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THE MEDIATOR IS THE MESSAGE

ANNA DAWE, CANA-DAWE, AND BAD LANDS AS A STATE OF MIND

BRUCE A. BUTTERFIELD

As Hodgins's novel [The Invention of the World] eventually tells us, when you begin to disbelieve in external authority "you can begin to believe in yourself."

—Frank Davey

"Some.(Canadian.) Postmodern. Texts."

And perhaps there is one reason why a comic writer should of all others be the least excused from deviating from nature, since it may not be always so easy for a serious poet to meet with the great and admirable; but life everywhere furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous.

—Henry Fielding

quoted on the title page of Hemingway's
*The Torrents of Spring*¹

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Badlands (1975), the fourth of Robert Kroetsch's novels set in Alberta, both extends the historical period that these novels cover and, in its detailed evocations of the Badlands of the Red Deer River, makes perhaps the most geographically specific use of the Alberta landscape. With each of the Alberta novels, Kroetsch moves further forward as well as backward in time: *The Words of My Roaring* (1966) takes place during the Great Depression; *Studhorse Man* (1968) takes place just after World War II and harks back to the 1920s; *Gone Indian* (1973) takes place in the 1960s and harks back to the prairies before white settlement.² *Badlands*, then, relates the world of 1972 not only to the immediate 1916-to-1972 period but to the far more remote past of the dinosaur, 70 to 120 million years ago.

Kroetsch widens the chronology here not from an interest in traditional history, "the given definition of history, which was betraying us on those prairies," (the same history that omits most of what has occurred on the earth by calling it "prehistoric"), but from an interest in place and the possibility of looking at the past as a kind of archaeology.³ Kroetsch's pushing the boundaries of history

back before white settlement, and even before aboriginal life, not only widens the field in or upon which the archaeologist—or archaeologically inclined writer—can find traces and fragments of the past, but emphasizes the importance of the land as a repository and as a constant, which is altered only superficially by the inscriptions of those who at various times inhabit it or wield power over it.

By means of such traces and fragments, the land yields up the “momentary insights” and multiple voices that Linda Hutcheon says Kroetsch, the postmodernist, prefers to the unreliable universals of traditional history or the agreed-upon metanarratives of national mythologies.⁴ And hereby, Kroetsch’s postmodern novels could be said to validate regional identity: the region, like the individual human being, takes its identity from a multiplicity of local, individual fragments unearthed in its various strata and from a multiplicity of voices, often even contradictory ones, impossible to gather into any tidy synthesis. Despite such “momentary insights,” regional identity or naming is never complete or fixed; new fragments continue to be unearthed and integrated into the on-going picture of the region. When Kroetsch asks the question, “How do you write in a new country?”—that is, how do you write when the Eurocentric literature of your country is “the literature of a people who have not lived on prairies”?—he not only calls attention to a problem prairie writers face (“we had, and still have, difficulty finding names for the elements and characteristics of this landscape”) but sounds a clear challenge to Canadian writers in other regions as well, where the impulse toward such reimagining of regional identity may not be as strong.⁵

Badlands, like Kroetsch’s earlier novels, embeds within its ostensibly main story a second, more personal story that the narrator—Anna Dawe—is somehow impelled to reveal, although her embedded story is fragmentary and discontinuous, and is sometimes revealed only in her omissions—the meaningful silences that tell as much or more than words do. The

novel’s main story is that of a three-month expedition, in the summer of 1916, into the dinosaur beds of the Red Deer River in Alberta—the first of many such expeditions undertaken by the narrator’s father, William Dawe. As told by Anna Dawe fifty-six years later, the expedition story is a comic, mock-heroic one, for which Anna draws upon two basic sources: the books of field notes that her father has sent home and that she has read over and over again, and the many classic accounts she has obviously read of heroic male adventures. Anna—on the surface of things—both criticizes the limited information and lack of emotion in the field notes and uses traditional adventure stories to parody and thereby further undercut the validity of her father’s expedition, and indeed of his entire career.

Among the many works Anna parodies is Homer’s *Odyssey*, for hers is indeed the story of an adventurer’s long journey home to his wife and family after many years of struggle with a tenacious enemy—the earth, reluctant to yield up its archaeological treasure. Anna also characterizes Dawe as a crazed and deformed Ahab figure, as monomaniacal in his search for white dinosaur bones as was Ahab in his search for the great white whale. Web, Dawe’s comically inept second-in-command, whose penchant for tall tales would alone suggest the works of Mark Twain, is a parodic version of Huck Finn who similarly abandons home, father, and history and then makes his way downriver in Dawe’s poorly built, often unmanageable raft. As the expedition continues in Anna’s telling, it also becomes a parodic version of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as the descent into older and older strata of the Alberta Badlands becomes increasingly ominous. Through these and many other parodies, the well-read Anna paradoxically draws attention to Dawe’s adventure and away from the more important story she has to tell.

Both framing this story and occasionally interrupting it are passages of Anna’s comments, apparently spoken directly to her implied reader. The important subtext embedded within the expedition account and within

these commentaries is the story of Anna Dawe herself. While constructing her version of the expedition story, she is on the road in her Mercedes, retracing most of the route of Dawe's journey—with several notable differences. She reverses the route, so as to go up-river instead of down; she seeks out and is joined by Anna Yellowbird, the Native woman who fifty-six years earlier first followed and then accompanied Dawe's expedition; and she and Anna Yellowbird finally decide to go the men one better by tracing the river all the way back to its source in the mountain lakes. Both in the comments she makes on the expedition story as she reconstructs it and in the details she reveals from her own life, Anna suggests her more important, underlying purpose—that is, to reinvent her parents (a William Dawe whose memory she can live with, and a real mother in the form of Anna Yellowbird) and, having done so, to move on at last, even at the comparatively late age of forty-five, into her own mature life.

MEDIATOR BETWEEN TWO GENERATIONS AND TWO CANADAS

For Anna Dawe, the relief that comes from revealing an unhappy past, along with the satisfaction of creating a complex parody of her father's expedition story, leads her to accept, if only implicitly, a more sympathetic view of her father than she has had, and a less idealized, but very welcome, view of Anna Yellowbird. That she actually acknowledges neither of these changes comes as little surprise. Anna Dawe is, as Robert Lecker points out, something of the western trickster-figure herself, revelling in story perhaps not as Lecker suggests, "*to no end*,"⁶ but instead to make a somewhat unlikely case for herself as innocent victim, by casting her father as a loveless and unloving adventurer whose willful neglect of his only child explains why she is now a forty-five year-old virgin—solitary, unloved, and very likely alcoholic. Thus presumably victimized by her father, Anna begins the novel by casting herself even further as the victim,

forced by default to tell a story that she implies she should not have to tell.

Midway through the soliloquy that begins the text of the novel, Anna complains that she doesn't know why it was left to her "*to mediate the story*." She makes the specious-sounding argument that "*women are not supposed to have stories*" but are expected instead "*to sit at home, Penelopes to their [men's] wars and their sex*"—as her mother had, and as she has been doing for most of her forty-five years.⁷ The trick here, as we later discover, is that she has long been aware both of the reason she must go to the Alberta Badlands (to find Anna Yellowbird, whom her father has identified as her spiritual mother), and of the need to tell her own story, even though it is embedded in his (to assuage the pain of feeling abandoned and unloved). What is more, she has been preparing herself for years, presumably by reading the cartons full of books she has ordered, for just this sort of erudite, highly allusive storytelling.

This early in the novel, the reader may quite reasonably assume that the untold story to which she refers is either her father's entire life history or at the very least the tale of his 1916 dinosaur-bone-hunting expedition down the Red Deer River in the Alberta Badlands. Indeed, Anna's first soliloquy is preceded by a chronology that follows William Dawe from 1916 (the year of his Badlands expedition) through 1972 (the year of Anna's return journey fifty-six years later). Anna does, of course, tell a version of these stories, even as she both conceals and reveals the story much more important to her—that of her own life—embedded in the parodic tale of her father's villainy and misadventure, and serving, in turn, as an apologia for the appallingly limited and sterile life that she, a woman of considerable education and material privilege, has led for most of her forty-five years.

Anna's apparent reluctance as a storyteller, the notion that it is somehow inappropriate for a woman to tell stories, and her suggestion that telling this story is in some way foolish ("*to set straight the record—fifty-six years*

after the event—is part of my folly” [p. 45])—all belie the fact that this is a story she very much needs and wants to tell. What is more, her use of the verb “mediate” suggests several other ways in which she has already envisioned her role as storyteller. First, she does see this story as somehow already extant and in need only of an “intermediary” who will convey it to the reader. Surely this story has been building in her mind for many years. On the other hand, she is enough of a postmodernist to know that any telling of the story is but one “manipulation” of the available fragmentary evidence, and that other mediators—perhaps even she under other circumstances—might well shape it differently. Her extensive parodying of well-known male heroic-adventure stories tells us that she relishes discrediting the traditional forms in which Dawe’s story might be told; because she reinvents the participants in this story even as she gives us evidence that contradicts or undercuts those inventions, she teases us with glimpses of other readings and hints at the nature of her bias. Finally, by mediating, she also means that she “intercedes” in the story from a desire to reconcile the parties involved in it. She looks toward two probable reconciliations—the one parental, with the father whom she has reason to think did love her and with her spiritual mother, Anna Yellowbird, and the other with the two Canadas represented by Dawe and Yellowbird, Old Ontario and the even older Native culture.

If Anna encourages the reader to draw wrong conclusions about the nature of the story she will tell and her willingness to tell it, then the title of Kroetsch’s novel—at first glance quite a geographically specific one—also intentionally misleads the reader into assuming that the Alberta Badlands are the only bad lands under consideration. Of course the Alberta Badlands are obviously “bad” because of their natural limitations to travel, habitation, and plant life, but, as the Palliser expeditioners saw them, bad also because of what they saw as unreliable and potentially hostile Indians—Blackfoot, Piegan, and Blood—who lived, and still live, there. Indeed,

after Palliser’s report of 1859, the entire Palliser Triangle was considered bad land—inasmuch as it was called unfit for agriculture and thus, in Palliser’s view, unfit for human habitation.⁸ What is more, by extension, the prairies generally, the land that Kroetsch calls “the West,” might be considered “bad land,” more difficult to live on, more resistant to the shaping hand of the settler than other parts of Canada, as well as inadequately named or understood by other Canadians, especially those of Establishment Ontario, unfamiliar with the prairies.

By still further extension, the novel might suggest that Canada itself is, in large part, bad land. After all, explorers and settlers often saw Canada as bad territory because of such well-known limitations as its rocky coastal regions and Canadian Shield, its vast but seemingly useless frozen north, and its often inhospitable soil and climate. But Canada might have been called bad figuratively as well (especially from Kroetsch’s point of view in the early 1970s) because much of it remained unnamed in its own right, still suffering the way a colony invariably does from the namings laid down by the mother country, or in Canada’s case countries, and from its failure to incorporate “the Indian past into Canadian consciousness, not as an alien graft, but as ur-Canadian, as the quintessence of Canadianness.”⁹ In any renaming of the land, any reinterpretation of the traces and fragments in the archaeology of history, the Indian past must obviously figure significantly, much more so than it has in traditional Eurocentric histories of Canada in which history essentially begins with white exploration and settlement. Much as Anna Yellowbird comes to play a parental role in the life of Anna Dawe, the Indian past must become, in effect, part of the genetic makeup of a newly imagined Canada.¹⁰

If we read Anna Dawe as Cana-Dawe, the only reading of her name that doesn’t limit it to bird imagery, the novel suggests that the process of coming-of-age is quite similar for both Anna and her country. First, it involves

the retracing of history, or his-story (in this case, the colonizer's), in order to recover the untold stories or fragments thereof, which—for whatever reason—have been previously silent. Then, the process continues with the telling of those stories, so that the significant people, places, and experiences are renamed in their own terms—including such local western forms as the tall tale and the vernacular speech of western people. Among those renamings, for Anna as for Canada, must be that of the Indian, who was misnamed from the start by explorers on their way to the East Indies, and whose history must take its natural part in individual people's lives and in the whole country's history.

REINVENTING AND REVEALING THE DAWE FAMILY

What follows here is some of the useful information about the Dawe family that Anna scatters, as if inadvertently, through both her narrative and her soliloquies. It is from these fragmentary artifacts, rather than in her inventive, wildly parodic expedition story, that Anna hints at a very cold, unloving mother and reinvents a father who was not only capable of loving—if not good at demonstrating that love—but whom she loved more than she is yet able to admit. Following that information is a brief tracing of Anna's reinvention of Anna Yellowbird as the spiritual mother who helps to free her for the more mature life to come.

1. In 1916, William Dawe was thirty-five years old and a virgin when, shortly before leaving for the Alberta Badlands, he married Elisabeth Kilbourne, a wealthy woman ten years younger and not a virgin.¹¹ She had previously consummated an affair with a young soldier with whom she was in love, and who went off to war, as she assumed, to be killed (p. 191). If thirty-five in 1916, Dawe was presumably born about 1881, perhaps in Ontario. About Dawe's parentage and other background Anna offers no information, and we might wonder why an only child, who lived for many

years first with her mother, and then with her father, seems to know so little about him—or is unwilling to reveal what she knows. Might such information make us more sympathetic with Dawe than Anna would want us to be, or perhaps cause us to pity him, as she would not want us to do?

2. Dawe is short of stature and hunch-backed, having suffered at some earlier date from a condition called kyphosis, which Anna says, rather caustically, "only left you humped and deformed but harder than a snake to kill" (p. 174). About what deprivations or humiliations he might have suffered in childhood or youth as a result of his illness and deformity, Anna is again silent. Nevertheless, at the time of his marriage, he was described, perhaps by his future wife, as a "strange and intense and almost attractive man" (p. 191). He was trained as a paleontologist—or perhaps geologist or archaeologist—doubtless at some university, perhaps also in Ontario. Despite his handicap, he must have been remarkably well-trained, considering the range and magnitude of his future successes in the field.

3. All evidence suggests that his wife had little use for him or for sex. Anna reveals that Elisabeth had not enjoyed her sexual encounter with the departing soldier, whom she presumably loved, and that she married Dawe, in Anna's words, because she needed a husband, "but she did not need to have him around" (p. 191). Her need for a husband was largely a social one—"it was the fashion and rage to marry a man who was going away to die"—and she was the only woman in her circle who had not succeeded in marrying one of the young soldiers going off to die in Europe (p. 191). A seemingly controlling woman, she thus engineered both her own unhappy loss of innocence with the departing soldier, and then, "stiffly, with deliberation rather than abandon, she engineered his [Dawe's]" as well—after which Dawe departed, leaving "behind him his married widow" (pp. 191-92). The perhaps seriously repressed Dawe, his loss of innocence "engineered" by an unloving wife, can hardly have been expected to learn the

ways of love up to this point in his life. Indeed, who might have loved him or taught him to love?

4. During their some twenty-six years of marriage, once each autumn—presumably upon his return from a summer in the field—Elisabeth would “allow” Dawe into her bed, feeling, as Anna puts it, “*for an evening’s relief from her boredom, perhaps even for two nights, that she had been mistaken in her memory of the man,*” but then that “*her boredom, again, would seem preferable to the man she had married out of boredom*” (p. 3). Presumably the only break in this pattern—from their marriage in 1916 until Elisabeth’s death in 1942 or 1943—occurred in October 1926, when Dawe stayed an unprecedented third night. We are left to assume that Anna’s birth nine months later was the direct result of this third night’s stay and thus might conclude that Anna’s very existence came about because Dawe was allowed to break the established conjugal pattern and not because of any special desire on the part of the perpetually bored Elisabeth for a child.

5. The Geological Survey people, for whom Dawe either worked or had applied to for work, told him that although he would be allowed to accompany an expedition, he would never lead one “(because of failing health, it was duly noted in the Summary Report of the Geological Survey)” —as Anna so matter-of-factly recalls it (p. 223). Thus, presumably because of his deformity, Dawe was prevented from taking the kind of active and well-funded professional role that later events proved he was perfectly able to handle. His consolation for this considerable setback came from his wife’s “solicitous” family, who suggested that he could live in her Ottawa apartment and Georgian Bay summer home—presumably with no need to work at all. This solicitousness might well have been read as condescension by a man already cruelly condescended to by the Geological Survey and eager to get on with his work in order to prove his detractors wrong.

6. Despite these discouragements, Dawe managed to create a highly successful career,

for two seemingly admirable reasons: his own willingness to take the risk, “against the advice of his contemptuous colleagues, [and] his silent wife” (p. 174); the courage or folly of his taking to the field a whole generation late, after such greats among bone-finders as Sternberg and Brown had already made their successes—with large, well-trained, expensively outfitted crews; and one less admirable reason—the money his wife paid him to stay away. Although Anna elsewhere implies that her father actually enjoyed fame and fortune, in truth he had little of either: “*It is true that success never made him wealthy. But my mother’s sense of guilt, or pride, or perhaps her need to keep him in the field, provided him with the means to live beyond his income. And beyond us as well*” (p. 138). Here we see a bit more clearly how Anna has previously, and with deliberate calculation, exaggerated her father’s fame and fortune and concealed the truly awful motives behind the payoffs her mother used to keep Dawe out of the way. We see, too, in the phrase “*and beyond us as well,*” the great burden of sorrow that Anna carries as a result of this separation from a father who it seems did love her, and of her proximity to a mother who seemingly did not.

7. During the course of his first expedition, Dawe—though severely tested by his untrained crew and poorly equipped, comically unseaworthy raft (and though regularly underrated, slandered or made fun of by his daughter in her telling of the tale)—seems nevertheless to have proved a good enough paleontologist to make a surprising success out of potentially dismal failure. The bones that Dawe ships out of the Alberta Badlands (the finding of which Anna’s story churlishly attributes to Web), along with the bones from his later expeditions, provide him decades of fruitful museum work in the years after his wife dies and he ceases going into the field. Hired by the museums that have bought his finds, and spending years reconstructing the *Daweosaurus* skeleton, Dawe continues to lead a professionally productive life well into his seventies. Apparently unimpressed by this

achievement, or the fact that upon Elisabeth's death Dawe ceased making field trips in order to live near his daughter, Anna seems only to resent the fact that his museum work continued to keep him away from home and away from the fatherly role she would have liked him to play. She also clearly resents the occasion when, upon arriving unexpectedly for a visit, he caught her drinking—probably to excess—and criticized her “*like a child*” (p. 233). Here, ambiguously enough, the Anna who presumably wants her father to be at home cannot tolerate the behavior that any concerned father might be liable to when seeing his child descend into alcoholism.

8. On his first expedition, Dawe began the habit of keeping books of field notes and sending them home, where Anna and her mother presumably read and reread them:

We read in those sun-faded and water-wrinkled books, read not only the words but the squashed mosquitoes, the spiders' legs, the stains of thick black coffee, even the blood that smeared the already barely decipherable words. And the message was always so clear that my mother could read, finally, without unpuzzling the blurred letters or the hasty, intense scrawl. She could read her own boredom and possibly her loneliness, if not his outrageous joy. (p. 2)

If, in this clearly limited way, Dawe was sincerely attempting to communicate with his family (as Anna herself speculates [p. 34]), expressing love or concern in the only way he knew how, or perhaps to save for posterity some meager outline of his experiences, he need not have bothered for Elisabeth's sake. The only emotions she read between the lines were not Dawe's but her own boredom. When Anna sets out in 1972 to find Anna Yellowbird, however, she has had the benefit of many more years of readings and no doubt a considerably better view of the person her father was than she is prepared to admit. But of course, she has learned at her mother's knee one of the cardinal truths of postmodern literature:

that there is no story except what the reader sees, and that there are as many stories as there are tellers and readers. Thus, she is well prepared to devise the version of Dawe's expedition story that will fill her need both to ridicule Dawe and to create an apologia for her own life.

9. In October 1942, when Anna was fifteen and his dying wife fifty-one, Dawe returned to Georgian Bay, as Anna later reveals to Anna Yellowbird, “to visit not his dying wife but his daughter”—a hopeful sign, one might think (p. 1). Dawe presumably “*showed up . . . pretending he had only stepped out to buy a quart of milk*” (p. 262)—perhaps feeling close to his daughter despite their long years of separation—and made the mistake of lying with Anna in her bed. In this clearly unsuitable setting, he nonetheless gives her information that he obviously considers very important for Anna's assessment of him as a father: that her mother had been “*always dying*”—an unmistakable suggestion that it is Elisabeth, not he, who constantly sought death and who killed any possibility of health in their marriage; and he tells Anna that she was named for another Anna, Anna Yellowbird, who was just the same age—fifteen—when she joined the Dawe expedition (p. 262). From this information, of course, Anna gets the hint that she waits another thirty years to act upon—namely that whatever she is as a person was somehow conceived or born on that fateful first expedition, that Anna Yellowbird plays some critical part in this identity of hers, and thus, that in order to find herself, she will need to find Anna Yellowbird.

However, as these important but doubtless confusing revelations continue, Dawe, weeping, holds his daughter in his arms, and as Anna says, “*kissed my neck, my shoulders, my young breasts*” (p. 262). Of course, the effect on Anna of this excessive intimacy is more traumatic than tender, more sexually disturbing than filial. Indeed, from this encounter may well follow the sexual repression that the forty-five-year-old Anna confesses to Anna Yellowbird as her greatest shame.

From Dawe's point of view, however, the reader might also see in this scene a replaying of what was undoubtedly the only truly important sexual encounter of Dawe's life, his two-week idyll with Anna Yellowbird, who, albeit briefly, gave Dawe a glimpse of what a fulfilling sex life might actually be. When Dawe asks his daughter to touch his hunchback, he is surely recalling that the other Anna was the first to touch it with sympathy and thereby helped Dawe speak the "simple sentence" that "he had never spoken . . . in his whole life before": "I have a hunchback" (p. 190). Although this scene in his daughter's bed is obviously too close to outright sexual abuse of daughter by father to allow of any convincing justification, it echoes one of the novel's epigraphs, "Coyote and the Shadow People," which Kroetsch quotes from "*Nex Percé Texts*":

But suddenly a joyous impulsion seized him; the joy of having his wife again overwhelmed him. He jumped to his feet and rushed over to embrace her. His wife cried out, "Stop! Stop! Coyote! Do not touch me. Stop!" Her warning had no effect. Coyote rushed over to his wife and just as he touched her body she vanished. She disappeared—returned to the shadowland. (p. iv)

Throughout their marriage, *noli me tangere* has indeed been Elisabeth's message to Dawe from the shadowland of her "winterized" house on Georgian Bay; if Dawe had wanted Anna to have some more positive view of adult sexual relations, he could be sure that she would never develop such a view under the influence of the woman, his wife in name but not reality, who lay dying—always dying—in the same house.

What is more, this Coyote story also echoes the sexual awakening that Anna Yellowbird effects for Dawe during his convalescence from a serious fall—before she returns to the shadowland from which she originally emerged to join the expedition. Perhaps confusing the fifteen-year-old Anna Dawe with

his tender memory of the fifteen-year-old Anna Yellowbird, Dawe rushes to embrace the only true "wife" he has known—Anna Yellowbird, whom he now sees in the form of Anna Dawe—and his daughter, too, disappears into a shadowland, spending her next thirty years as a sexually frustrated, well-read, probably alcoholic, and clearly unhappy virgin.

10. The only book of Dawe's field notes that Anna seems actually to have taken with her on the trip up the Red Deer River, and then up into the lakes that form the source of that river, is the very last of them—the volume in which Dawe had written on the last page, "I have come to the end of words" (p. 269). It is this line that Anna calls "*the only poem he ever wrote, a love poem, to me, his only daughter*" (pp. 269-70)—a confusing reference, perhaps, until one recalls Dawe's words about sacrifice, spoken just before his apparent suicide by drowning in the waters of Georgian Bay. Seemingly referring to the sacrifices he made in order to further his career, those sacrifices that Anna most resents—"Something we have to do . . . for the advancement . . . the understanding"—Dawe may actually refer to the sacrifice he is about to make of his own life so that Anna, relieved of his presence, can advance in her own understanding of him and of herself and get on with her own life (p. 233).

Much earlier in the novel, Anna has speculated that although Dawe once wrote "*I despise words*," he actually enjoyed writing even this sentence, which she says "freed him in some way he did not fully comprehend"—as if, having gone on record as despising words, he was then not responsible for whatever limitations of expression his field notes suffered from (p. 34). Anna, however, during many years of reading and re-reading these notes, seems to have learned to read between the lines and thus has come to comprehend more fully than Dawe himself might have his "generosity," "the ambitions that drove him, the anxieties that obsessed his barren nights, the immaterial thoughts that shaped themselves against his headlong hurry" (p. 34). She knows the William Dawe who, when taunted by her

about not burying the boy Tune, killed in a mistimed dynamite explosion, can still after many years choke up and be reduced to "his *damned, sudden, gentleness*" (p. 232).

When she throws his last volume of field notes into the lake, as Anna Yellowbird simultaneously tosses in Michael Sinnott's photographs, she is hardly throwing away her father—after all, how could she?—or even ridding herself of his memory, but instead consigning to some as yet unformed stratum at the bottom of the lake her old image of her father, in favor of the newly imagined, more human, more genuinely loving man whom she now can begin to accept. In so doing, she also reminds us that Dawe, whose body was never found in the waters of Georgian Bay, consigned himself to a similarly watery grave. Her carrying the field notes to the Red Deer's source and depositing them there might even be said to constitute a fitting requiem for her father.

THE REIMAGINING OF ANNA YELLOWBIRD

In the imagination of the fifteen-year-old Anna Dawe, the fifteen-year-old Anna Yellowbird of the year 1916 was no doubt easily construed as yet another innocent victim—like Anna Dawe herself—of the villainy with which she credited William Dawe. Although an idealized figure rather like the Sacajawea of legend emerges from many of Anna Dawe's descriptions of Anna Yellowbird during the Dawe expedition days, that ideal is often counterbalanced with hints of another, earthier Anna Yellowbird: in the water with Grizzly and Web, she is described as childlike, "a child playing in the water," small and thin (p. 240); yet, "hers was a quality that Dawe mistook for innocence, the indifference and concern of a child and woman of fifteen" (p. 188). When the men first come upon her, Anna Yellowbird is a very young widow whose husband has gone to the World War and been killed. Lying in a "shallow depression beside the fresh mound" of her husband's grave, she is described as having "moccasined feet somehow too small

for standing or walking," but she is nonetheless eager to go with them to "the place of the dead" in order to find the soul of her husband (pp. 6, 7, 8). Child-woman, both naive and aware—Anna Yellowbird seems construed on the one hand as a kind of noble savage and on the other as a woman very much of the world.

Anna's tipi of bones also puts her in a fable-like setting, a Badlands version of the magical forest retreat in which the medieval maiden awaits her lover. When Dawe first comes upon it in a clump of cottonwoods, he "began to walk in a circle around the heaped and apparently singing bones, vaguely aware as he did so that the fragments were arranged in some sort of pattern" (p. 144); yet, upon entering the tipi, he is struck not by anything magical, or by the various objects that have been taken from his boat, or even by the variety of bones piled about, but instead by "the sheer domesticity of the scene . . . the fire in the middle of the small room, the pot by the fire, the knife and fork by the pot" (p. 145). Here, the enigmatic Anna must be both mythical and mundane—Anna Dawe's fairy-godmother-like deliverer, yet also the woman whose domestic example might have made Dawe feel guilty about abandoning his family or perhaps cause him to express, if only to himself, some real desire to be at home with his wife and daughter.

In a similar passage somewhat later, Anna Yellowbird seems equally enigmatic: as Dawe's lover, she is an "erotic delight," who, moving under the branches of a cottonwood tree, startles a goldfinch—thus presenting the portrait-image of a Renaissance noblewoman, painted with the emblem that bespeaks both her name (Yellowbird) and her nature (sensitive but unmistakably sensual) (pp. 190-91). Yet in the same scene, a self-assured, psychologically savvy Anna Yellowbird can stand up to Dawe, who is seeking pity for his being a cripple, and tell him "You like it. . . . It makes you special" (p. 189).

The Anna Yellowbird whom Anna Dawe encounters in the bar of the Queen's Hotel in Gleichen, Alberta, in 1972, is not at all the

pitiful widow who couldn't be alone, or who worried about Tune's fate, or who ministered humbly to the men's needs. She is a tough old Blackfoot woman who is both more crude and more formidable than Anna Dawe had expected. When first encountered, Anna Yellowbird is sitting at a "beer-wet table" with two men, "getting drunk on bottled beer," Labatt's Blue being her brand of choice (p. 25). "She was much larger than I had expected," Anna says, and she is clearly a woman who knows her own mind. When Anna Yellowbird remarks, about Dawe's activities, "He did what he did," she reveals a surprisingly objective view of William Dawe's actions. When Anna Dawe attempts to reinterpret this remark to suit her preferred bias against Dawe—"He did what he wanted" and "He did as he pleased"—Anna Yellowbird responds, "Then he is not the man I knew" and "I did not know that man" (p. 26), clearly denying the willfulness that Anna Dawe chooses to attribute to her portrait of William Dawe, the neglectful, absent father.

Anna Dawe seems amazed that Anna Yellowbird "even after fifty-six years . . . would defend the man—her recollection of the man—who in her days of grief found her: and ignored her, and used her grief, and then let her vanish again" (p. 26). Yet Anna Yellowbird's recollected feelings are more likely to be reliable here than are Anna Dawe's assumptions about the victimization of Anna Yellowbird at the hands of William Dawe. Of course, Anna Dawe has yet to discover a great deal about Anna Yellowbird—that she not only followed the men of her own volition and for her own purposes, but helped herself to some of their food and belongings, that she seems to have enjoyed discovering the various ways in which they could be sexually satisfied, felt superior to the men rather than used by them, and went off willingly at the end of the journey with Michael Sinnott, with whom she had arranged the fair trade of his expedition photographs for some photographs he wished to take of her.¹² In the years that followed, Anna Yellowbird had given birth to four or five sons—she doesn't seem sure which number—

all of whom she somewhat insensitively named "Billy Crowchild." She thus seems to have been little better at the role of sensitive and attentive parent than was William Dawe in his daughter's eyes.

In the end, of course, it is fortunate for Anna Dawe that Anna Yellowbird is the dirty, smelly, beer-sodden, down-to-earth person she is. For it is Anna Yellowbird to whom Anna Dawe is able finally to confess her sexual shame—that she is a dried up, forty-five-year-old virgin—and confess the perhaps greater shame she still feels about the frightening sexual advances her father had made in her bed, some thirty years earlier. Once Anna Yellowbird has released her spiritual daughter from these old mysteries ("He was a great one for the nipples. . . . I let him suck by the hour. If that was what he wanted" [pp. 262-63]), the two women can begin to explore what they have in common—their independence and self-reliance, their love of using the dirty words that Dawe didn't think appropriate for his daughter, their love of liquor and the release it gives them from the constraints of their lives, the pleasure they take in thumbing their noses at the pretentiousness of men—the men's field notes and historical photographs—and even in singing a suggestive song. As traditionally sexist as "Roll Me Over in the Clover" may seem to be, it is not inappropriate, because they have acquired their independence without paying the price of hating men; they now—both—understand men too well to take them any more seriously than need be.

ANNA DAWE AND THE LAND

The newly emerged Anna Dawe leads the way not only toward her own as yet unrealized coming-of-age, but toward that of the West and by extension that of Canada itself. Any land that is poorly understood, inaccurately and inadequately named, by those who live there, is by definition a bad land, whether that be the psychological landscape Anna Dawe has inhabited, lands already perceived as for some reason bad, or those still in bondage to

old definitions. Release from the old, Ontario-fostered external authority, willingness to let loose in the forms of language that people really speak, reinterpretation in the popular idiom of a wider range of historical/archaeological fragments, and perhaps most importantly of all, reconciliation with its long-excluded Native population—these are the steps that Kroetsch suggests both the West and Canada-Dawe generally must take in order to be themselves, to find their identities at last, to come of age.

As much as she may play the trickster or innocent mediator in the reinvention of her father and mother, Anna is nowhere more the objective narrator than in her descriptions of the Alberta landscape and its flora and fauna. Descriptive passages like the following suggest that there was no substitute in Anna Dawe's life for picking herself up, getting out of Ontario, and actually experiencing the landscape of the prairie West for herself; whether described in lyrical or powerful or even fearsome terms, the land is clearly seen, never merely construed from impoverished sources or the eyes of others:

[Web] turned onto and then away from the prairie trail, the dusty and rutted trail that served as and was a road; and then he was walking in the mauve blooms of bergamot, the radiant yellow of buffalo beans; he was loping through patches of wolf willow that rustled against his wet and dusty boots, the odour of sage rich and curative in his living nostrils. (pp. 54-55)

The large drops hit hard on the deck, spat, hit dully on the tent's roof. The forked lightning, far in the west, webbed and patterned the sky, mapped the blue sky black and white; and then, in final counterpoint, struck almost on top of them, broke down onto the island, near the boat, and even while the tent was an appalling white bloated creature on the black water, on the black boat, thunder crashed. . . . (p. 103)

The pronghorn was partly devoured. Coyotes had caught the scent, had come up out of the coulees. Or bobcats. Or a wolf, surviving alone in the Badlands, had come to eat. The carcass was ripped open, scattered red on the edge of the blackened prairie where the fire had stopped. (p. 150)

In the Alberta Badlands, as in bad lands everywhere, one finds both beauty and ugliness, and a great deal of life in between. The archaeologically alert viewer who can truly see any land—and all the traces and fragments that can be found and interpreted there—is in turn empowered by that land, however bad it may once have seemed.

NOTES

1. Frank Davey, "Some. (Canadian.) Postmodern. Texts.," in *Reading Canadian Reading* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988), p. 117; Ernest Hemingway, *The Torrents of Spring* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926; Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), title page.

2. Jurgen Schafer, "A Farewell to Europe: Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* and Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*," in *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature*, ed. Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1988), p. 85.

3. Robert Kroetsch, "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues," in *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 2, 4.

4. Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 165.

5. Kroetsch, "Moment of Discovery" (note 4 above), p. 5.

6. Robert Lecker, *Robert Kroetsch* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), pp. 94-95. Lecker's italics.

7. Robert Kroetsch, *Badlands* (Don Mills, Ontario: PaperJacks, 1975), p. 3; hereafter cited in parentheses in the text. Kroetsch's italics in quotes.

8. In describing the activities of the Palliser Expedition in September 1857, Irene M. Spry says that "the grizzly [sunning himself . . . on the opposite side of the river] was calm, but the men from Red River [Colony] were not. They were getting more and more excited and worried as the expedition went deeper into Blackfoot country.

When they learned that Palliser hoped to push on still farther, up the South Saskatchewan to where the Red Deer joined it, they were horrified. They had not forgotten that thirty-odd years earlier the Hudson's Bay Company had abandoned its post at the Forks of the Red Deer and South Saskatchewan as being too dangerous and too costly; this had given that part of the country a bad reputation." *The Palliser Expedition: An Account of John Palliser's British North American Expedition 1857-1860* (Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1963), pp. 68-69.

9. Schafer, "Farewell" (note 2 above), p. 87.

10. Although the currently important question of cultural appropriation clearly arises here, Kroetsch was probably not thinking of uses of the Native past in quite these terms when writing in the early 1970s.

11. A possible source for the name Kilbourne, one seemingly consistent with Elisabeth Dawe's role as kill-joy, is the work by William Kilbourn written on the occasion of Canada's centennial. *The Making of a Nation: A Century of Challenge* in The Canadian Illustrated Library series (Toronto:

McClelland and Stewart, 1965, revised 1973) might be called just the sort of Eurocentric, Eastern-Canadian-Establishment-inspired interpretation of Canada that Kroetsch's Alberta novels challenge.

12. Michael Sinnott was the given name of Mack Sennett (1883-1960), the formally uneducated, Canadian-born Irishman who escaped immigrant ghettos of east-coast cities, began making films with the Biograph Company, and organized the Keystone Film Company in 1912. The originator of slapstick film comedies, he was said to be the discoverer of Charlie Chaplin. See Kalton C. Lahue, *Mack Sennett's Keystone: The Man, the Myth, and the Comedies* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1971), p. 43.

Another possible source of inspiration for Kroetsch's Michael Sinnott appears in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, "Epilogue: The Photographer": "He drove around the country in a high square car whose top was of flapping black cloth. The pictures he took turned out to be unusual, even frightening. People saw that in his pictures they had aged twenty or thirty years." (New York: New American Library, 1983), p. 205.