalists. After all, the naming of individuals within newspaper articles is a hallmark of community publications; by extension, such coverage and exposure expands the potential pool of community voices, subjects, and authors.

Surprisingly, early print publications in northern Alberta were in fact diverse and widespread. Unlike today, there were a number of outlets that reflected aspects of local life – some of which were even publishing concurrently with each other. A look at the history of Fort McMurray’s newspapers provides important insight into how local voices have increasingly been managed and controlled over the last few decades.

The early 1960s saw the *Fort McMurray Banner*, launched by Art Playford, which reprinted town council minutes, local announcements, and updates by the Chamber of Commerce. By 1967, other publications in the region included the *Northern Star*, the *McMurray Sun*, and the *News and Advertiser*. With alternating success, these publications sought to supplant the oral transmission of regional information and events via daily gossip or word of mouth (Huberman 219).

In 1970, the *McMurray Courier* was launched by Bernard and Frances Jean, who “saw newspaper publishing as a sacred responsibility, and often wrestled ... with how to fairly portray all sides of the issue without showing a blatant bias.” The Jeans dominated the information landscape during the first half of the 1970s; however, amidst the extended news coverage and “gutsy” editorials penned by Frances and her family, during the *Courier*’s four years of operation the newspaper did not print a single retraction – regardless of factual accuracy (220).

We will return to Frances Jean later in this chapter, but one important aspect to note here is that the Jean family sold the *Courier* in 1974 for \$100,000 and a new paper, *Fort*

McMurray Today, was launched by Bowes Publishers. In the words of the new owners, local residents would be kept informed concerning “developments within the oil industry,” and almost parenthetically the publication would also strive “to be a community voice” (Huberman 222). Crucially, then, the paper’s explicit priority – to promote fossil fuel content first, and the community second – demarcated a different direction and a different function than earlier publications. This new emphasis on resource development would quickly become apparent when *Fort McMurray Today* simultaneously published the *Oilsands Review* for one year. Meanwhile, another publication was about to present itself alongside *Fort McMurray Today*: in the wake of the legacy of the *Jeans*, Irwin Huberman, a former editorial staff member for the *Courier*, went on to become a co-founder and editor of the *Fort McMurray Express*, which published from 1979 to 1994.

At present, *Fort MacMurray Today* remains the city’s primary local newspaper. It is owned by Postmedia³²² (owner of Sun Media, among other tabloids) and distributed locally as a tabloid that is circulated twice a week.³²³ Another publication, *Fort McMurray Connect*, printed its final issue on 22 Dec. 2016, and subsequently dismantled its website and erased all of its prior content. At the moment, three other Fort McMurray publications continue to publish: *Snapd Wood Buffalo* (www.woodbuffalo.snapd.com), which is essentially a monthly community forum – its only rule is that every submission “has to be 100% positive” (“About snapd”); *MyMcMurray* (www.mymcmurray.com), an

³²² Postmedia’s affiliation with right-wing politicians and pro-fossil fuel lobbyists is well-documented. Recently Postmedia hired the former chief of staff to Alberta premier Jason Kenney to participate in a newly minted “energy war room” (see Bellefontaine).

³²³ In November 2016, *Fort McMurray Today* announced it would no longer publish 6 times a week (*The Canadian Press*, “Fort McMurray Newspaper”).

online publication that is a repository of local, provincial, and energy industry news and is affiliated with two local radio stations; and *YMM (Your McMurray Magazine)* (www.yourmcmurraymagazine.com), a quarterly publication targeted to “everyone who lives, works, & plays” in Fort McMurray – even though there are just as many articles about the bitumen sands as there are about local people and culture.

As for the other two regions associated with bitumen sands development, Cold Lake has two publications: the Postmedia-owned *Cold Lake Sun*, which is published once a week, and *The Courier News and Publishing*, which consists of volunteer submissions from the local military community. Peace River’s primary newspapers are the Postmedia-owned *Peace River Record-Gazette* (est. 1973), which is published once a week, and the conspiracy-tinged publication *Smoky River Express*.³²⁴ There is also a subscription-based online publication called *Mile Zero News*, and a life and business magazine called *Move Up* (published in Peace River by the editors of the now-defunct *theVAULTmagazine*). These publications in Cold Lake and Peace River represent limited avenues for print media in these regions and reflect the subjective – often partisan – content that is disseminated to readers.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, there was one exception to this dearth of print coverage in the region, particularly with respect to local indigenous voices. In 1983 the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society of Alberta established *Windspeaker*, which was a weekly newspaper that spanned anywhere from 20 to a formidable 48 pages. Subtitled A

³²⁴ The news section of the *Smoky River Express* consists primarily of content submitted by locals. The publication’s editor, Tom Henihan, frequently expresses incredulity concerning the veracity of climate change and he chastises the “apocalyptic dogma” of global warming as a falsehood spread by “alarmist” “self-ordained environmentalists” and “climate change enthusiasts” (Henihan, “Climate Change Alarmists”). Henihan also calls environmentalists “recreational protestors who love the childish fun of creating a nuisance in the name of a so-called greater good” (Henihan, “Alberta”).

New Dawn in Aboriginal Communications, the publication's initial objective was to serve northern Alberta's indigenous people (Windpeaker.com). The wide-ranging content included highly topical news articles, informative features, and outspoken editorials and opinion pieces. Some of the articles from the 1980s were even written in indigenous language (see Appendix X). Also impressive was the willingness on the part of *Windspeaker's* editors to print lengthy letters to the editor – many submissions easily spanned half a page. In more recent times, such dedications of ample text space and layout to voices from the community are rare if not obsolete occurrences in print media.

In 1990, when the federal Conservative government cut 100% of its funding to indigenous newspapers across the country, 9 out of Canada's 11 indigenous publications were forced to fold. Only *Windspeaker* was able to survive this massive decimation. By 1993, *Windspeaker* had assumed the mantle of "Canada's first and only provider of national Indigenous news, information and opinion" (Windpeaker.com). More than 20,000 former articles from *Windspeaker* have been scanned and are now accessible through the AAMSA. This content dates back to the 1980s, and in retrospect is an invaluable historical and literary resource for the region, particularly in light of two dominating figures who controlled Fort McMurray's newspapers and selected local narratives for many years.

6.2 Irwin Huberman

It is no coincidence that Fort McMurray's two prominent former newspaper founders – Irwin Huberman and Frances K. Jean – also wrote two of the region's most widely available and heavily promoted books. In tandem with control of the local newspapers, the publication of these books has correspondingly turned these two authors into

gatekeepers of local narratives. In many instances, Huberman and Jean have helped promote certain local figures and namesakes in print, while simultaneously minimizing or marginalizing a number of alternative voices, opposing viewpoints, and unconventional perspectives. Whether as editors of their respective papers or as writers of their collections of local stories and accounts of important Fort McMurray residents, these authors selectively printed winners and losers, and even today the region continues to favour many of the names and figures depicted in these compilations.

In *The Place We Call Home*, Irwin Huberman presents a number of stories of Fort McMurray individuals, some of which date back more than a century. Named Fort McMurray's business leader of the year in 1985 and subsequently designated one of the province's top business executives (*Academy for Jewish Religion*, "Irwin Huberman"), Huberman also launched the aforementioned *Fort McMurray Express* (1979-1994). Many of the local accounts and anecdotes represented in *The Place We Call Home* stem from the author's personal interviews with the subjects. In general, however, Huberman filters these narratives through the larger narrative of bitumen development. Although some residents helped grow the local economy or helped contribute to their community independent of rapidly expanding extraction projects, Huberman continually returns to fossil fuel-related concepts like growth, progress, and economic booms and busts throughout his text. Consequently, local stories that exemplify charity or altruism gradually give way to the main industrial narrative.

Huberman's text, then, includes a vital collection of testimonials from residents but necessarily proceeds to recalibrate them to fit into the larger master narrative of bitumen sands development. There is a great deal of potential for commentary on much of the

book's content, but I will look specifically at the various ways in which Big Oil has influenced the region. Fossil fuel company-based patronage, for instance, has been prevalent in Fort McMurray for so long that it has become naturalized as a common and acceptable practice. Likewise, Big Oil's influence on schools and education programs has been a mainstay for decades, as well as its influence on public infrastructure projects that ordinarily would not have been appropriated by the private sector. *The Place We Call Home* also contains examples of how citizens began to perceive bitumen as magical, and – aside from a few exceptions³²⁵ – engaged less frequently in civic life and in decisions that directly affected them. This growing disengagement coincided with a change in residents' personalities, a general increase in crime, and a shift toward shopping outside of Fort McMurray instead of supporting local businesses – all of which coincided with the arrival of Big Oil. The author also outlines the noteworthy efforts of two doctors whose legacies as watchdogs have been diluted by the fossil fuel industry, and toward the end of the text, an almost declarative tone is evoked as Huberman remarks that Fort McMurray has changed from a “place to call home” to a “place to exploit” (Huberman 262). Yet despite these indications of a downward trajectory for the region, lurking beneath all of this content is Huberman's inescapable urge to present industry favourably.

Big Oil's Influence and Patronage

This preferential treatment toward industry seems only natural when one considers that Huberman previously worked for Syncrude (book cover, *The Place We Call Home*). As

³²⁵ There is one exception to Huberman's positive depictions of fossil fuel companies: the author notes that criticism accompanied the River Park Glen project, when Fort McMurray's planning group felt that outside developers “failed to respect” the group's role in creating “a calmly planned community.” The planning group further argued that Syncrude began River Park Glen construction without even providing a building or development permit (Huberman 259).

such, the author mostly avoids commenting upon the environmental consequences of bitumen extraction in the region, which is a rather disconcerting decision in light of the fact that Huberman worked as communications director for the environment ministries of both the Alberta and Ontario governments (*Academy for Jewish Religion*). There is also an unavoidable question of authorial reliability with the list of “Patrons” included inside *The Place We Call Home*, whereby Huberman acknowledges he received support from Albion Sands/Shell Canada, Imperial Oil, Japan Canada Oil Sands Limited, the Oilsands Discovery Centre, Suncor, and Syncrude. With respect to these last two corporations, obvious patronage is particularly noticeable: throughout the text, Huberman makes no less than 82 references to Syncrude and 19 references to Suncor.

This overt support from fossil fuel-affiliated organizations seems to influence the book’s chronology and structure. Although the book initially features a number of local accounts, after Huberman describes the launch of Great Canadian Oil Sands (Suncor) in 1967, fewer regional narratives appear – despite the fact that such narratives previously constituted much of the book’s engaging content. Although *The Place We Call Home* was published in 2001, Huberman uses 1980 as the cut-off year, which allows narratives of positivity and nostalgia to be promoted before the onset of narratives of descent and decline that have hounded and haunted Fort McMurray as it has transformed into a boomtown community. The text is front-ended with community stories and then transitions to more recent, presumably positive connotations of petro-states, resource development, or capitalism that take their place.

A pattern of maverickhood and local stubbornness emerges in the stories included in *The Place We Call Home*, which is meant to represent determination and grit but

ultimately seems to backfire. This stubbornness is most evident in instances when locals refused to heed nature's basic warning signs. For example, there has been a history of inaction with respect to the likelihood of potential floods – even when the region had numerous warnings. Such was the case when the “big one” of 1936 destroyed over seventy homes. That year, although the community of McMurray was warned in advance that melting ice and snow would impact the region on a large scale, few residents heeded the radio station advisories. Inevitably, the flood caused major damage (Huberman 97).³²⁶ Four decades later, the town again faced a major flood which received national media coverage, and once again the impact to a number of citizens could have been prevented a decade earlier. During the “Great Flood of 1977,” residents from the Park Plaza and Clearwater area were uprooted and dislocated, but they should not have been there in the first place: in 1964, the province had prohibited the city from allowing housing in this flood-prone region. The town ignored these development restrictions and developed the area anyway, which resulted in significant property damage and a long waiting period of resettlement for the flood victims. The 1977 flood caused \$2 million worth of damage (243).³²⁷

In addition to floods, many fires in Fort McMurray have been preventable. The Abasand bitumen sands plant, for instance, burned down in November 1941, but might have been spared if shortcuts had not been taken in terms of the quality of the firefighting equipment (117).³²⁸ In fact, Abasand burned down several times, under circumstances

³²⁶ Similar advance warnings are ignored in the present, as with the Alberta floods of 2013, which were predicted to arrive in the near future. Sources like CBC (“Weather Disasters”) and William Marsden (*Stupid To The Last Drop*) cautioned as much (Marsden 112).

³²⁷ In addition to the floods of 1936 and 1977, there was also a “Great Flood” in 1918 (Huberman 57).

³²⁸ Elsewhere in the text, Huberman describes a Fort McMurray store that caught fire in 1934. During the crisis, the owner was asked by townspeople what needed to be saved. He answered whatever items were “of most value.” The townspeople subsequently went into the building and helped the store owner salvage

that were considered to be suspicious at best. In 1980, Darlene J. Comfort outlined these missteps in her bluntly-titled book, *The Abasand Fiasco: The Rise and Fall of a Brave Pioneer Oil Sands Extraction Plant*. To this day, whether facing fires or floods, many Wood Buffalo residents opt to ignore the advice of experts who warn against rebuilding infrastructure unless certain criteria are met. This tendency toward stubbornness will be revisited shortly, but certainly in the case of properties in certain areas, the likelihood of flooding has remained constant for decades, while many citizens seem to convince themselves that nature – as with the bitumen sands themselves – can easily be domesticated and predicted by human beings.

Building Public Schools and Public Roads

Huberman provides insight into the influence that Big Oil has had on Fort McMurray's public sectors, and his examples are often surprising since they occur so early in the history of bitumen extraction. One case from the 1930s describes how the ill-fated Abasand Oil company circumvented municipal requirements and assumed an infrastructure role usually performed by municipal and provincial levels of government, and built a school-house for nearby residents (Huberman 106). This example of the alliance between the fossil fuel industry and public education would be followed by more examples in the years to come. In subsequent decades, Big Oil has even extended its reach beyond building roads and started to influence the content that schoolchildren are taught. For instance, Suncor, Syncrude, and Cenovus have been engaged to help redesign school curricula in Alberta. Edmonton's public school board has referred to fossil fuel

materials from his business. Meanwhile, another store across town was looted and pillaged during the fire (94). In total, fourteen businesses burned.

companies as “stakeholders” and even approached corporations for their help in deciding “what to teach children in kindergarten to Grade 3” (CBC, “Oilsands Companies”). This dubious initiative was criticized because the educational content was “highly focused on the oil and gas industry” (Emo and Tamauchi). The province of Alberta’s prototype PDF for altering the curriculum is accessible online.³²⁹

In addition to building new schools, fossil fuel companies assumed other public infrastructure projects that were usually handled by the government. For instance, when the company British American Oil created a public road in the early 1940s (Huberman 153), they effectively established a precedent for fossil fuel companies to build roadways that has continued to this day. Not surprisingly, the construction of Abasand’s public school and British American Oil’s public road also coincided with new policy changes by elected officials that facilitated the allocation of public funds to subsidize bitumen extraction projects for loan-delinquent companies like Bitumount (140).

As northern Albertans became accustomed to fossil fuel development, they started to see beauty, or experienced a sense of wonder, with hydrocarbons. Jean (Milne) O’Connor, for instance, said she could see “rainbows” in the oil puddles on the ground at the nearby Abasand plant (131),³³⁰ and Judy Mitten found the smell of train coal to be “wonderful” (146). This sense of wonder and beauty toward coal and bitumen coincided with an increase in remarks that decried the ugliness of muskeg, overburden, and other types of natural spaces.

³²⁹ See Ibrahim; Toledano; Emo and Tamauchi; Robinson; Salz; CBC, “Oilsands Companies.” For a PDF of the curriculum, see open.alberta.ca/dataset/alberta-education-s-curriculum-development-prototyping-partners.

³³⁰ “There was oil from the plant on the ground,” O’Connor remarked, “and I saw rainbows in the puddles. Oil was magic. There was no radio, so you had to have imagination. To me all puddles have rainbows” (Huberman 131).

Yet even as some residents warmed to the pervasive aspects of fossil fuel extraction in the region, these sensory encounters were not always welcome – particularly when they began to appear in unexpected or unwanted places. Fort McMurray’s first library, for instance, reeked of fossil fuels (179),³³¹ and during the community’s Blueberry Festival, a fuel with an oil-like odour spilled over onto baseball fields and threatened to ruin the event (189). To this day, the olfactory connection to fossil fuels remains a constant in everyday life in Wood Buffalo.

As Big Oil funding increasingly intersected with civic life and civic planning, the personality of the local population began to shift too. Among Huberman’s more revealing statements is his observation that Fort McMurray was once considered stable, but in more recent years has become volatile, unpredictable, and chaotic. In the author’s words, the community had been home to a regular “cast of characters”³³² that had “remained stable” from the 1940s onward, and for years the town’s families, relationships, friends, festivities “and even disasters” were steady and predictable. By the 1960s, however, Fort McMurray “appeared to be swallowed up” by new residents. Although these newcomers “brought optimism and fresh ideas from the ‘outside,’” they “challenged the status quo,” and insisted they had to be provided with the kinds of “additional services and comforts” that were available in other cities across Canada (162). Huberman’s reference to a sort of general stability prior to the arrival of industry implies that instability – or destabilization – occurred after development projects began to alter the region.

³³¹ Frances Jean corroborates this detail, and notes that the library was situated in a maintenance garage, where fumes “often seeped through to the library” (F. Jean 179). Perhaps not coincidentally, the funds necessary to open this new fossil fuel-scented library were raised by wives of Great Canadian Oil Sands employees (Huberman 179).

³³² Frances Jean likewise adopts the term “character” for residents such as Gus Hawker (F. Jean 88), Bill Tatum (90), and Dim (Dmitri) Silin (190). She also writes that the French-Canadian Jerry Gauthier, also known as “the Mad Trapper,” performs an act for which he “dresses the part” (228).

By the 1970s, the influence of fossil fuel companies on public policy in Fort McMurray often came at the expense of civic participation. In 1977, an important public meeting was held in which the key finances and daily operations of Fort McMurray were outlined. Ultimately, only two people showed up at that meeting (249), and one of those two people, Norm Weiss, had strong ties to the Shell bulk station. By 1979, Weiss was elected an Alberta MLA.

As connections to the fossil fuel industry became commonplace for Fort McMurray's politicians, pre-established regulations were increasingly treated as irksome obstacles. Jack Shields for instance – a former MP and recruiter of First Nations people through the Newstart program – loathed regulations and “was never one to let formalities stand in his way.” By the time he became Chairman of the Public School Board, Shields was adamant that a school be built in Abasand Heights in 1979, and he grew restless when local and provincial officials did not issue immediate approvals. So he mandated construction to begin without any of the prerequisite survey information (Huberman 252). Furthermore, Shield insisted that the building be named Frank Spragins School, in honour of his friend – who also happened to be Syncrude's first president (F. Jean 263).

Another man who circumvented customary regulatory channels was Vic Henning. Described as a man who wielded “ultimate power” in the Wood Buffalo region in the mid- to late-seventies, Henning fast-tracked regulatory processes for water, school, road, and sewer services by meeting directly with provincial ministers. Through these off-the-record encounters, Henning circumvented standard procedures and fast-tracked projects so companies like Syncrude and the Alberta Housing Corporation would benefit (Huberman 260-1).

As large-scale extraction projects continued, their destabilizing impacts caused social problems to worsen. After the GCOS plant opened, some employees were required to work for 28 days in a row (199); crime spiralled at a rate three times higher than in other towns with similar populations (187); hotels overflowed with “hard drinking patrons” who often fought with each other in various community parking lots (233); prostitution was rampant (234); hospitals filled with fatalities caused by highway speeding (236); and wives of GCOS employees experienced high levels of depression, alcoholism, and marriage dissolution (199). At the GCOS and Syncrude construction sites, workers participated in card games that regularly yielded \$30,000 pots. Disturbing anecdotes from these card games include one player who was accused of cheating and then seriously beaten and dumped onto Highway 63, and another worker who earned \$24,000 in one game and was subsequently “found at the camp dump stuffed into a garbage bag” (233).³³³ Despite these unprecedented alterations to Fort McMurray’s previously tranquil way of life, loneliness seemed an even greater existential threat, so restless workers continued to punch the clock at their jobs just to combat boredom from the town’s inherent isolation.³³⁴

Soon, incidents of harassment and assault began to occur. The burgeoning bitumen sands workforce was predominantly male, however a few women employees worked at construction sites. These women who lived at the trailer camps were continually harassed and required 24-hour protection “from the hordes of men who surrounded them,” and in

³³³ According to Huberman, Syncrude officials and the RCMP denied the murder occurred but a number of plant workers swore to the authenticity of the events (233).

³³⁴ Longtime community members noticed that “their calm and predictable towns” had been “overrun by outsiders” who had imported “a variety of social problems” (Huberman 204). Residents started to believe that higher incomes and new houses from the company would fix marital and family problems, but the lengthy work hours and the remoteness only made matters worse. For many workers, “large paycheques were no match for the isolation, and these families did not last long in the community” (199).

town, citizens like schoolteacher Norma Jean Atkinson recalled being unable to go to public washrooms unless accompanied by at least one other woman because leering men continually pinched or slapped her buttocks (229). Incidents of harassment also occurred frequently in a bar named after Peter Pond – perhaps the same one mentioned in Alistair MacLean’s *Athabasca* (MacLean 43).

Over the decades, bitumen sands workers have continued to behave in a similar manner, or, at least, have been exposed to it: some newly arriving workers still resort to mischief and crime when struggling to find productive ways to pass the time in northern Alberta. According to Alex Hannaford, the city is “synonymous” with “tough, young, bored single men” (Hannaford), and this boredom amid stifling isolation has led to substance addictions (A. Ferguson). In his 2008 book *Tar Sands*, Andrew Nikiforuk outlined a number of facts and statistics that corroborated the instability and disruption inherent in the region, including a heightened presence of Hell’s Angels, a lucrative drug dealers’ market, and a strong underground demand for “clean urine” – a consequence of the fact that 40% of bitumen sands employees were testing positive for cocaine or marijuana in screening tests (*Tar Sands* 44).³³⁵ Between 2006 and 2008, the statistics were disturbing: drug and alcohol abuse in the region increased by 25%; Fort McMurray’s rate of drug offences was five times the provincial rate; the city’s assault rate was 89% higher than the rest of Alberta; and the impaired driving rate was 117%

³³⁵ Nikiforuk notes that employers have allowed drug and alcohol abuse to slide because of the high demand for qualified workers; some contractors insist they would lose of their work crews if drug testing was implemented (*Tar Sands* 44). One employer offered a worker \$50,000 to distribute cocaine at his work camp (48). There have been reports of camp chefs who deal drugs, and one cook even stabbed a drug dealer to death (50). Amidst these harrowing conditions, employees have also been committing suicide by jumping from 300-foot tall cokers; Suncor classified these deaths as the results of “natural causes” (50).

higher than elsewhere. In 2006, half of the categories that charted basic, quality-of-life factors in Fort McMurray were classified as either “worse” or “worsening” (44).

Such data and anecdotes – whether in the Huberman or Nikiforuk texts – demonstrate that the presence of Big Oil has consistently been plagued by negative socioeconomic impacts, regardless of the era. More recent reports have shown that work camps in northern Alberta remain places where violence against women is a significant problem: a 2015 academic paper revealed that city planners preferred to limit public discourse concerning company camps than to examine existing worker conditions or implement improvements to these volatile environments (Strong).³³⁶ Furthermore, all of these issues have been accompanied by a spate of workplace deaths. At least six Suncor employees died in 2014 alone.³³⁷

One other negative socioeconomic impact could be observed in the way citizens changed their shopping habits in the Wood Buffalo region. As resource extraction accelerated, local residents were encouraged to spend more money – but not within the community itself. Prior to Christmas, GCOS organized Diversified bus trips to Edmonton so that employees could shop at larger stores that offered more selection. The shuttle program encountered backlash since it incentivized citizens to avoid buying from community merchants, and encouraged “hundreds of thousands” of local dollars to be spent elsewhere. Non-GCOS employees were vocal in their displeasure; however, the

³³⁶ See also Maimann, “Link.” Such data has been swiftly opposed by right-wing media; however, these claims did not include any countering facts (*Toronto Sun*, “Trudeau”; Cosh).

³³⁷ See *Fort McMurray Today*, “Suncor,” which states that six Suncor employees had died by July 31, 2014. It is unclear if a bear attack was counted in the number of deaths at Suncor, or if that attack was considered a separate non-industry-related death (see *The Canadian Press*, “Coworkers”; Derworiz). These onsite deaths have expanded beyond Suncor. By the end of 2014, a seventh bitumen sands worker was killed; that death occurred at a CNRL worksite (*Fort McMurray Today*, “Top 10”). In 2016, two more workers were killed in an explosion near Anzac (*CBC News*, “Nexen Charged”). Between 2006 and 2014 alone, *Alberta Oil* magazine cited 86 worker fatalities in Alberta’s oil patch (*Alberta Oil*).

practice of shuttling locals to Edmonton – and this out-migration of money that might have stayed in the community – went on to become an annual tradition (Huberman 194). Whether it is overriding public sector projects, facilitating disreputable worker behaviour and activities, or encouraging citizens to keep their money out of the region, Huberman provides a number of candid examples that corroborate some of the potentially harmful consequences when Big Oil becomes a dominant power in the community.

Double Roles: Doctors as Watchdogs

For years, a number of Wood Buffalo’s municipal politicians have had ties with industry; however, some local doctors have in fact taken a more oppositional stance toward industry. Dr. Des Dwyer, for example, received the Governor General’s Award for his role in exposing major health issues in indigenous communities (254), and Dr. Al Nicholson – who became coroner of Fort McMurray and the Medical Officer of Health – was a man “who refused to buckle to corporate or political pressure.” On one occasion, Nicholson investigated a fatality that occurred on the Suncor premises. Officials “wanted him to brush the incident under the carpet,” but Nicholson released a sweeping report that condemned the company and the contractor for deficient safety standards processes (256). Today, online searches of “Al Nicholson” and Suncor yield little information concerning the exposé. Yet despite a muted online presence, prior to his death Nicholson was ranked one of Alberta’s Top 100 Physicians of the Century.

In light of Alberta’s substantial opposition toward messages that threaten industry’s intentions, the invaluable whistle-blowing efforts of Dwyer and Nicholson appear to have contributed to a general lack of recognition of their names, online or otherwise. In addition to these doctors mentioned in Irwin Huberman’s book, there have been at least

two other unheralded doctors: Michel Sauvé, who was embroiled in a three-year legal battle with True North Energy for having presented to Alberta's Energy Resources Conservation Board a number of statistics and "facts it didn't want to hear" concerning poor work camp conditions and health care crises (Nikiforuk, *Tar Sands* 51);³³⁸ and David Schindler, who is "perhaps Canada's foremost water scientist" (Clarke 164). Schindler's groundbreaking research – as well as his contentious public announcement in 2010 concerning tumour-laden fish samples from the Athabasca region (CBC News, "Oil Sands Poisoning"; Weber, "Deformed Fish") – made the doctor a perennial target of fossil fuel companies (George 207-212; Marsden 102-116). Ostracized and demonized, these important and influential physicians corroborate the perception of a northern Albertan culture that frowns upon figures who speak truth to power. All four of these doctors bravely spoke out about health concerns, issues, and crises, and also dared to interrogate the status quo of fossil fuel extraction and the potential harms of ongoing projects. Such disruptions tend not to be rewarded with memorialization.

The Place We Call Home also brings to light the checkered pasts of some of the region's more unseemly civic leaders. For instance, only a few years before he was elected as mayor of the town of McMurray, Paul Schmidt was a former Nazi supporter and sympathizer. For years, Schmidt was a fervent and outspoken supporter of Adolf Hitler,³³⁹ but eventually his ideological leanings caused him considerable public shame,

³³⁸ According to Nikiforuk, the Conservation Board "ignored the statistics and approved the projects anyway. The regulator's persistent disregard for the health consequences of its approvals convinced Sauvé that the whole system was corrupt: 'Consultants for corporations said everything was fine. It was disingenuous and a downright deceitful presentation of the facts. The ERCB bases its decisions on information that is entirely one-sided'" (*Tar Sands* 52).

³³⁹ A "fiercely loyal German," Schmidt "publicly applauded Hitler's ability ... 'to pick Germany up by its bootstraps and put it back on its economic feet'" (Huberman 115). A former Mines Branch Director, Dr. Eugene Haanel, was accused of being a German sympathizer during WWI by fellow bitumen sands founder (and author from Chapter Four) Sidney Ells (Chastko 13).

so he returned to work in the bitumen sands. The German immigrant did not see any issue with running for office, so he put his name forward and, remarkably, was elected mayor from 1951 to 1955 (Huberman 115-116). In the category of dubious local politicians, some might also include former mayor Chuck Knight, who was once a renowned “skid-row drunk” (161).

Such patterns continue today. As is often commonplace with other elected officials across Canada, there is no shortage of Wood Buffalo politicians who have been caught engaging in crooked or illegal activities. For example, city councillor Guy Boutilier resigned when it was discovered he did not live in the city for 6 months prior to the 2013 election (Laderas), and more than \$100,000 of local taxpayers’ money were spent on trying to remove city councillor Krista Balsom over a conflict of interest issue. This latter debacle seems noteworthy – especially with respect to the subject of this chapter – by virtue of its connection to matters of publication and local periodicals: Balsom inappropriately voted on Fort McMurray’s 2018 budgetary allotments even though she stood to benefit from pecuniary interests as the publisher of *Your McMurray Magazine* (*YMM*) and as the owner of Balsom Communications Inc. (Thurton, “Councillor”).

Between October 2013 and June 2014, a spate of resignations occurred on Wood Buffalo’s municipal council after a number of members refused to allow their activities to be subjected to a forensic audit (see Appendix E). The Canadian Taxpayers’ Federation discovered that, in anticipation of the looming audits, 68 municipal employees had been released between 2011 and 2013, and that the corresponding severances cost the municipality \$6.6 million, with payoffs ranging from \$11,000 to \$354,000 (McDermott and Jeffrey). Gag orders were implemented because of the potential controversy, and

some departures were never explained. Although former mayor Guy Boutilier denounced the payoffs as “shocking,” in 2012 Boutilier himself received \$527,000 as a “transition allowance” following his loss in the provincial elections (Harper, “Severance Packages”).

Huberman ultimately concludes that many people have regarded Fort McMurray “as a place to exploit” ever since the days of Peter Pond (as has been previously noted, another less-than-noble figure). This common declaration substitutes the sense of expendability and commodification for a sense of home and place; “a place to exploit” effaces the region’s past priorities and community values that demonstrated sharing resources, collaborating with others, and respecting the land.

The author carefully suggests that this perspective is not the only one though, and states that the history of the region has been “one of parallel and often competing realities ... oil and the outsiders versus those residents who call Fort McMurray home” (Huberman 262). Those who belong to the latter experience nostalgia for a time when the two realities were not so intertwined. For example, Ruth Schiltroth, a former resident who eventually moved to Consort, Alberta, sometimes returned to Wood Buffalo but on those occasions she preferred to see Fort McMurray “the way it was, not the way it is now” (263). She, like many others, identifies a clear demarcation of before bitumen sands projects and afterwards. This divide is clearly articulated in Huberman but, as we have seen, many of the problems that plague resource development today have been occurring ever since the launch of GCOS/Suncor. Long-time local citizens sensed that their places in the community were being suppressed in favour of newcomers, and consequently they felt “minimized and forgotten.” As resident Peter Hanson recalled, once large machines arrived and dominated the region, it started to seem “like it was us and them” (163).

In spite of its anecdotes and memories *The Place We Call Home* is a local touchstone, but Huberman's editorial choices are selective and reflect the unavoidable reality that bitumen operations immediately transformed the Wood Buffalo area. In Huberman's hands, these alterations and value shifts – for better or worse – are presented as if they had evolved naturally. As corporate considerations became crucial, early regional figures became “characters” from a bygone era, and the community norms, traditions, and values that once contributed to the region's identity now shared imaginative and narrative space with the fossil fuel industry and the unforeseen impacts of its monolithic trajectory.

6.3 Frances K. Jean

For a number of reasons, this dissertation concludes with Frances K. Jean and her formidable impact on the Wood Buffalo region. Few local writers reflect subjective power and name recognition in northern Alberta's culture and literature as much as the self-published Jean. Her book *More than Oil* is a veritable checklist of the names of individuals and families that the author deems most important to local history. When one considers Barbara Eckstein's aforementioned theory about the importance of ensuring that authors and storytellers participate in planning sessions for how places are used (Eckstein 16-17), Jean's book – which is basically an itemized, annotated list of selected individuals – legitimizes the transfer of suitable speakers from the community at large into the hands of a select few, uniquely identified gatekeepers of the region's identity and culture. During the 1970s, the Jeans were instrumental in ensuring that the last names of specific families were commemorated as street names in Fort McMurray. By using the

platform of the *Courier*, the family obstructed a request by the power company to launch numbered streets because they “objected to losing the historic names” (F. Jean 213).

Jean’s book opens with a confrontational opening remark that curtly anticipates and cuts short prospective criticism: “I would encourage anyone who criticizes my book to write a better one,” the author declares (n. pg., preamble to *More than Oil*). Although confident in tone, Jean’s dare cannot mask a plain truth in terms of her status and far-reaching power within the community: those who write their own books would likely still have to go through the long-time editor and publisher in order to have the works printed.

First Peoples in Fort McMurray

Frances Jean was a prominent figure who was familiar with her subjects, and, much like Sidney Ells, her selective inclusions were reinforced by the rhetorical impact of the drawings that are interspersed throughout *More than Oil* – including the way that indigenous people and white settlers are depicted. Since Jean’s book is often considered a touchstone text concerning the region, the way that indigenous and non-indigenous locals are represented in written and illustrated form can have negative or positive impacts, depending on the reader’s point of view.

Accordingly, the book’s structure and methodological layout bears further examination. Jean places all of the content regarding indigenous people at the beginning of the book and it is divided into four sections: First Peoples, The Dene, The Cree, and The Métis. Some brief comments accompany these sections, then Jean devotes the rest of her book to explorers, settlers, entrepreneurs, businessmen, and developers. The placement of the indigenous section at the beginning of *More than Oil* allows Jean to safely claim that she has accounted for aboriginal content in her book; however, this

choice also neatly (and rather conveniently) segregates and situates these peoples in the past – especially since their existence and local impacts are omitted from the rest of the book.³⁴⁰ This editorial decision effectively stifles the reader’s capacity to view Fort McMurray as a region that has grown in tandem with, or alongside, indigenous people. Instead, readers are led to interpret historical local milestones, events, personalities and partnerships as products of white residents or visitors.

The descriptions of indigenous people invite scrutiny, especially compared to later chapters in the book where descriptions of successful white residents are uniformly glowing and laudatory. In the book’s first mini-chapter, Jean writes that “enmity” had existed between the Cree and the Chipewyan people (F. Jean 2), and suggests a predetermined, natural tendency for aboriginal peoples to engage in conflict instead of collaboration. In the subsequent chapter Jean quotes Alexander Mackenzie’s remark that the Dene (Chipewyans) “are sober, timorous and vagrant, with a selfish disposition which has created suspicions of their integrity.” When they first arrived many years ago, the Chipewyans “came from another country, inhabited by very wicked people” (4). Although Mackenzie’s remarks are accurately quoted, this characterization of “very wicked” Chipewyan people arriving from elsewhere perpetuates the trope that indigenous people somehow were not the original inhabitants of the land.³⁴¹ Further, Mackenzie’s use of rhetorically charged words like “enmity,” “vagrant,” “selfish” and “wicked” – as

³⁴⁰ This omission of indigenous content from the rest of *More than Oil* is reflected in the exclusivity of its subtitle: *Trappers, Traders & Settlers of Northern Alberta*. It is also worth noting that present-day structures and groups in Fort McMurray that are affiliated with indigenous people – such as the Nistawoyou Friendship Centre and the Athabasca Tribal Council (Fort McMurray First Nation No. 468) – are absent from Jean’s book.

³⁴¹ Archaeological evidence confirms that indigenous people have been in the country for many millennia. In Canada, artefacts and bones from First Peoples have been found that date back at least 12,000 years. These ancestors may have crossed to North America from Asia, or via rafts and boats across the Pacific (Canada’s First Peoples).

they appear in such a condensed section of *More than Oil* – establishes a tone, perception, and impression that Jean does not bother to remediate, clarify or correct.

Jean singles out two exceptions to these generalizations of indigenous people: Matanabee and Raphael Cree. Described by Samuel Hearne as “scrupulous in truth and honesty,” well-mannered, elegant and noble, Matanabee was, according to Jean, “courteous and kind and never spoke ill of anyone.” In Jean’s esteem, Matanabee was “the greatest native leader of the century” and had qualities that constitute an “ideal native” – as opposed to an indigenous person who is disruptive, discourteous or uncivil.³⁴² This model behaviour for indigenous people is also reflected in Jean’s description of Raphael Cree and his renowned family, who respected the King and Queen so much that they hung pictures of the British monarchs in their cabin (9). With this symbolic gesture of an indigenous family signalling its obedience toward the Royal Family, Jean – a fierce Royalist herself (*Calgary Sun*, “Frances Jean”)³⁴³ – establishes criteria for the “ideal” local resident as someone who outwardly exhibits loyalty to their colonizers.³⁴⁴

Jean also at times frames indigenous history through a positive lens, even when such conclusions would benefit from stronger context. For instance, Jean euphonizes the day that Treaty 8 was signed in 1899, only noting that Chief Paul Cree told his son

³⁴² Jean notes that Mackenzie considered the Cree people to be hospitable, generous and good-natured “except when perverted by the inflammable influence of liquor” (7).

³⁴³ In her obituary, Jean was described as “a trail blazer, an astute business woman, an historian, author, and fearless ambassador for Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada and the Queen” (*Calgary Sun*, “Frances Jean”). Jean’s fierce commitment to the Royal Family led to an invitation for her to have tea with the Queen at Buckingham Palace’s Royal Gardens (Karp).

³⁴⁴ As with the Dene/Chipewyans and the Crees, Jean states that the Loutit and Shott families also represented “the best of the Métis” because they “helped develop our area by their bodily strength and strength of character” (F. Jean 13). In other words, the Métis people who helped transform the region into a more industrialized space demonstrated qualities of the “ideal native” (9).

Raphael it was a “beautiful sunny day” (F. Jean 9). To this day, the 1899 treaty holds a central role for indigenous residents, but not in the author’s book. Another example of a glossed representation can be seen with the elderly Métis woman Elsie Yanik. Although she and her siblings were placed in a convent when she was eight years old, Yanik has nothing but “praise” for the nuns responsible for her care. Whether deliberately or not, Jean’s specific inclusion of Yanik’s positive experience at a Catholic school comes at the expense of including corresponding statistics or anecdotes of indigenous and Métis youths who had less favourable experiences. Further, as the co-founder of a business called Noralta Air Charters, Yanik is “highly respected” not only by Jean but by many Albertans, and when she attends various official functions in Fort McMurray, she says prayers both in English and “in her native tongue” (13). Jean’s tacit approval of Yanik’s business acumen and Christian behaviour contrasts with the lived experience of other local indigenous people who may have practiced more traditional ways of life (i.e. hunting or trapping) or spiritual beliefs not affiliated with Christianity but are absent from *More than Oil*. At this point in the text, Jean comfortably inserts herself into the book: she remarks that Elmer Cree once stopped by her home to eat some of her fresh bread (9).

From Explorers and Settlers to Business Owners

After this preliminary indigenous content has concluded, Jean devotes a number of chapters – and demonstrably more pages – to early explorers and traders. This transition effectively keeps the four groups from the previous chapters distant, compartmentalized and unknowable, while the explorers and traders enjoy privilege of unique names and identities (Pond, Mackenzie, Thompson, Fraser, Franklin, McMurray, Moberly). Jean soon establishes a recurring pattern: upon their arrival to the region, these early visitors

became affiliated with either the North West Company or the Hudson's Bay Company.³⁴⁵ By presenting these explorers and traders as early participants in the development of commerce in the region, Frances Jean positions herself in good company, particularly as an owner and operator of over a dozen local businesses (Karp), and particularly when the Jean legacy strategically occupies the final chapter of her book.³⁴⁶ At the same time, the author notes figures like Pond, Thompson, and Fraser died poor (F. Jean 19, 25, 27), and their financial status at the time of their death seems to be significant for Jean.

Other recurring patterns in the text include Jean's affinity for early examples of business networks as well as her steadfast appreciation for residents who demonstrated a strong, Protestant work ethic. In several early chapters, the author emphasizes the fact that some of the region's early settlers were members of Boards of Trade or Chambers of Commerce, including George Golosky (48), William Biggs (52), Charlie MacDonald (58), Walter Hill (63), and Henry Alexander "Mac" McCormick (80). These men were evidently more than just settlers, but among the first catalysts to help transform Fort McMurray into a commerce-based community.³⁴⁷

With each namedrop, Jean – a fervent Baptist – also emphasizes hard work as a cornerstone value: Agnes and George Golosky “were no strangers to hard work,” and they passed that ethic down to their children and grandchildren (49); the Biggs family was renowned for working hard (53); Tommy Morimoto was able to “outwork” larger

³⁴⁵ Peter Pond, for instance, joined the North West Company, as did Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser; David Thompson was an apprentice at the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) for 7 years, and then joined the North West Company; Colin Fraser II was a scout for the HBC; William McMurray was a factor for the HBC; Henry Moberly joined the HBC because McMurray talked him into it, and Sir George Simpson did likewise (F. Jean 15-39).

³⁴⁶ Anne M. Young, who writes this final chapter, also expresses that the Jeans mastered Fort McMurray's “rugged landscape,” including land and river travel (F. Jean 321).

³⁴⁷ Jean's early encounters with Fort McMurray's Chamber of Commerce were somewhat less favourable. In 1971, the organization asked her to leave a meeting because women were not permitted.

men who shovelled gravel (67); Billy Loutit, whose mother was an indigenous woman, was “a hard worker and very honest,” and all of the Loutit men had reputations for “hard work, stamina and speed” (71-72); Hugh Stroud was a “diligent worker” (78); “Mac” McCormick was said to work “around the clock” (79); Jack Fairbairn was wealthy because he worked hard (85); and likewise the strongest attribute of the “Self Made Man” Bill Tatum was that he worked hard (91, 93); even Tatum’s children were home-schooled by his wife because he believed that public schools “held too many distractions to hard work” (92). Given Frances Jean’s reputation as an extraordinarily busy person, it stands to reason the author would call attention to the specific trait of hard work.

In addition, Jean attributes this praiseworthy quality to specific outsiders who have come to the region. The author refers to the immigrants who arrived from China as “hard working” (220), and Wing Wong and his wife Eleanore worked particularly hard (224). She is also complimentary to the “hard-working” “French people” who came to Fort McMurray (235), and the original Scottish settlers were likewise “[h]ard working, honest and true pioneers” (61). The inherent challenges of living in the Wood Buffalo region may inherently call for a strong work ethic; however, the sheer number of recurrences in the text by Jean begin to come across as excessive or extreme (see Appendix F for even more references to hard work in the text).

Finally, Jean does not miss an opportunity to include her own husband in this category: as will be discussed later in more detail, the inexperienced Bernard Jean operated and published *The McMurray Courier* “with determination and hard work” (321). This repetition and reiteration of hard work among the selective personalities allows Jean to establish prerequisite criteria for residence in the region. The emphasis on

labour-focused lifestyles during the region's early history aligns well with the long and unrelenting hours often required of those who now work in the bitumen sands.

Curiously, in a book that declares itself to be about more than oil, three chapters are allocated to men who were instrumental in the development of the bitumen sands: Karl A. Clark, J. Howard Pew, and Frank Spragins. A case could be made for the inclusion of Karl A. Clark, since he established an intermittent presence in the region by virtue of his canoeing and camping excursions; this nature-based connection to the region may have played a part in his later disdain for bitumen sands operations and their presence in the area. Jean's chapter on Sunoco president J. Howard Pew ("A Man of Faith"), however, seems more tenuous, considering the Pennsylvanian oil tycoon never lived in Fort McMurray and only visited the region a few times (259-261).³⁴⁸ Pew professed a "strong faith in God," and his inclusion in the text can perhaps be attributed to similarly devout Frances Jean, who likely appreciated Pew's rigid determination to live "by his Christian principles" (259).³⁴⁹ In addition to "his belief in *hard work* and free enterprise and his devout Christian beliefs" (260; emphasis added), Pew advocated for uniform honesty in business and in politics, which he argued would be achieved when citizens rededicated themselves "to the service of God" (261). Jean also devotes a chapter to Syncrude's first president Frank Spragins, whom she calls "visionary" and for whom a school in Abasand is named (263). These chapters about Clark, Pew, and Spragins do not mention the damage caused by industrial activity; after all, such references would only

³⁴⁸ Pew co-founded the Pew Charitable Trusts, which has since given millions of dollars to the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an organization that argues the superiority of fossil fuels to renewables and maintains that there has been a "forgotten moral case for fossil fuels" (Profeta).

³⁴⁹ Earlier in the text, Jean similarly admires the explorer David Thompson, "a deeply religious man who neither smoked, drank or swore and he refused to give alcohol to the Indians" (24).

harm the image of a region that is robust, thriving and successful.³⁵⁰

Publishing Power

With the means and resources to publish whatever she wishes, Frances Jean *writes the region* from her own vantage point. In order to substantiate this authorial position of power, Jean remarks that a number of early figures likewise wrote the region: trappers and traders kept diaries (16), Peter Pond and Alexander Mackenzie had journals (17, 21), the “phenomenal storyteller” David Thompson kept 77 field notebooks, and John Franklin wrote long-lost diaries (32). Other references to early writers include figures like Jack Golosky who wrote *One Man’s Journey* in honour of the 100th anniversary of his father George’s arrival to Fort McMurray (46), Billy Loutit who wrote in a personal diary every day (71), and Gus Hawker who wrote a 100-page book but was unable to find a willing publisher because there was libellous content (89). If these works written by Golosky, Loutit and Hawker (among others) were ever recovered and published, they could act as a supplemental perspective in light of Jean’s authoritative but subjective commentary about these men. As with her praise for businessmen and hard workers, Jean draws particular attention to individuals who, like her, were text-makers.

Jean does not reprint excerpts from the above authors, nor does she expand upon the content of their texts; however, she does reprint poems by Charlotte Mitchell and Marnie Grant, with whom she is more familiarly acquainted (184-185, “McMurray Then and Now”; 243, “A Trapper’s Retreat”).³⁵¹ While these poems appear in *More than Oil*, a

³⁵⁰ Throughout the book, Jean often blames external influences for the failure of local businesses – notably in her disdain for the National Energy Program (276, 292, 302, 308, 311).

³⁵¹ Jean also quotes Dorothy Dahlgren in her account of Len Williams (F. Jean 69-70). Uncoincidentally, Dahlgren’s *People of Our Past* was published by Jean’s Printing (1988). Further, the cover of the book is comprised of a map of northern Alberta.

number of other obscure or unheralded texts from Fort McMurray writers are omitted – including works from authors that Jean identifies by name, such as Rex Terpening, George Caouette, Bern Will Brown, Mary Clark Sheppard, Harry Aimé, Marjorie Aimé, and E. O. “Eddie” Engstrom.³⁵² Ideally, Jean would have included a more representative selection of excerpts and texts, especially in order to demonstrate a wider array of local literary content beyond the consolidation of literary power wielded by the Jean dynasty.

As with Irwin Huberman’s book, Jean’s *More than Oil* has strong connections to Big Oil. Huberman worked at Syncrude, while Jean’s husband Bernard was hired by the newly launched Great Canadian Oil Sands (Suncor) in 1967, and the family consequently moved to Fort McMurray from Westbank, British Columbia. These connections unavoidably impact the content in both books, particularly because the citizens profiled either worked in the fossil fuel industry or were somehow connected to it. For instance, figures like Tom Morimoto (66-69) and Len Williams (132-137) led fascinating lives as men of visible minority status, but their chapters are accompanied by reminders of their affiliation with bitumen sands companies. Although Morimoto’s family came to Fort McMurray from Japan, and Williams (who was black) came to Fort McMurray from the United States to flee the Ku Klux Klan (133), these men also merit inclusion in Jean’s text because Morimoto worked at Bitumount for the infamous Robert Fitzsimmons (see Chapter Four), and Williams was a night watchman at a Syncrude mine in his later years (136).³⁵³ This pattern of petro-affiliation recurs – a chapter describes a person’s notable

³⁵² In Engstrom’s chapter, Jean wonders about the accuracy of his text, *Clearwater Winter*. This criticism seems rather hypocritical, since Jean herself inaccurately refers to Engstrom’s manuscript as *Clearwater “River”* (200).

³⁵³ In a book full of anecdotes and personal reflections, Jean’s chapter on Len Williams is an anomaly; the author reprints Huberman’s material on Williams, as well as most of a chapter on Williams from Dorothy Dahlgren’s *People of Our Past* (Dahlgren 65-68). Jean’s arm’s length engagement with the Williams

accomplishments as constituting *More than Oil*, yet also connects them to that very same industry. Jean's support of industry manifests itself in a number of ways,³⁵⁴ especially in the belief that bitumen sands projects hold the key to prosperity for those who are willing to *work hard*. In the case of the Hyska family, Bill and Elsie's daughter worked at Syncrude, and the work consequently "afforded her a lifestyle of home ownership, recreational vehicles, and a car, all as a single person. 'It's wonderful,' says the proud mom" (106). Jean's devotion to the fossil fuel industry is so strong that she enthusiastically declares Fort McMurray to be "the economic engine of the nation" (39).

This endorsement is not without qualifications, however; as with Huberman, Jean demonstrates how people in the region used to be more closely knit. One member of the Demers family fondly recalled when Fort McMurray's residents experienced a sense of closeness with each other and were generous, including during difficult times when businesses gladly extended credit to people (75). Les Wylie remembered a time when citizens anxiously awaited the arrival of riverboats into the region to receive supplies, and this mutual dependence on new provisions brought them together as a community (129). Steve Brooks Senior, who had an array of careers and participation on the town council, was much more blunt: "We had a living here before the tar pits" (180). Former RCMP officer and author Harry Hampton Aimé³⁵⁵ recalled how the 1940s represented "an era before extensive development and change began," and at that time indigenous people

content seems rather unfortunate. Len Williams is also mentioned in Alvena Strasbourg's *Memories of a Métis Woman* (26).

³⁵⁴ For instance, Jean praises former MLA Norm Weiss's effort to ensure that the Oil Sands Discovery Centre would be built (309); she also lauds Bert MacKay for his efforts in fundraising \$2.5 million for the Discovery Centre. MacKay, who was once a member of a band that opened for the Beatles (the Melotones, in 1964; F. Jean 305), was also instrumental in helping Huberman write his book (Huberman v).

³⁵⁵ Aimé's works include *Overalls, Red Serge and Robes: Life and Adventure in the Great Canadian North* (2004) and *Hazel Glen Farm* (n. date). Aimé and his wife also edited *Northern Memories* (2003).

“still maintained traditional values and ways” (279). In *Meeting Place of Many Waters* (1973), Darlene Comfort wrote that after she was exposed to “the Athabasca story” and bore witness to Fort McMurray’s past, she came to understand there was a pre-existing history that extended “beyond the trapped oils” and which had “roots in soil other than the fabled sands” (281).³⁵⁶ Jean’s inclusion of these nostalgic references to earlier times corroborates her claim that the region is indeed more than oil, and likewise her emphasis on the importance of present-day municipal engagement demonstrates an attempt to project the image of a city that still holds communal values to heart. At the same time, the subjective and selective chapters sidestep many external factors and influences that have impacted the region; as a self-professed journalist, Jean’s omissions are problematic.

An important common link between Huberman and Jean is that each had a weekly newspaper (*The Express* and *The McMurray Courier* respectively, 312). The *Courier* is considered to be Fort McMurray’s first newspaper, and Jean was writer, reporter, and editor all at once. In other words, there was a single point of contact for information, text, and context. Huberman’s project was likewise self-controlled. In effect, Huberman and the Jeans constitute a history of narrative control. The *Courier* would return in the guise of *FOCUS* magazine; it is not surprising, then, that the excerpts from *FOCUS* that appear in *More than Oil* originated from Jean’s own publication (321).

The hermetically sealed nature of the Jean enterprise allowed the family significant leeway with respect to what was published. This concentration of publishing power was

³⁵⁶ According to Comfort – whom Jean dubs the “Recorder of History” – many small towns often look back on their past, but Fort McMurray has “lingered so long on the verge and promise of rapid growth” that its sights have been squarely “fixed on the road ahead.” Ever since settlers first arrived, the thrill of “a vision of the true North” has been accompanied by “a road through tall, starving evergreens”; now, “there exists for us an opportunity to witness and preserve the past first-hand” (*Meeting Place* qtd. on F. Jean 280-281).

all the more problematic when one considers that, according to Anne M. Young, the Jeans had “no publishing experience or expertise running a press” (F. Jean 321). The fundamentals of journalistic standards were unfamiliar to the family, but at the same time the Jeans boasted they never had to publish a retraction during their run (Huberman 220).

Crucially, Jean’s position of power from her publishing endeavours were accompanied by her connections with, and influence on, politicians. Officially, she was never elected into public office; yet Jean remained “a powerful force at every level of government” (*Calgary Sun*, “Frances Jean”). When the author died in November 2018, all municipal buildings were flown at half-mast (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, “Flags”). Jean had the ear of policymakers, and she used that influence to her advantage – particularly with respect to the property owned by her family. One of the most important businesses in the Jean portfolio was the property holding company City Centre Group Inc. (CCGI). According to the website for CCGI, in the early 1990s only two stores survived the economic recession, and the Jeans’ store was one of them – thanks, of course, to “hard work” (CCGI).

Property ownership was crucial to the Jeans, and this sentiment had long been reinforced by likeminded political ideology. Prior to her son Brian’s reign as head of the party, previous Wildrose “Alliance” leader Danielle Smith spoke decisively about this fundamental concept. “If you can’t own property, own your business, own your printing press ... or place of worship,” asked Smith, “can you really have any other freedoms?” A disciple of Ayn Rand, Smith was adamant that property rights were “sacrosanct because they are liberty’s floorboards” (The Canadian Press, “Rise”). Such calls for Albertans to possess their own properties, businesses, and printing presses seem to bear rather

uncanny semblance to the Jean family.

Whenever external political factors threatened property holdings owned by the Jeans, preferential treatment tended to win the day. Specifically, after the Fort McMurray wildfire of 2016, Frances fought vigorously to prevent the municipality from taking over 14 scorched lots in Waterways, including lots that she co-owned with her son Brian. The property was deemed to be a flooding risk, and experts warned that any new construction projects in that space would be cost-prohibitive, risky, and dangerous.³⁵⁷ Yet Jean fought to retain possession of the land, and in June 2017 Wood Buffalo’s municipal council allowed her and 3 other opponents to keep their lots. The ensuing consequence of this decision was estimated to cost local taxpayers more for the necessary mitigation measures to these 4 select lots (\$4 million) than it would have cost for the municipalities to acquire all 14 lots (\$3.5 million).³⁵⁸ The decision to drag the property fight into a public forum was an intentional, and ultimately successful, ploy to hold onto the lot, regardless of the strong consensus that discouraged rebuilding on the property. As Jean once remarked in 2006, with her hands placed confrontationally on her hips, “It’s my town” (Fortney).

Throughout her life, Jean admirably participated in a number of altruistic

³⁵⁷ An assessment determined that the stability of the slope posed significant risks, but Frances Jean said that there was “absolutely no reason we can’t rebuild” in the same location. She also stated that, regardless of the risks, she would pay engineers to make sure any new structures were safely built. Jean added – incorrectly in retrospect – that she was certain that in a few years these particular lots would be “the choicest lots in Fort McMurray” (Thurton, “Mom”). As predicted by a number of experts, the ice-jammed Athabasca and Clearwater rivers flooded in April 2020. Brian Jean had to sandbag and stop up his mother’s flooded house; also, his own new house in Draper was completely flooded. Rather than confirming that new homes should not be built on flood plains, instead Brian wrote in a feature article that Alberta’s authorities must develop “well-thought-out procedures to handle evacuations” (B. Jean, “From the Fire”).

³⁵⁸ See Thurton, “Mom.” It also bears mentioning that in 2006, Jean’s downtown home and lot had an estimated value of at least \$500,000 (Fortney).

initiatives.³⁵⁹ Ostensibly, much of this charitable work was performed inconspicuously and without fanfare. Upon her death, Jean’s lengthy obituary remarked that, as a “strong but humble Christian, she read her bible faithfully every morning and over the years quietly donated millions of dollars to Christian charities” (*Calgary Sun*, “Frances Jean”). Ironically, the inclusion of this detail in the widely-distributed obituary was itself a contradiction to the claim of quiet humility. This notion of being a silent benefactor is also contradicted by the website for the aforementioned Jean-family-run City Centre Group Inc., which manifestly states that a portion of the organization’s profits are donated “to Christian organizations providing food, water and medicines to the world’s most needy” (CCGI). The outward display of charity by the Jeans also seems to have been problematized – if not undermined – by Frances’s son Brian, when he once boasted on his online profile, “Our net worth as a family has gone up ten times in the last 10 years – from \$2 million to \$20 million” (Climenhaga).

Perhaps the least “quiet” example of publicly declared humility for Jean occurred on 27 Nov. 2013, when this same son dedicated his parliamentary time as a federal Member of Parliament to a tribute for his mother. In addition to remarking upon her extensive volunteer and non-profit work, the Conservative MP claimed that his mother had dedicated “thousands of hours for Canadian democracy and to uphold conservative economic principles” (B. Jean, “Debates of Nov. 27th, 2013”).³⁶⁰ Some of these conservative “principles” trickle into other parts of *More than Oil*, such as Jean’s

³⁵⁹ For example, Jean was one of twelve nominees for the “Women of Inspiration” award, which is presented by Syncrude and Girls Inc. of Northern Alberta (Karp). In 2018-2019, the Syncrude partnership was replaced with Bouchier Group, an aboriginal company in Fort McMurray (Girls Inc. of Northern Alberta).

³⁶⁰ Brian’s use of a national pulpit is a contrast from the image of the quiet, selfless Frances, but it does help substantiate the family’s claim in Jean’s obituary that she “was held in high esteem by all who knew her” (*Calgary Sun*, “Frances Jean”).

admiration for the “self-made man” Bill Tatum, who owned many assets and had deep-seated antagonism towards social programs (F. Jean 93), or her support for the often-vocal Alwyn Tolen, who argued against paying school taxes (100).

Of course, the most overt indicator of the staunch conservatism in the Jean family is reflected in the ascent to power of Frances’s son Brian, who became leader of the province’s Wildrose Party – a right-wing political party who disapproved of the reigning Progressive Conservatives and sought to limit how much of Alberta’s money went to Ottawa. In attendance at the historic 2015 Wildrose Party nomination event was Frances Jean, who watched her son become the leader.

It is difficult to parse out the reputation of the Jean family with the reputation of the Wildrose Party. As an ideological home for many of the province’s fiercest social conservatives, Wildrose was plagued by a number of controversial incidents pertaining to homophobia, racism, misogyny,³⁶¹ discrimination, and even election violations (Bennett; Simon).³⁶² Under Brian Jean’s reign, the party dissolved in 2017 so that Alberta’s Progressive Conservatives could form the United Conservative Party and assimilate the Wildrose voters under the new banner.

Cumulatively, these details confirm that at both the local and provincial level, Frances Jean enjoyed a position of power, privilege and influence in Alberta. As Dawn Booth wrote, Jean’s nature and numerous accomplishments “compelled other people to revere her” (Booth 21). Upon her death in 2018, much of the content for the

³⁶¹ In March 2017, a Wildrose student club at the University of Calgary sent an email that insisted “that feminism is cancer” (Herring).

³⁶² Among other problematic comments, prominent and highly controversial Wildrose member Tom Flanagan once remarked that western civilization was thousands of years “more advanced” than indigenous cultures and that colonialism was both inevitable and justifiable (T. Flanagan, *First Nations* 304). The Wildrose Party was also fined by the federal government for breaking the law with respect to “robocall” regulations.

Spring/Summer 2019 issue of *YMM (Your McMurray Magazine)* was devoted to Jean’s legacy (see Appendix Y). Even after her passing, Jean dominated local print media.

From a narrative perspective, Frances Jean and Irwin Huberman held unique positions of power during their tenure as local publishers.³⁶³ Their output and content kept Wood Buffalo residents engaged and entertained until their newspaper runs ended, at which point the authors each wrote their respective books. Throughout the publication process, these writers retained control over their texts – and therefore over the region’s stories. As Dawn Booth notes, Frances Jean valued the city of Fort McMurray, “[w]hether she was making history or writing it” (Booth 21). As a publisher, editor, journalist and writer, Jean’s consolidated source of narrative power bears similarity with earlier self-publishing authors like A.M. Bezanson.

Inexorably linked to bitumen sands corporations, Irwin Huberman presented Fort McMurray as a place that both long-time and temporary residents “Call Home” – even though he himself left the area years ago. Meanwhile, Frances Jean attempted to offer “More than Oil” to curious outsiders, but although some passages do indeed focus on past traditions, events, and members of the community, it is also clear that fossil fuels flow through her book.

Certainly, an important facet of these texts is that a number of stories and accounts have been associated with, and attributed to, individual voices within the community –

³⁶³ Despite the family’s undeniable position of privilege of power from the moment they came to the region, Jean classifies herself and her family as *other*: “we were ‘The Others,’” she insists, because the Jean family arrived from elsewhere and was not already a part of the pre-existing community (F. Jean 269). When the printing business was sold in 2008, it was still owned and operated by Brian Jean (324); since he was already a federal MP for the Conservative party since 2004, such a position of influence might be perceived to be a conflict of interest.

just as Barbara Eckstein urges. It remains important to accredit and disseminate these names and deeds of local citizens, lest they be subsumed by the sprawl of resource development that is often governed by international interests.³⁶⁴ The methodology and selective manner by which Huberman and Jean went about their endeavours, however, were precarious. Their respective projects may have been the products of “hard work,” but because of their need to balance content with favourable impressions of the region, only certain accomplishments and people made the cut – including other ambitious writers who had contributed to the literary fabric of the region. Consequently, *The Place We Call Home* and *More than Oil* should be viewed more as prospective starting points concerning representative local voices, rather than as comprehensive or authoritative.

³⁶⁴ Only two corporations remain Canadian owned, while over \$528 billion “has been siphoned off by foreign shareholders who have ended up owning every major development in the oilsands.” For almost a quarter of a century, all bitumen sands investment has been footed by Alberta taxpayers (McQuaig).

Conclusion

The Trouble with Singular Narratives

From April to June 2018, an organization called Climate Outreach facilitated more than fifty meetings across Alberta. In those meetings, 482 people from a variety of sectors responded to five common narratives about the province, its climate policies, its reputation, and its future. Participants, who were comprised of churchgoers, industry workers, farmers, conservatives, immigrants and environmentalists, all voiced their opinions about the things they liked and disliked about these five mock narratives.

The meetings were part of Climate Outreach's Alberta Narratives Project. Since 1992, the Climate Outreach organization has received \$9 million from the Alberta EcoTrust Foundation.³⁶⁵ According to a news article by Bob Weber, the Narratives Project is supported by 75 organizations (Weber, "Alienated"); however, EcoTrust's industry sponsors read like a who's who of bitumen sands companies or affiliates. Some of the "Visionary Corporate Partners" for the Alberta Narratives Project and EcoTrust include Suncor, Cenovus, and Imperial Oil; the project's "Patrons" are Gibson Energy, Syncrude, Keyera, and a number of banks; the "Programming Sponsor" is Teck Resources; and one of the biggest and most outspoken partners is the Canada West Foundation, the right-wing think tank that derives its funding from Big Oil, corporate tycoons, pro-market advocates, and anti-environmentalists and which helped launch the Reform Party.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ In addition to Alberta EcoTrust, the Pembina Institute was also a convener of the Alberta Narratives Project (Report 2).

³⁶⁶ For the think tank's donor list, see Canada West Foundation.

The Narratives Project has admirable objectives, including the attempt to establish preliminary starting points of dialogue, and find shared goals or common ground among diverse groups of people. Yet the overriding, primary concern of the Climate Outreach initiative – a key detail which is omitted from Weber’s article – is the expectation that participants must come to a conclusion that constitutes one voice. The project’s authors call this singular voice a “core narrative” (Alberta Narratives Project 7). According to the website for Alberta Narratives, the Climate Outreach organization wants to help citizens avoid feelings of alienation by finding “language that works for specific audiences”; the group also seeks “a distinctly Albertan narrative that speaks across all audiences, based around our shared values and identity” (Climate Outreach 5). In other words, an initially heterogeneous communication process that ostensibly emphasizes the importance of hearing from all participants ultimately seeks to establish a single, homogeneous narrative that presumably encapsulates all “shared values.” The Narrative Project insisted it maintained “political neutrality,” but it is difficult to ignore the aforementioned, prominent support from Big Oil; inevitably, the overarching focus remained on keeping fossil fuel extraction in place and solidifying consensus on this particular point.

A first portion of the project revealed that participants from the meetings were in agreement – as depicted in the study’s “key findings” by a thumbs-up icon – that the oil and gas industry contributed to their way of life and to their prosperity (Report 9), while fewer than 10% of the participants thought that climate change was the most important problem humans face – as depicted in the study’s key findings by a thumbs-down icon (Report 8).³⁶⁷ The second portion of the report, published in February 2019, divided

³⁶⁷ Most participants also did not believe that the burning of fossil fuels was the main cause of climate change, or that climate change was a large and urgent threat, or that renewables could replace fossil fuels or

group participants into eight sections or categories. Each of these sections had a “Language to Avoid” recommendation, and in most cases the findings inevitably discouraged mentioning climate change to any groups (with the exception of the environmentalist group). Furthermore, when engaging with Albertans, the suggestion was to refrain from using any language that pertains to “external values,” and to avoid using any language or images that might be associated with any “environmentalist identity or ideology unless speaking with an audience that clearly shares those values” (Report II 58). Certainly, such restrictions would complicate the ability to urge regular Albertans to consider any prospective action on climate change – especially if some of them already feel like they are “under attack” by outsiders (Report II 55).³⁶⁸

Although Alberta Narratives originally included indigenous voices, these individuals said they had “deeply problematic” concerns with the project and ultimately decided not to participate. Undeterred, the organizers proceeded without indigenous participants, and instead worked with groups they chose to classify as “Indigenous community partners” (Report 17). The absence of authentic indigenous engagement on Alberta Narratives was criticized by three previous advisors who stated that the project was built upon “a sufficiently flawed methodology” (Melissa Quesnelle, Report 18), and the project’s unilateral method of engagement was “not inclusive of Indigenous practice,” and that its unbending framework would “always create a tension” (Alexia McKinnon, Report 19).

provide significant employment (Report 9-11). As has been noted elsewhere in this dissertation, this claim concerning jobs runs contrary to factual data; in 2014, green energy jobs surpassed bitumen sands jobs (Blackwell).

³⁶⁸ Alberta workers in particular feel that contrarians are “ungrateful” and “disrespectful” toward them (Report II 55).

Climate Outreach's emphasis on establishing a "core narrative" seems an appropriate microcosm of how northern Alberta has historically engaged with competing narratives and alternative voices. Yet unless contrary and dissenting viewpoints are permitted to remain intact – rather than subsumed into a larger master narrative – then Climate Outreach's call for feedback from Albertans of all backgrounds can amount to little more than a token gesture; inevitably, the monolithic voice of unrestricted resource development will simply continue its singular domination. For years, there have been attempts in the province to make discursive headway on critical issues like climate change, but major problems are bound to arise when projects like Alberta Narratives conclude that it is best to practice adhering to "Language to Avoid" and to avoid environmentalism in conversation unless all parties share the same viewpoint. Such restrictive approaches to dialogue all but guarantee that certain voices and lived experiences will have limited exposure in the present – including voices seeking to access, recuperate or restore past literary works or texts.

This process of consolidating narratives into a unified voice is complemented by recent efforts from fossil fuel companies to erase any unfavourable publicity. For instance, the iPhone app "Trail Blazer" (see Appendix Z), initially targeted at kids, was released by Syncrude but was terminated by the corporation not too long after they experienced negative publicity for their handling of the deaths of hundreds of ducks near a tailings pond. In the press release, the company noted that the game was "a fun and challenging way for children of all ages to learn about the community in which Syncrude operates"; however, that press release is no longer searchable online. A few feature articles about the "Trail Blazer" app survive online (Tencer, "Syncrude"; VanderKlippe,

“Syncrude”), but the game itself has been effaced and the speed with which this effacement occurred seems a reflection on how quickly the fossil fuel industry can act when it is on the receiving end of criticism. Big Oil’s control over favourable and unfavourable online narratives remains crucial, and great lengths are taken to ensure that negative press cannot be used retroactively against certain industries.

In addition to iPhone apps, Syncrude’s informational lockdown also seems to apply to real people. In my research, I had initially planned to reference a video featuring Steve Gaudet, a former manager of reclamation and environment at Syncrude.³⁶⁹ The YouTube video, titled “Steve Gaudet, B.Sc., ‘Syncrude Canada’” was a polished and stylized example of greenwashing that merited critical analysis, especially in terms of its near-pastoral visual rhetoric. Now scrubbed from YouTube entirely, such a resource could have been helpful.³⁷⁰

Cumulatively, these online erasures – among many others – serve to restrict the dissemination of information that might harm the reputation of the fossil fuel industry. It is difficult not to hypothesize that these erasures are deliberate ways of ensuring that negative press cannot be used against certain industries. The online battle to suppress or complicate access to stories that do not support Alberta’s master petro-narrative is itself thorny – and perhaps undemocratic – but, as we have seen in earlier chapters, from a literary perspective such actions continue a pattern of relegating alternate or subversive voices to the periphery. Meanwhile, much of the early literature from northern Alberta

³⁶⁹ Gaudet is featured in the 2010 edition of Syncrude’s promotional publication *Pathways*, where he explained a radar system that tracks birds and their flight patterns to aboriginal elders during Syncrude’s annual First Nations Elders tour. At the time, Gaudet was also part of the Aboriginal Relations Steering Committee for Syncrude’s Aboriginal Relations Program (44). See Syncrude Canada Ltd., *Pathways*.

³⁷⁰ At present, Google searches for Gaudet’s name together with Syncrude show few results. The dismantled link from 11 June 2010 was youtube.com/watch?v=iXtHFPGXjIY.

remains scarce, inaccessible, or out of print unless it is connected to, or sponsored by, the fossil fuel industry.

What Northern Alberta's Literature Tells Us

Prior to 1967's establishment of Great Canadian Oil Sands (Suncor), northern Alberta's literature was only peripherally connected to the bitumen sands. Early testimonials from indigenous people were still lacking in terms of authenticity, because they were recounted by white settlers and then only in recollection years later (i.e. Mary Lawrence). The launch of GCOS ushered in the publication of more technical texts that chronicled the concerns and subject matters of industry. After GCOS was constructed and operational, many local citizens were at work in the sands, and their voices were less prominent – as evidenced by the sharp decline of personal anecdotes in Huberman's text from 1970 onward.

The perception of the bitumen sands has changed. In texts, the collective image presented by industry, politicians, and many media outlets is positive and strategically constructed. For years, much of northern Alberta's literature has avoided the subject of stopping or slowing bitumen sands development. Alternate approaches or possibilities with respect to the boreal forest and its resources are less often debated. The sands have been positioned by industry as a resource that must be developed under the assumption that their primary purpose *is* to be developed. A number of technical and financial setbacks and disasters have been clearly and extensively documented in some of the region's texts, but many of these have faded from visibility.

Indigenous literature from northern Alberta is scarce, but even non-indigenous texts are sparse and many of the ones that do exist have either been under-exposed or

forgotten. As has been established, much of northern Alberta's literature has been written by "outside" authors, but this fact alone does not seem to disqualify these voices from being a part of the northern Albertan literary collective.

Northern Alberta's early texts are uncomfortable reminders of what used to be, what has been lost, and what problems accompany current trajectories and courses of action. The region's early literature evokes a more idyllic time, including the many examples of Eden and the pastoral. If some of these texts were more readily accessible, contemporary readers might have a broader understanding of how drastic a cultural and ideological transformation has occurred within the region; they may even reconsider the centred status that Big Oil has occupied for decades. After all, northern Alberta's early literature boasts examples of heterogeneity, multiculturalism, economies based on sharing and community partnership, and important perspectives from underrepresented or marginalized citizens. More to the point, these early texts are potentially disruptive.

Just as human beings cannot ever return entirely to nature, one wonders if the authors of today and tomorrow could ever return to pre-industry texts (aside from fiction, of course); petro-culture in northern Alberta's literature has become one of its unavoidable hallmarks. Yet even within this rhetorical space, there is still room for counter-discursive texts from the likes of Larry Pratt and Andrew Nikiforuk – both long-time Alberta residents. Stories and narratives that precede large scale energy projects as well as counter-industry voices can be added to northern Alberta's literary catalogue. Such inclusions might encourage a hybrid literary model that *includes* additional narratives, rather than *omits* them in favour of a singular, petro-dominant master narrative. Since this content has remained latent for so long, and since these under-

represented perspectives offer some important lessons and context, I argue it is crucial to excavate *or reclaim* these narratives (i.e. reclaim their value). There is more to northern Alberta's literature than resource extraction and development.

A reclamation of past texts could be accomplished in a few ways. One option might be to compile and publish a collection or anthology that contains excerpts from some of northern Alberta's texts – to date, no such literary compilation exists. Another option might be to reissue or republish some of these out-of-print texts; as far as I can discern, the only text that has been reprinted and reissued is Alistair MacLean's *Athabasca* (and even then, the reissues appear to have been the result of changes to the book jacket cover – the novel itself has not been republished for a long time). A third option might be to revisit the texts that have featured quotations or anecdotes from local figures and then reprint or reproduce the full original interviews, not just selective or subjective portions.

Such a multiplicity of texts, voices, and narratives would help to challenge the single, "core narrative" sought by the aforementioned Climate Outreach project, and other dominant groups. Given the potentially subversive elements of these perspectives and voices, new readers will be encouraged to approach the texts with charity, humility and modesty. Such readerly qualities may lead to stronger and more active listening, and perhaps even help allow for the possibility that unimpeded growth and expansion are not the only options when imagining the space and place of northern Alberta.

In a way, a more fully rounded collection of texts – whereby industry/non-industry narratives appear side by side – would metaphorically resemble the bisected geography of the northern Alberta itself. By this I mean that there are entire segments of the region that have been disrupted, while other patches of the boreal forest remain untouched by

industry operations. Aerial tours of the bitumen sands allow passengers to witness both of these sights simultaneously; from above, one can easily envision northern Alberta's sublime, early days as Eden, as well as the toxic sublime, postlapsarian consequences of rapid, unfettered resource development. By the late 1960s and 1970s, industry reports on the economic prospects of bitumen became the publications of choice. The proliferation of government documents, corporate financial reports, and development feasibility studies supplanted existing texts about the area. The focus on people and the bioregion shifted to a focus on the land as object and as objectified, and that trend continues today.

The bitumen sands force us to think about our own beliefs. As has been pointed out, much brute force is required to extract bitumen. Likewise, a great deal of effort may be required to recover and promulgate narratives and stories that could contradict or disrupt overarching beliefs and ideologies previously assumed to be set in stone. In recent years, northern Alberta's various projects have prompted many Canadians to reconsider what it means to live in a democracy, particularly when industrial projects or proposals attempt to sidestep or minimize clearly defined parameters of what constitutes acceptable environmental harm. On such occasions, citizens begin to wonder whether all values are universally shared, and whether a fundamental difference in values exists that cannot be bridged. There are many vested interests, and all too often it is the most dominant voices who speak loudest – even if they have only a tangential connection to the region and its residents. Such a communication-averse apparatus seems almost impenetrable and calls into question how we can ever hope to hear and acknowledge any of the voices that have originated from, or have been about, this region. It is entirely possible that some of the answers we seek can be found in northern Alberta's literature.

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Appendices

Appendix A

A preliminary list of authors from Northern Alberta

Fort McMurray region

Harry Hampton Aimé

Hazel Glen Farm (n. date)

Overalls, Red Serge and Robes: Life and Adventure in the Great Canadian North (2004)

Marjorie Irene Aimé

Northern Memories (2003)

Damian Asher with Omar Mouallem

Inside the Inferno: A Firefighter's Story of the Brotherhood that Saved Fort McMurray
(2017)

Bruce Atchison

When a Man Loves a Rabbit: Learning and Living with Bunnies (2006)

Deliverance from Jericho: Six Years in a Blind School (2007)

How I Was Razed: A Journey from Cultism to Christianity (2012)

Dee Bentley and Thomas Zimmerman

Muscle and Heart: Fort McMurray Fire Stories (2017)

Rick Boychuk

River of Grit: Six Months on the Line at Suncor, Ft. McMurray, Alberta, 1986 (1996)

Inge Bremer-Trueman

A Root Beer Season (2013)

When the Wheels Fall Off (2015)

Winging It (2017)

Bern Will Brown (formerly Father Brown)

Arctic Journal (1998)

Arctic Journal Volume II: A Time for Change

Free Spirits: Portraits from the North (2007)

End-of-Earth People: The Arctic Sahtu (2014)

Patricia Marie Budd

The Aging Philosopher (play) (2003)

A New Dawn Rising (2007)

Hell Hounds of High School (2011)

Hadrian's Lover (2013)
Hadrian's Rage (2016)

Randy S. Burton
The Mystery of Glass Island (2013)

George Caouette
Ramblings and Recollections, 1956-1974

John W. Chalmers
On the Edge of the Shield: Fort Chipewyan and its Hinterland (1971)

Sheila Chartrand
The Goonchba (2016)
The Schobrine (2015, winner of the Canada Book Award)

Darlene J. (DJ) Comfort
Meeting Place of Many Waters (Part One: The Fur Trade) (1973)
Pass the McMurray Salt Please! The Alberta Salt Company as Remembered by Three Fort McMurray Pioneers (1975)
The Abasand Fiasco: The Rise and Fall of a Brave Pioneer Oil Sands Extraction Plant (1980)

Roddy R. Cross
Dead Cold (2012)

Freeman Cull
Home Is Where the Hurt Is: The Cull's Journey from Englee, NL to Fort McMurray, AB (2009)

Dorothy Dahlgren
People of our Past in Northern Alberta (1988)
Tales of the Tar Sands (1975)

Luay Eljamal
Jason Love: The Eternal Sphinx, Book One (2008)
Freeing Heaven's Secrets (2014)

Sidney Clarke (S.C.) Ells
Northland Trails (1956, 1938)
Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands (1962)

E.O. (Eddie) Engstrom
Clearwater Winter, (1984; 2nd printing 1987)

Robert Fitzsimmons

The Truth about Alberta Tar Sands (1953)

Marnie Grant

Unpublished journal (see F. Jean 240) / “A Trapper’s Retreat” (poem) (see F. Jean 243)

Therese Greenwood

Dead in the Water (co-editor and contributor) (2006)

Mystery Ink (co-editor and contributor) (2007)

Kill As You Go (2018)

What You Take with You: Wildfire, Family and the Road Home (2019)

Stephen Harris

Travelling through North Korea: Adventures in the Hermit Kingdom (2017)

Jerron Hawley, Graham Hurley, and Steve Sackett

Into the Fire: The Fight to Save Fort McMurray (2017)

Barb Hermansen

Barb Hermansen: Her Story: The Last Woman to Raise Children on the Athabasca River (2011)

Irwin Huberman

The Place We Call Home: A History of Fort McMurray as its People Remember (1778-1980) (2001)

Blair Jean

Clearwater Memoirs (2016)

Frances K. Jean

Cooking with Memories (1998)

More Than Oil: Trappers, Traders & Settlers of Northern Alberta (2012)

Dr. Ronald Laybolt

Competence vs. Confidence: What is The Missing Link? (2018)

The Storm Within: The Demons We Deal with Everyday (2019)

James MacGregor (James Grierson MacGregor)

The Land of Twelve Foot Davis (A History of the Peace River Country) (1952)

History of Alberta (1972)

Paddle Wheels to Bucket-Wheels on the Athabasca: “A Romance of Progress Set in Northeastern Alberta” (1974)

Jordan Maskell

Together We Stand: A Northern Alberta Wildfire Story (2000)

Patricia McCormack

Fort Chipewyan and the Shaping of Canadian History (2010)

Patricia McCormack and R. Geoffrey Ironside, eds.

The Uncovered Past: Roots of Northern Alberta Societies (1993)

Peter McKenzie-Brown

Bitumen: The People, Performance and Passions behind Alberta's Oil Sands (2017)

Charlotte Mitchell

“McMurray Then and Now” (poem from 1987 book of poems) (see F. Jean 184-185)

Miscellaneous

Muscle and Heart: Fort McMurray Fire Stories (ed. Cyndy Pickersgill) 2017)

Tom Morimoto

Breaking Trail: From Canada's Northern Frontier to the Oil Fields of Dubai (2007)

Sanjay K. Patel

The Future of Oil: A Straight Story of the Canadian Oil Sands (2012)

Edythe A. Parkinson (a.k.a. Dee Parkinson-Marcoux) (co-written with A.L. Mular)

Mineral Processing Equipment Costs and Preliminary Capital Cost Estimation (1972)

Rick Ranson

Bittersweet Sands: 24 Days in Fort McMurray (2014)

Julie Rowe

Icebound (2011)

North of Heartbreak (2012)

Playing Doctor (2012)

Saving the Rifleman (2012)

Aiding the Enemy (War Girls) (2013)

Enticing the Spymaster (War Girls Book 2) (2013)

The Mammoth Book of ER Romance (1 story) (2013)

Timeless Keepsakes (1 story) (2013)

Timeless Escapes (1 story) (2014)

Timeless Treasures (1 story) (2014)

Molly Gets Her Man (2014)

Hollywood Scandal (Seacliffe Medical Book 3) (2014)

Timeless Vows (1 story) (2015)

Men of Action (2015)

Deadly Strain (Biological Response Team Book 1) (2015)

Lethal Game (Biological Response Team Book 2) (2015)

Viral Justice (Biological Response Team Book 3) (2016)

Mary Clark Sheppard, ed.

Oil Sands Scientist: The Letters of Karl A. Clark, 1930-1949 (1989)

Athabasca Oil Sands from Laboratory to Production: The Letters of Karl A. Clark, 1950-1966 (2005)

Leanne Shirtliffe

Saving Thunder the Great: The True Story of a Gerbil's Escape from the Fort McMurray Wildfire (2016)

Fred Stenson

Lonesome Hero (1974)

Waste to Wealth: A History of Gas Processing in Canada (1985)

Alberta Bound (editor) (1986)

Last One Home (1988)

Working without a Laugh Track (1990)

The Road Home (editor) (1992)

Teeth (1994)

The Story of Calgary (1994)

RCMP: The March West (1999)

The Last Stack (2000)

The Trade (2000; Giller finalist)

Thing Feigned or Reimagined (2002)

Lightning (2003)

Waterton: Brush and Pen (2006)

The Great Karoo (2008; Governor General's Award finalist)

Glenbow Provincial Park (2012)

Rotary in Calgary (2014)

Who By Fire (2014)

Alvena Strasbourg

Memories of a Metis Woman: Fort McMurray, Yesterday, and Today (1998)

Dheena Subramanian

Jesus, the Yogi: A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas (2009)

Inner & Outer: A Collection of Inspirational Poems (2010)

Flakes of Snow (2013)

Testament (2013)

Rex Terpening

Bent Props and Blow Pots: A Pioneer Remembers North Bush Flying (2003)

Isabella Michelle Trempe

Mr. Complicated: Love or Lust, Book One (2015)

A Touch of Past Unwanted (2015)

A Final Twist Too Complicated (2016)

Donald G. Wetherell and Irene R.A. Kmet
Alberta's North: A History, 1890-1950 (2000)

Peace River and Grimshaw region

Alexander MacKenzie Historical Society (collaborative project; ed. Katharine Hoskin Hunt): *Peace River Remembers: Peace River, Alberta and Adjacent Districts* (1984)

Dollye Cooper
Looking Back with Dollye Cooper (2011)

Carmel Ellis
Barns of the North Peace (photographic book) (n. date)
Wilderness Park – Reflections (2010)

Olive A. Fredrickson (with Ben East)
The Silence of the North (1972) (made into a film in 1981 starring Ellen Burstyn, Tom Skerritt and Gordon Pinsent)

Chrystia Freeland
Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super-Rich and the Fall of Everyone Else (2012)

Theresa Griffith
Love Your Skeletons (2011)
York Boat Captain – 18 Life-Changing Days on the Peace River (2013)
Tiny Books on Big Ideas, Volume 1: Four Books of Insight and Inspiration in 1 (2018)

Dianne Ireland
Grandmama's Treasured Favorites & Traditional Recipes (2013)

Mary Percy Jackson
Letters from Northern Alberta, 1929-1931 (2006)

Jean Cameron Kelly
I Remember Part I / Part II (n. date)

Beverly Lein
An Elk in the House (2006)
The Three Saints of Christmas (2009)
Mary: Woman of Sorrows (2011)
Wolf Spirit: The Story of Moon Beam (2010)
Evil on the Peace River (2012)

Pearl Luke
Burning Ground (2000)
Madame Zee (2006)

Matthew Vincent Marcone
Northern Alberta: Pioneer Stories That Shaped A Region (2019)

David McLaughlin
Stories I Love to Tell (2010)

Hal Sisson
The Big Bamboozle (1999)
Coots, Codgers, and Curmudgeons: Things Were More Like They Used to Be than They Are Now (1999)
Caverns of the Cross (2002)
A Fat Lot of Good (2002)
A Fowler View of Life (2002)
Garage Sales of the Mind Are More Like They Are Now than They Ever Were Before (2002)
Maquiladora Mayhem (2004)
You Should Live So Long (2004)
Sorry 'Bout That (2005)
Modus Operandi 9/11 (2007)
Potshots (2008)

Trevor Wolf
Titanium Blues: A Plane Crash Survivor's True Story (2000)

Cold Lake region

Cold Lake Historical Society
Treasured Scales of the Kinosoo (1980)

Judith Graves (penname: Judith Tewes)
Spirited: 13 Haunting Tales (contributor) (2011)
Under My Skin: Skinned Book 1 (2010)
Second Skin: Skinned Book 2 (2011)
Skin of My Teeth: Skinned Book 3 (2013)
My Soon to be Sex Life (as Judith Tewes) (2014)

Robbie Shaw
Superbase 18, Cold Lake: Canada's Northern Guardians (1990)

The Cold Lake and District Sportsmen Fish and Game Association
Cold Lake and District Sportsmen Fish and Game Cook Book (n. date)

Aboriginal Healing Foundation
Awakening our Spirit: Cold Lake Community Reconciliation and Healing Project (n. date)

Slave Lake region

Larry Loyie (Oskiniko/Young Man) and Constance Birssenden

The Wind Cannot Read (1992)

Ora Pro Nobis, Pray for Us (play, 1994)

The Healing, a Memoir for Four Voices (1996)

Fifty Years Credit (play, 1998)

No Way to Say Goodbye (play, 1999)

As Long as the Rivers Flow (2002)

The Gathering Tree (2005)

When the Spirits Dance: A Cree Boy's Search for the Meaning of War (2006)

Goodbye Buffalo Bay, A True Story of Life in a Residential School ... and of Moving On (2008)

The Moon Speaks Cree: A Winter Adventure (2012)

Residential Schools, With the Words and Images of Survivors, A National History (2014)

Welcome to the Circle (2014)

Two Plays About Residential School 20th Anniversary Edition (Loyie's *Ora Pro Nobis, Pray for Us* and Vera Manuel's *The Strength of Indian Women*) (2018)

Town of Slave Lake

Wisdom Gained: The Town of Slave Lake Shares Its Reflections on Recovery from the 2011 Wildfire (2016)

Sheila Willis

Alberta History: Short Stories Volume 1, Lesser Slave Lake Region (2020)

Fort McKay region

Stories My Granny Told Me: Stories, Tales, Legends, Poems Collected by the Young People of Fort McKay (1999)

Appendix B

Examples of Gerard Manley Hopkins's influence on James G. MacGregor

In *The Land of Twelve Foot Davis*, James G. MacGregor describes how, after refugee settlers came to the Tupper Creek Settlement, “flaxen-haired milk-maids” drove the cows home at night, “from pasturing in the rich grass of the buttercup-bedecked ponds” (MacGregor 372). Here MacGregor’s diction, again reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s sprung rhythm, alludes to the natural and the pastoral, but since the images describe newly arriving settlers, they naturalize northern Alberta’s colonization, even as MacGregor points to the increasing difficulty of culling through the copious bush and navigating formidable muskeg to forge a path for the newly arriving railway (369). For the first time, many discovered “how puny is the strength of a man and two oxen when pitted against the sucking mud of a muskeg” (366).

Appendix C

A financial case for keeping bitumen in the ground

Texts such as Tony Clarke's *Tar Sands Showdown: Canada and the New Politics of Oil in an Age of Climate Change* provide alternative ways of considering resources other than bitumen that can be defined as *valuable*. Clarke describes how Jeff Wells, the International Boreal Conservation Campaign's senior scientist, has remarked that Alberta's boreal forest "is to carbon what Fort Knox is to gold" (Clarke 174). In effect, Wells's analogy of boreal forest as carbon and gold transforms peat and bogs into sites of usefulness and value, rather than strictly the bitumen beneath. According to Clarke, peat accounts for 12% of Canada's land mass, making the country "a world leader in peatland carbon storage." Certainly, in terms of the overall benefit to the biosphere, peat holds more value than "black gold"; in fact, northern boreal forest expert and limnologist David Schindler³⁷¹ calls Canada's permafrost "a bank vault" that holds carbon (qtd. on Clarke 175). Further, when the Canadian Boreal Initiative (CBI) applied a dollar value to peat,³⁷² they estimated that value to be worth \$3.7 trillion; the Mackenzie boreal forest alone was estimated to be worth \$93.2 billion per year. By these calculations, the benefit of keeping Alberta's peat intact is approximately 2 ½ times more valuable than its disruption – i.e. more valuable than bitumen extraction (176). In strict financial terms, the possibility of leaving bitumen in the ground arguably outweighs the presumed benefits of its excavation.

³⁷¹ Schindler is also featured in *Peace Out*, the acclaimed 2011 documentary directed by Charles Wilkinson.

³⁷² As referenced in "The Real Wealth of the Mackenzie Region," by authors Anielski and Watson.

Unfortunately, this alternative economic value of keeping the boreal forest disruption-free has been obscured in recent years, and not by coincidence. In 2000, a stakeholder group called CEMA (Cumulative Environmental Management Association) was formed in order to analyze the impacts of industry on the boreal forest. Although a CEMA report was due in 2002, it was not completed until spring of 2008 because bitumen sands companies had vetoed its recommended actions (179-180). At the same time, an array of industry projects were fast-tracked during the 2000s,³⁷³ even as environmental management deadlines were continuously delayed (McDermott, “With No”). Eventually, in what can best be described as a conflict of interest, CEMA received nearly all of its funding directly from bitumen sands companies. Inevitably, CEMA announced its dissolution in December 2015, as the fossil fuel industry deemed the organization to be “irrelevant.”

³⁷³ For instance, the Kearl Oil Sands Project in the Kearl Lake region, north of Fort McMurray (Imperial Oil).

Appendix D

Some similarities between Randy S. Burton and Franklin W. Dixon

Beyond content and style, Randy S. Burton and Franklin W. Dixon shared similarities in upbringing. “Franklin W. Dixon,” who wrote 20 of the first 24 Hardy Boys books, was in fact a Canadian from Haileybury, Ontario named Leslie McFarlane (b. 1902). Located 100 miles north of North Bay, the town of Haileybury embodied the very definition of northern Canada remoteness for McFarlane, especially during his formative childhood. Haileybury also experienced the same kind of resource development boom that other jurisdictions like northern Alberta likewise have experienced – specifically with the discovery of silver and the accompanying changes to the region. By 1912, Haileybury had Ontario’s highest number of millionaires per capita – 35 millionaires in the small town – because of the silver mining boom (Greenwald 10). The onset of eccentric miners, engineers, prospectors and con artists transformed once-docile Haileybury into an “author’s dream” (2). Through the plots of his Hardy Boys capers, McFarlane returned to the idea of wish fulfillment and desire for treasures and riches.

Earning only a few thousand dollars over the span of two decades (xiii), McFarlane signed agreements to waive rights and royalties to the Hardy Boys franchise because at the time it was more important for him to pay his monthly bills. As a ghostwriter he was only paid \$125 for each book he wrote (50). Similarly, at the end of *The Mystery of Glass Island*, Randy S. Burton remarks that he wrote his book because he and his family were having financial difficulties and he was looking for a way to “contribute more money to pay down our debt” (Burton 119).

Appendix E

Wood Buffalo municipal council members who resigned rather than be audited

After the municipal council of Wood Buffalo implemented an auditing requirement for its elected members, seven men preferred to resign, rather than allow their activities to be exposed by a forensic audit. The names of the seven members are Ron Taylor, Bruce Irvine, John Buchko, Glen Laubenstein, Sudhir Sandhu, Henry Hunter, and Glen Smith (McDermott and Jeffrey).³⁷⁴ The resignations occurred over the span of nine months, from October 2013 to June 2014. The scope of the suspected corruption prompted the Canadian Taxpayers' Federation (CTF) to urge the province of Alberta to intervene. According to the CTF's Derek Fildebrandt, the paper trails "make clear that something is causing a massive turnover of staff at the R.M. [Regional Municipality] of Wood Buffalo and ... these staff [members] are being paid incredible sums of money for their signature on non-disclosure agreements" (McDermott and Jeffrey).

³⁷⁴ The full list of members: Gary Palmer, Director of Supply Chain Management, Aug. 6, 2012-July 5, 2013, \$28,050, Henry Hunter, Executive Director of Planning & Infrastructure, Feb. 13, 2012-Sept. 1, 2013, \$45,450, Sudhir Sandhu, Director of Employee Development and Support, May 11, 2011-Sept. 1, 2013, \$76,450, Samuel Alatorre, Director of Planning Development, Jan. 1, 2011-June 30, 2013, \$72,000, Brian Moore, Director Assessment & Taxation, May 20, 2012-Jan. 1, 2013, \$20,350, Clayton Driver, Director of IT services, Sept. 14, 2011-June 30, 2013, \$53,500, Kola Oladimeji, Director of Finance, May 22, 2012-Sept. 6, 2012, \$7,650, Therese Greenwood, Director of Communications, June 1, 2012-Aug. 31, 2012, \$7,650, Harry Harker, Acting Director of Planning & Development, March 1, 2013-Sept. 1, 2013, \$8,077.38, Stacy Kuiack, Director of City Centre Development, July 4, 2012-Sept. 1, 2013, \$35,000, Ron Taylor, Executive Director of City Centre, May 5, 2011 through Sept. 1, 2013, \$58,717.46, Ted Zlotnick, Director of Supply Chain Management, June 4, 2013-Sept. 30, 2013, \$10,000, Bruce Irvine, Director of City Centre Development, Jan. 1, 2013-Sept. 1, 2013, \$18,900, Felice Mazzoni, Director of Planning & Development, July 29, 2013-Sept. 1-2013, \$4,200.

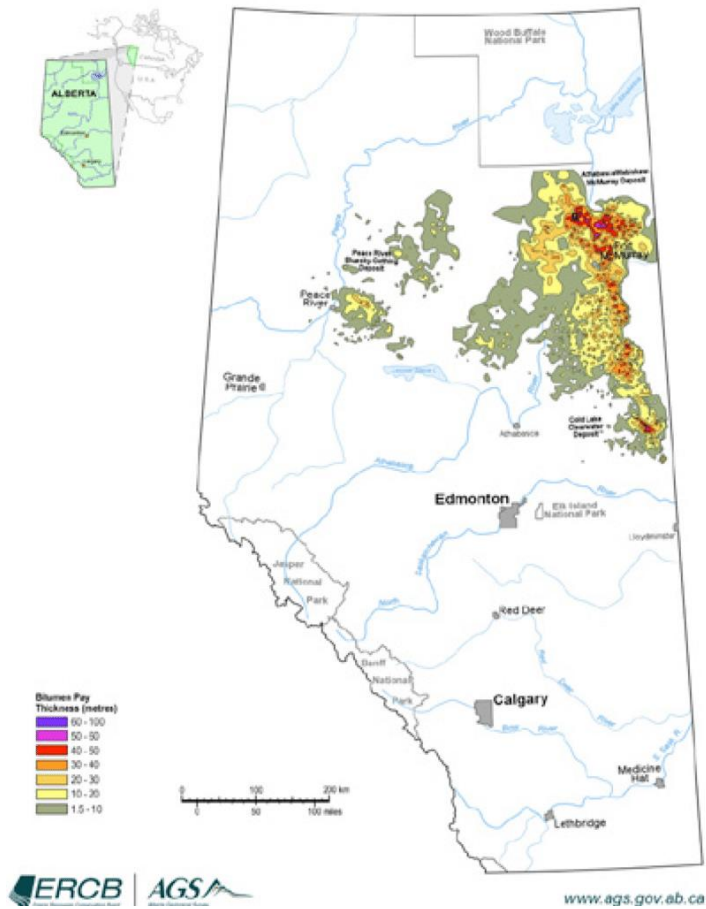
Appendix F

Additional examples of Frances Jean's "hard-working" local citizens

More examples of hard work include: the Augur Brothers were "honest, hard-working and sincere" (F. Jean 124); Leo Larose "worked hard" (229); Roy Ewashko loved "hard work" throughout his life (250); oil magnate J. Howard Pew's life was characterized by "hard work" (260); Stu Morton and Roger Charest succeeded with their radio station venture because of "hard work" (267); the Walsh family became successful real estate moguls by virtue of their "hard work" (304); long-time MLA Norm Weiss has a much-needed affinity for "hard work" (310); and Al and Yvette Burry "worked hard" (312).

Jean also presents hard work as a primary factor in recovery from health setbacks: Roger Ulliac had a stroke that resulted in loss of speech and mobility, but because he pushed himself, through "determination and hard work" he subsequently recovered; Ulliac was willing to "work hard, take risks and seize opportunities," and went on to be one of the richest landlords in Fort McMurray (233). Also, Jean notes that Darlene Comfort's book *The Abasand Fiasco* gave readers an idea of the "hard work" demonstrated by the early "oilsands explorers" (282). Further, Jean writes that one of Fort McMurray's first fastball teams came into existence because of "dedicated, hard-working players" (317).

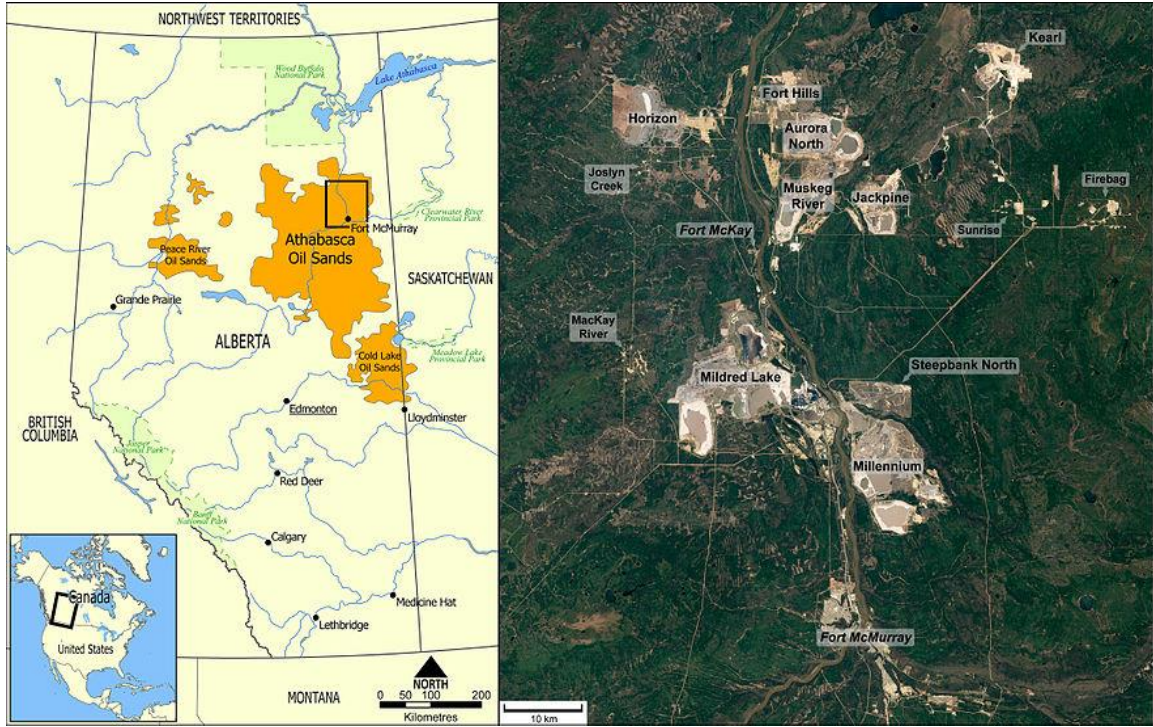
Appendix G



Appendix G. Alberta Geological Survey. “Location of the Athabasca, Cold Lake and Peace River Oil Sands in Alberta.” *Alberta Oil Sands*, May 9, 2012.

www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-of-the-Athabasca-Cold-Lake-and-Peace-River-oil-sands-in-Alberta-Map_fig2_276088989. Accessed 6 May 2018.

Appendix H



Appendix H. Map: Athabasca, Cold Lake, and Peace River Oil Sands in Alberta

Map Athabasca_oil_sand_mining_map_2011-1 at Wikimedia Commons at

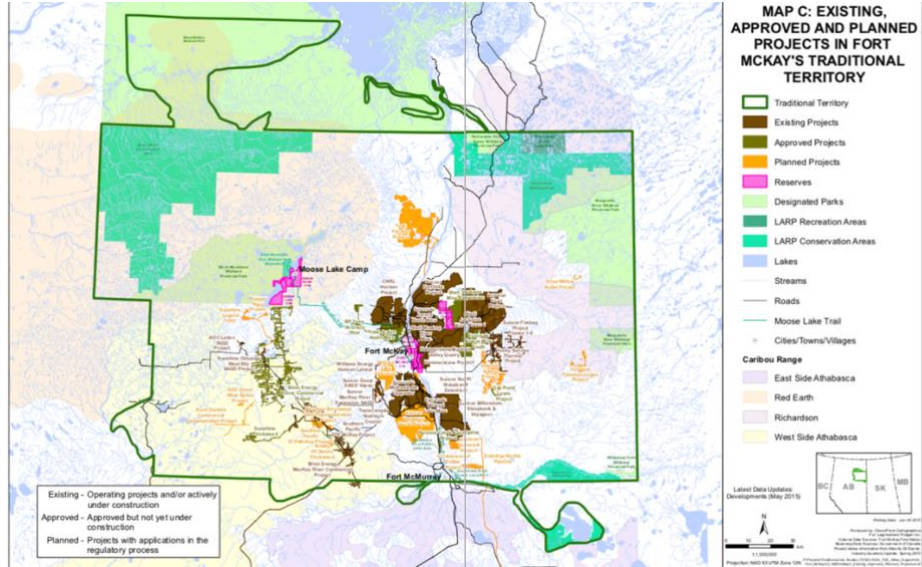
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Athabasca_oil_sand_mining_map_2011.jpg

Appendix I



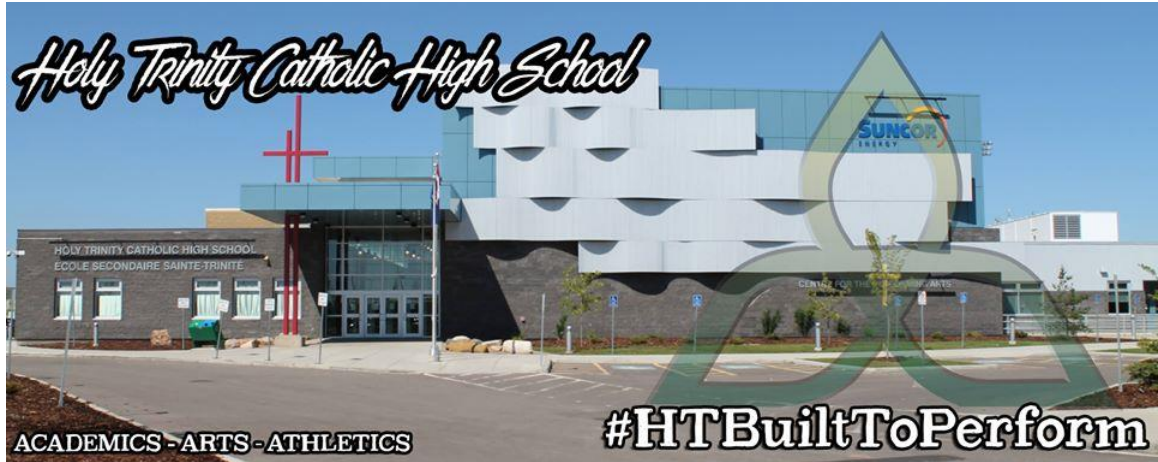
Appendix I. Daniel Tencer. “Northern Gateway: Enbridge Accused of Misleading Public with Video that Shows Smooth Sailing in Douglas Channel.” *The Huffington Post*, from SumOfUs/Leadnow.ca, 16 Aug. 2012. www.huffingtonpost.ca/2012/08/16/enbridge-douglas-channel-islands_n_1789223.html.

Appendix J



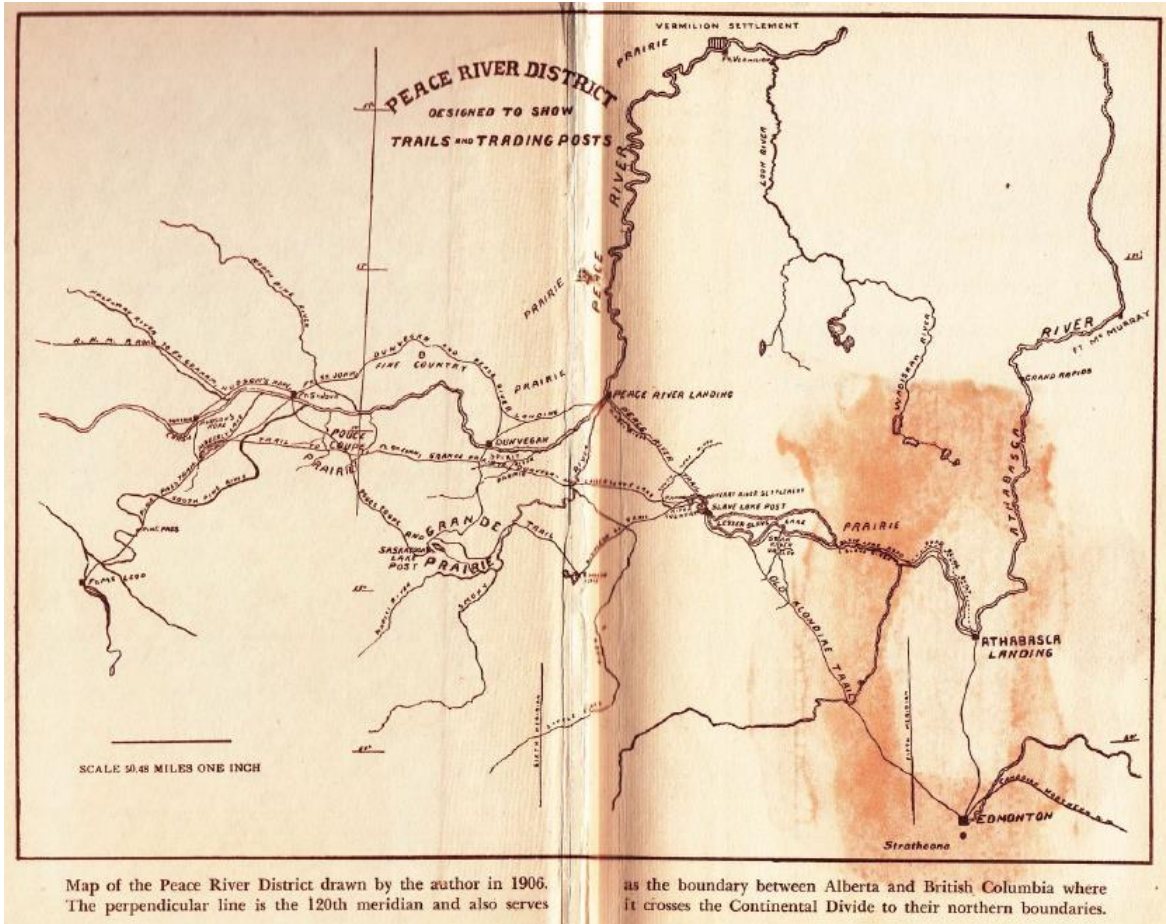
Appendix J. “Map C: Existing, Approved and Planned Projects in Fort McKay’s Traditional Territory.” (T. Flanagan, “The Community” 14-15).

Appendix K



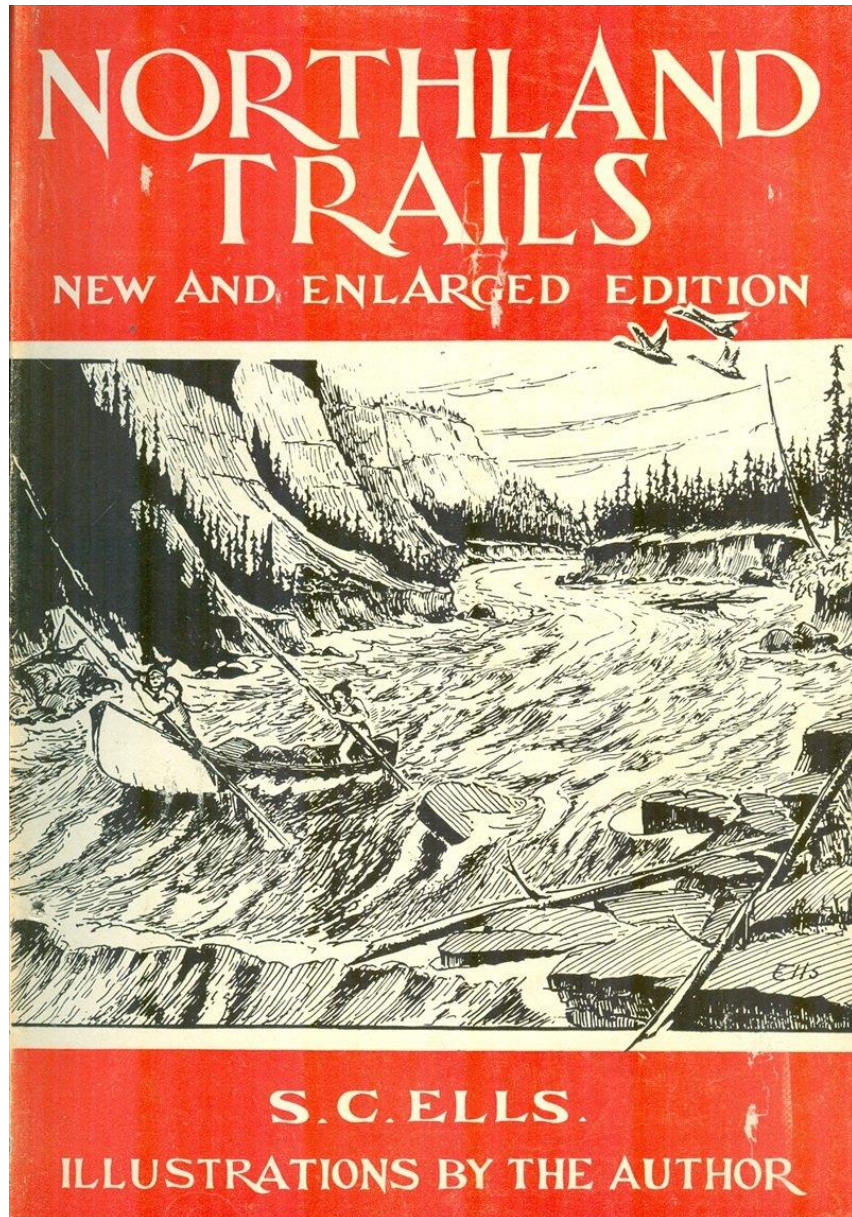
Appendix K. Holy Trinity Catholic High School in Fort McMurray. The name of the school is less prominent than the Suncor logo, which is also placed higher than the crosses.

Appendix L



Appendix L. A.M. Bezanson's hand-drawn map of the Peace River, included in *Sodbusters Invade the Peace*.

Appendix M to S



Appendix M. Cover of Northland Trails by S.C. Ells, 1956 edition.

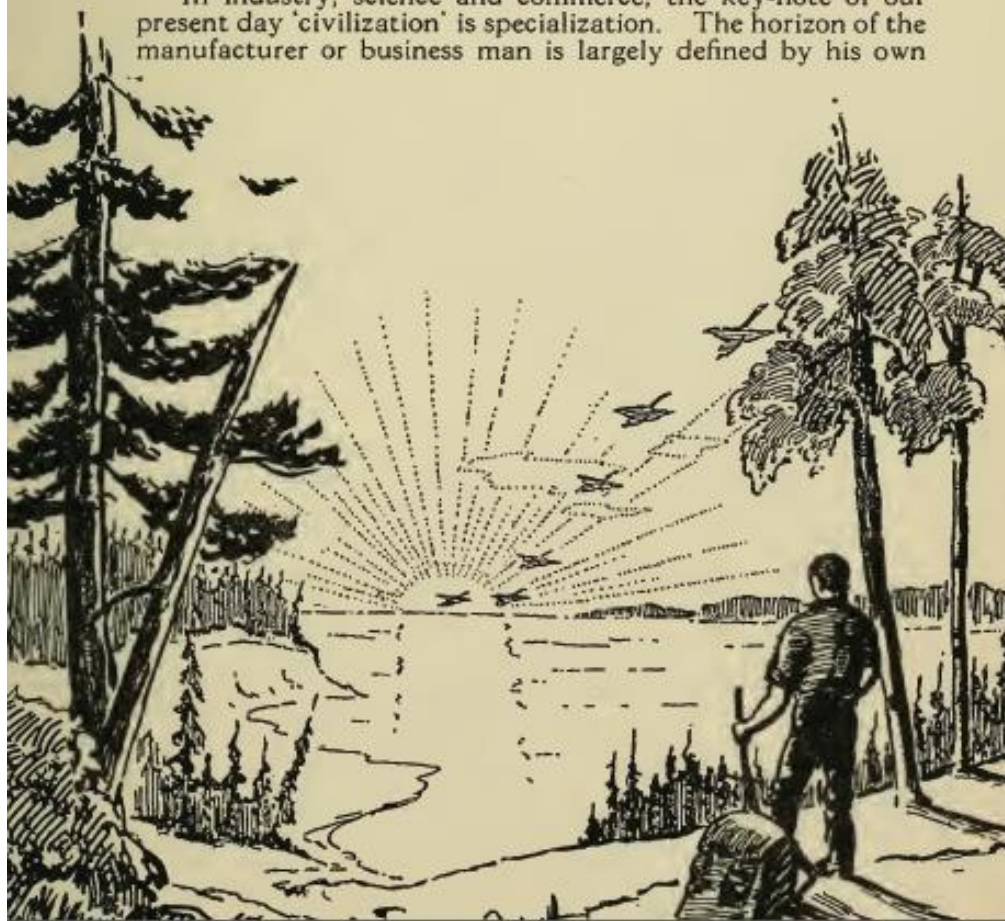


Preface.

In the following pages, the writer has assembled a group of verses and short stories. For the most part, scenes are laid in that part of Canada known as the North West Territories.

In referring to what is popularly known as "Canada's Last Great North," statistics indicating land and water areas, population, natural resources, and meteorological data become quite inadequate. The writer has therefore attempted to convey something more vital than mere statistics—the atmosphere of the great North land and the spirit of its people.

In industry, science and commerce, the key-note of our present day 'civilization' is specialization. The horizon of the manufacturer or business man is largely defined by his own



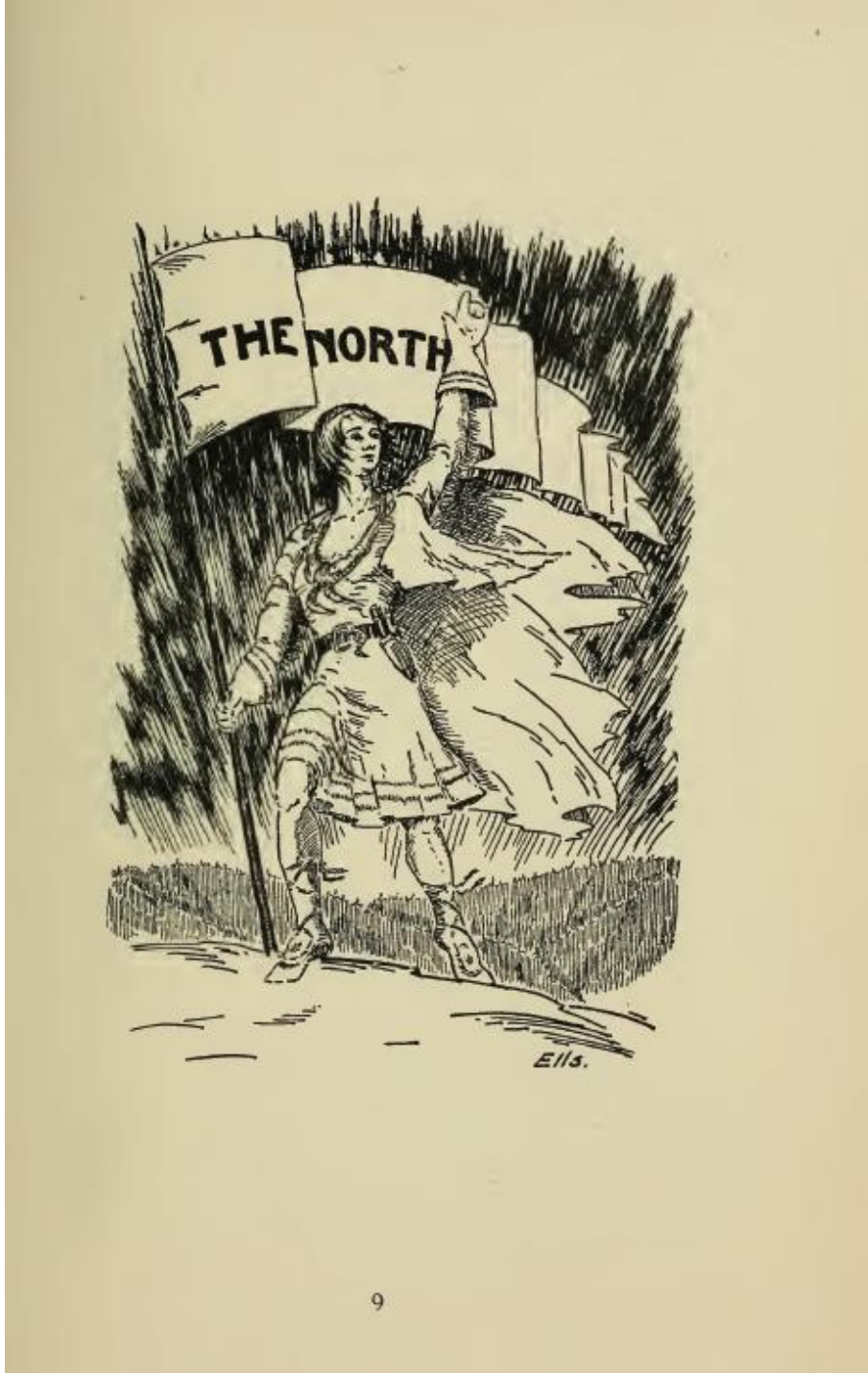
Appendix N. Preface and illustration by Ells (*Northland* 5).

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THE SEEKERS.....	23-24
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Appendix O. Table of Contents and illustration by Ells (Northland 7).



Appendix P. (Ells, Northland 9).

White Water



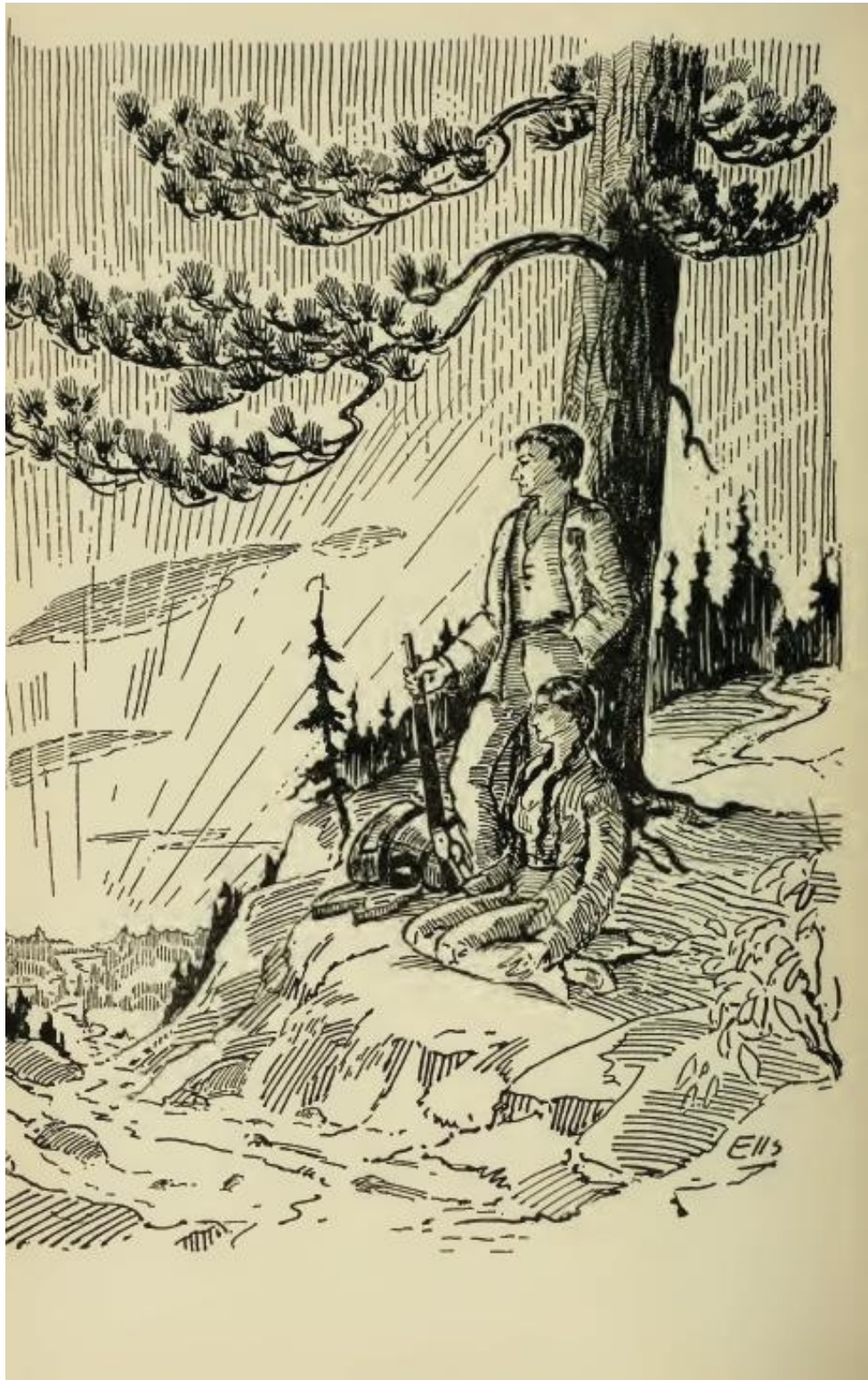
Countless rapids, heavy and light, interrupt the courses of the many, many streams which wind across the Canadian northland. Where water is heavy and fast and channels rock strewn and tortuous, paddles become useless toys, and poles—the points iron shod or charred by fire—must be used. Only those who have personally handled canoes through really difficult—and dangerous—rapids, can know the thrilling exaltation that such an experience may bring.

the brutal hardship and cruelty of the winter trails. There were moccasins and stout garments to mend, snowshoes, toboggans and harness to overhaul. About the cabin, along the shore, and where clumsy floats bobbed solemnly between deeply driven net stakes, the tempo of life quickened under a new impulse.

Day after day, through morning mist and autumn haze, disciplined wedges of geese and ducks were reluctantly winging their way toward the south. Day after day, singly or in pairs, canoes were turning their prows toward the north, bound for far-away trapping grounds. Toward the end of September, while blustering snow squalls dimmed crested hill and distant headland, Pelequin's canoe followed. Among the ragged willows and alders that fringed the shore, as best they could, followed the train dogs.



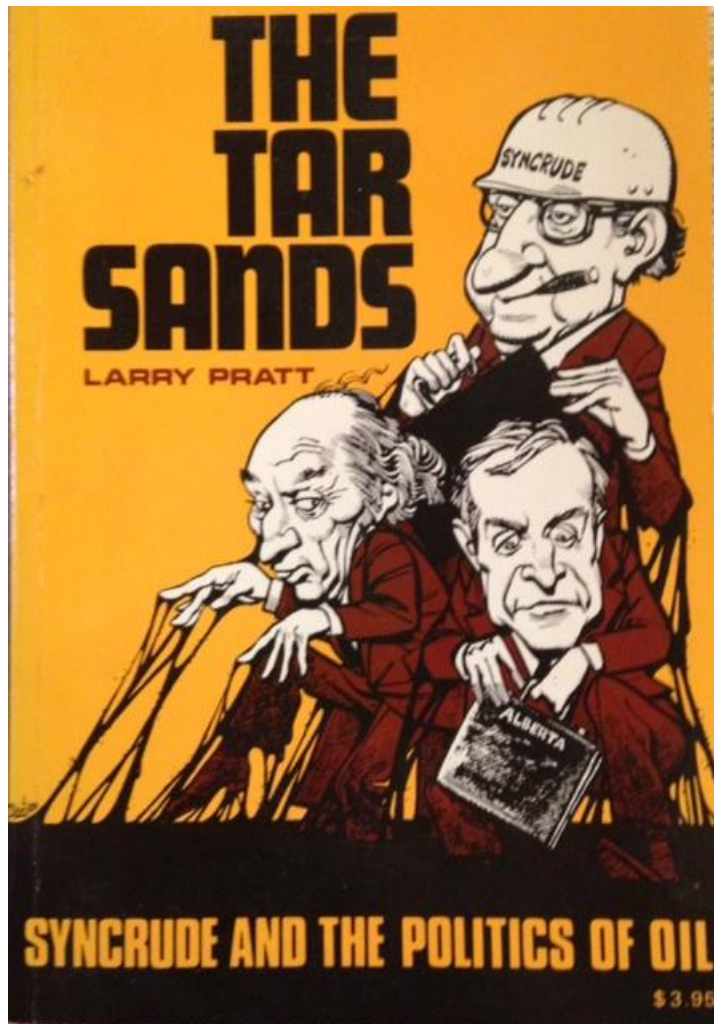
"Towards the end of September Pelequin's canoe followed."



Appendix S. "The Song of the Pine" by Ells (*Northland* 120).

Appendix T

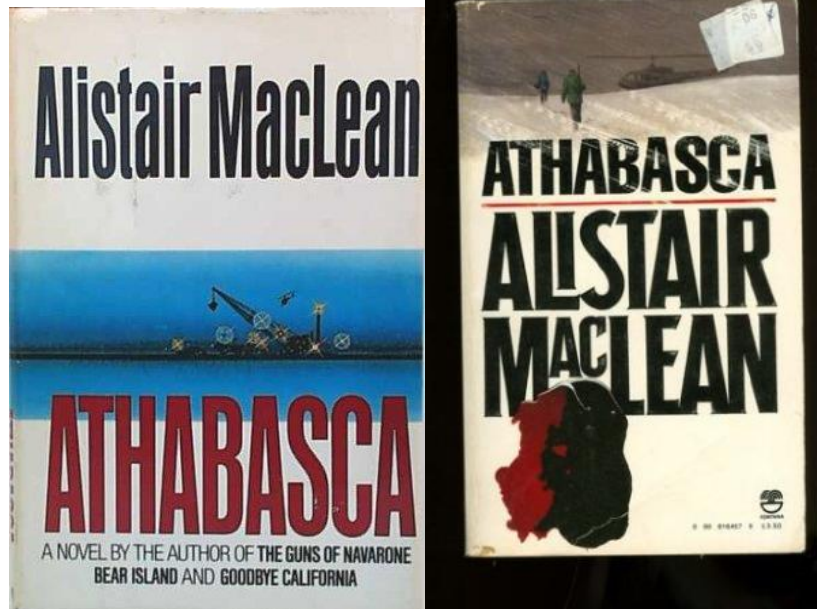
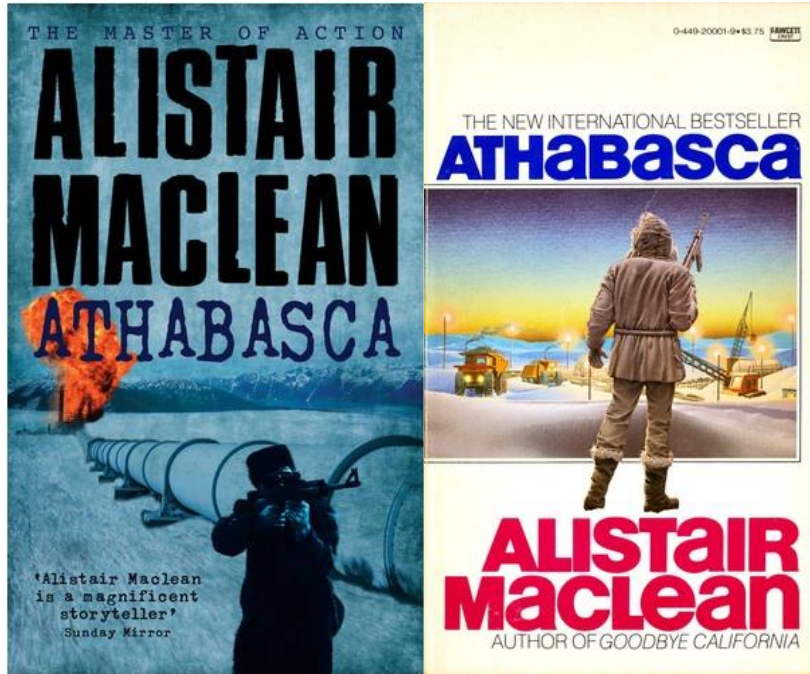
Original cover of *The Tar Sands* by Larry Pratt, no longer available. Pictured are: Pierre Trudeau, Peter Lougheed, and Mississippi-born Syncrude president and lobbyist Frank Spragins, for whom a Fort McMurray high school is named.

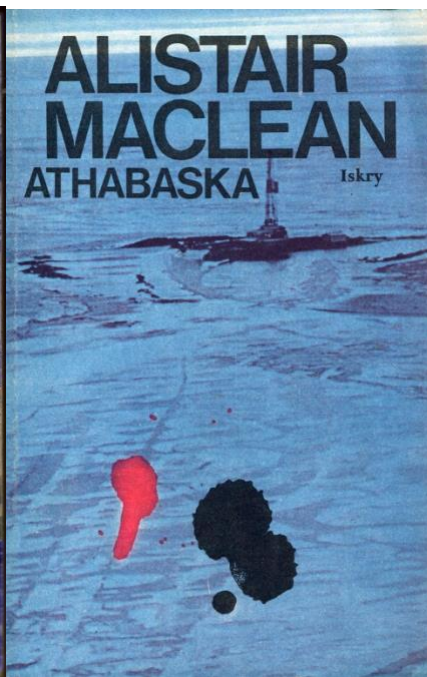
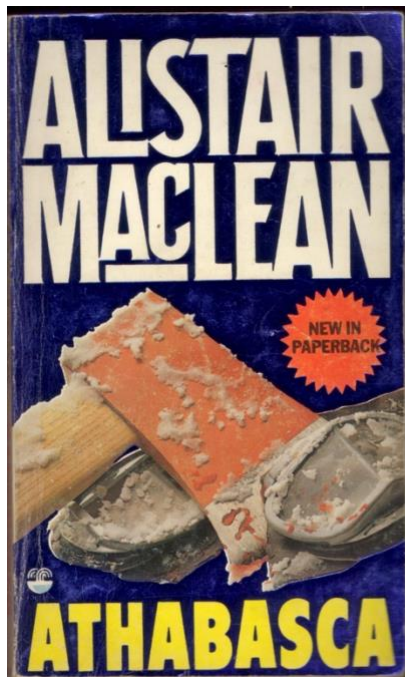
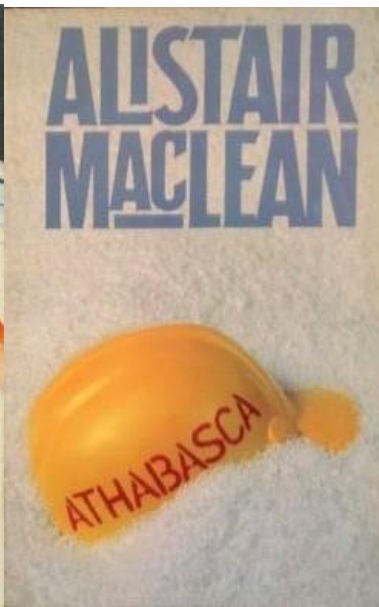
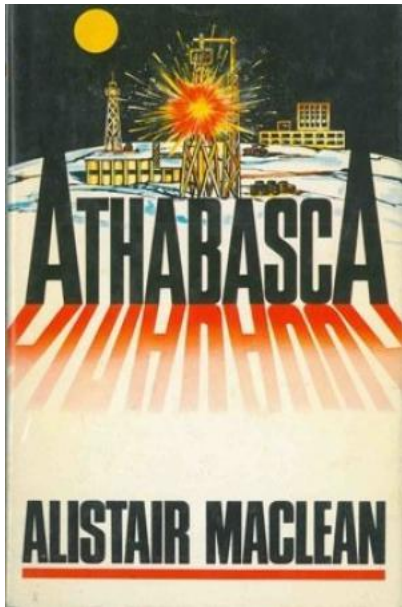


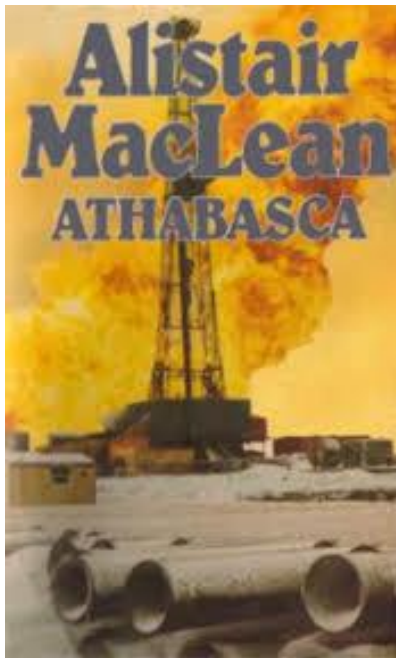
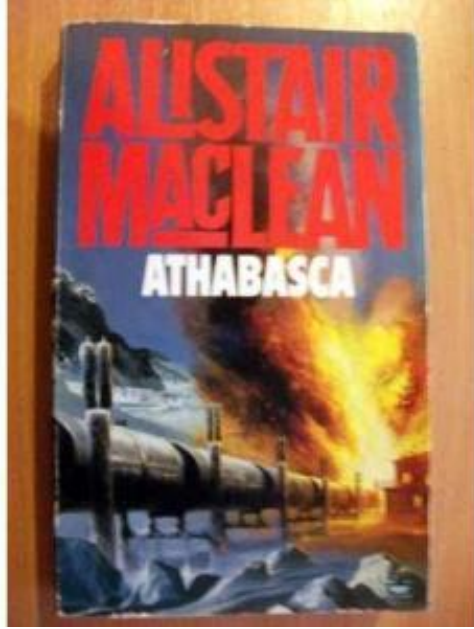
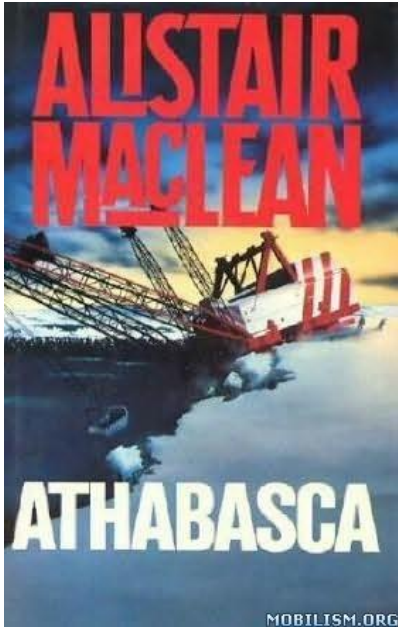
Appendix T. Photograph of *The Tar Sands*. 1976. Roger Albert. "Power and Politics in the Tar Sands." *rogerjgalbert.com*, 29 May 2018, rogerjgalbert.com/2018/05/29/power-and-politics-in-the-tar-sands.

Appendix U

Various book covers of *Athabasca* by Alistair MacLean.





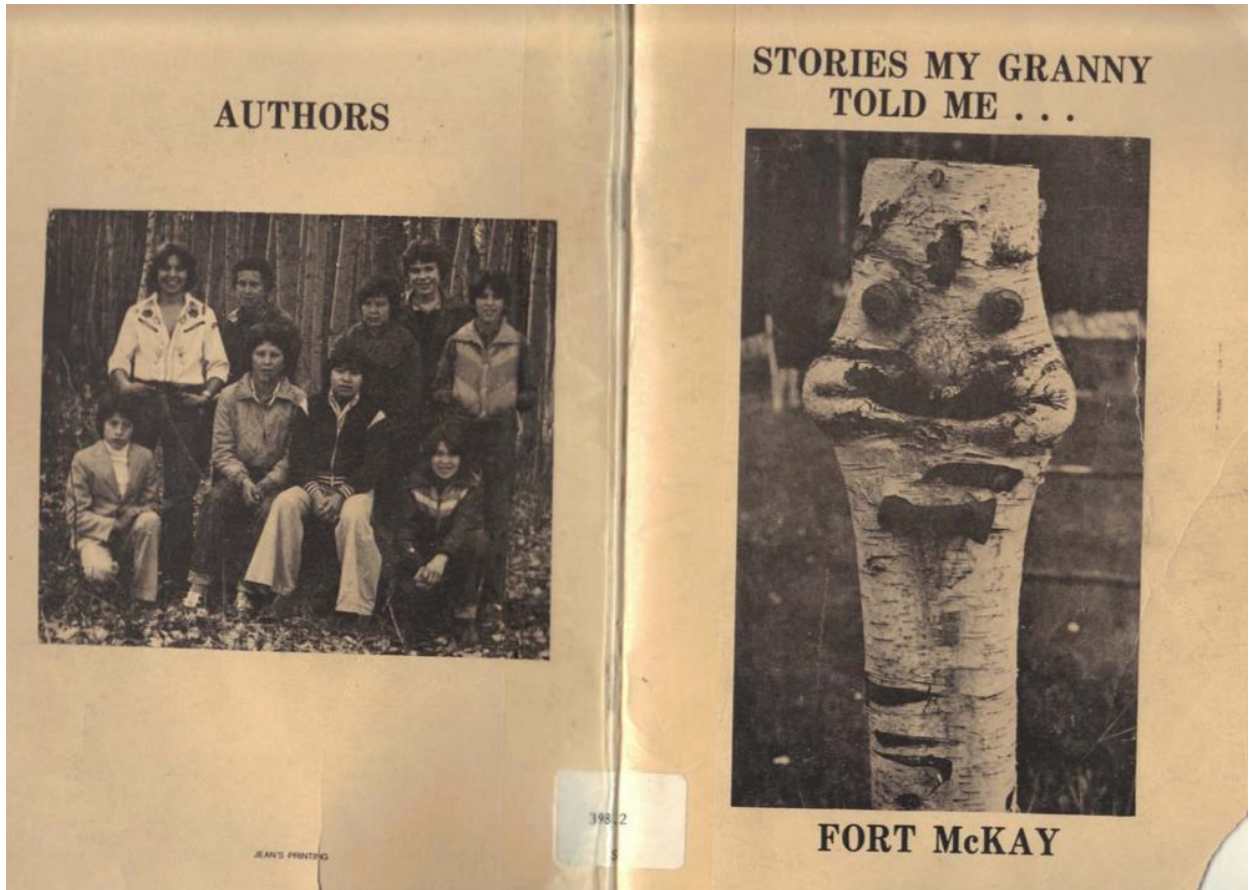


Appendix V

The map of the region as depicted in Maclean's *Athabasca* (1980). Note how in this rendering, only certain details from northern Alberta and Alaska are included; British Columbia, by comparison, is not named and has no discerning boundaries or landmarks.



Appendix W



Appendix W. Cover and back page of *Stories My Granny Told Me*. Note there are photos of the “Authors” but they are not identified by name here or anywhere else in the text.

Meet to discuss Natives and resources

By Jeanne Lepine

Attendance from Native groups, governments, industry and private individuals is expected at a three-day symposium dealing with Native people and renewable resources, to be held at the Westin Hotel in Edmonton April 29 to May 1.

The Alberta Society of Professional Biologists will examine the past, present and future relationships between the Native people and renewable resource management as well as the effects on the cultural and economic welfare of the Native people.

Day One will deal with Native resource use and the way it is now compared to the way it was. The keynote address on resource use and Native culture is being given by Bill Wilson, coordinator of the Miisagwanaga Tribal Council.

Presentations will also be given on resource harvesting and the social structure of Native communities; renewable resources and the economy of Native communities; soil harvest

ing and soil services; Fort Chipewyan and the Peace-Alberta Delta, and wildlife use and management by James Bay Cree.

Day Two will deal with co-management of renewable resources.

The keynote address will be given by Peter Usher, a consultant, on a declaration of power in the Northwest Territories and changing roles in resource management. There will be other presentations on the following topics: resource co-management in Wood Buffalo National Park, co-management of Pacific salmon, joint bear co-management in the Northwest Territories, preparing for the future—training for Native people as resource managers in Alberta, Native roles in monitoring of energy developments, and training and employment of Alaskan Native after land claim settlements.

Day three will deal with economic development through renewable resources, and case histories. The Honourable Nicholas Shtromov, leader of the NWT government, will give

the keynote address on renewable resources and economic development in the N.W.T. Presentations will also be made on the following topics: game ranching and the farmer's co-op in the Lac La Pêche region, the bison as a settlement, self-sufficiency through agriculture and the culturing of wild rice.

In the afternoon of the third day, there will be a panel discussion on animal rights and resource economics with special facilities for Dr. Alan Bisdorf, a brief presentation by panel members on management lessons from the anti-sealing campaign, by author Allen Herdovick, the animal rights viewpoint by the president of I Kure Wildlife Coalition, Steven Best; effects of the site agreement on Native people and their lifestyles by the Honourable Nellie Courchane, MLA for Naineland, NWT.

All sessions will be held on the mezzanine level of the hotel. A barbecue featuring smoked salmon and buffalo steaks, and a buffet dinner with hot

beef and buffalo will be provided at Fort Edmonton Park on the evening of April 30, with bus transportation from the Westin Hotel being available.

There will be a limited number of booths and display space available for displays and posters on the mezzanine level during the Symposium. Any individual or organization interested should register as soon as possible for information or to reserve display space.

Advanced registration fee of \$95 per person includes the luncheon on the first day (ASPB members, \$80). Registration at the door is \$25 per person, and includes the luncheon on the first day (ASPB members, \$20 per person). Students, \$5 (seminar only). Barbecue tickets, \$30 per person.

Early registration is recommended as the acceptance of registrants is limited.

For further information contact: Symposium Registrar, P.O. Box 566, Edmonton, Alberta, T5J 0K8, or phone (403) 269-5150.

DO YOU THINK YOU'RE ELIGIBLE TO BE REMATED AS AN INDIAN

The new Federal Bill C-31 may allow you to register as a status Indian and/or Band Member.

For more information please call:

Native Council of Canada (ABC)
342-2170 Red Deer
Between 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Mon. - Fri.
246-5530 CALGARY

NOTICE OF PUBLIC MEETING

The Board of Trustees of the Northland School Division No. 61 will hold its next Regular meeting on Friday, April 18th commencing at 7:00 p.m., and continuing on Saturday, April 19th, at the Northland School Division Board Room in Peace River, Alberta.

All interested members of the public are invited to attend, and to give an understanding of their Board operations.

A question and answer period will be provided for the public on an as-needed basis.

G. de Kleine
Secretary-Treasurer
Northland School Division No. 61



WHY BE LEFT OUT?



You don't get left out of either on all the great news of the Native community by reading the Windspeaker newspaper every week. And that's not all to worry. The Windspeaker also includes articles, letters, notices of conferences, meetings, stories, photos and cartoons. Don't miss it single issue.

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Indigenous syllabics text arranged in columns, likely a translation or transcription of the article content.

A NEW DAWN IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNICATIONS

Appendix X. Windspeaker Vol. 4, No. 5, April 11 1986, pg. 5. Note indigenous syllabics in article.



Appendix Y. Cover of Spring/Summer 2019 issue of *YMM: Your McMurray Magazine* featuring Frances K. Jean.

Appendix Z



Appendix Z. Taken from Daniel Tencer article “Syn crude iPhone App Teaches Kids to Stop Worrying and Love the Oil Sands.”