

"The Past of My Place": Western Canadian Artists and the Uses of History

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ABSTRACT. Popular artists are playing an important role in reconstructing our perspective of the past of the prairie region. Emphasizing the role of women, the experience of First Nations and the significance of class, these artists are providing westerners with a sense of their cultural past and present that is at odds with the homogenized view of culture with which mass media bombard them. This article examines the contribution of three of these important cultural regionalists — folk singer James Keelaghan, film maker Anne Wheeler, and novelist Rudy Wiebe.

SOMMAIRE. Les artistes populaires jouent un rôle important dans la reconstitution de notre perspective de l'histoire des Prairies. En soulignant le rôle des femmes, l'expérience des Premières nations et l'importance de la notion de classe ces artistes donnent aux habitants de l'Ouest un sentiment de leur passé et de leur présent culturels qui ne correspond pas à la vision homogénéisée de la culture dont les bombardent les médias. Cet article examine la contribution de trois de ces importants régionalistes culturels: le chanteur folk James Keelaghan, la réalisatrice Anne Wheeler et l'écrivain Rudy Wiebe.

More than a decade ago Robert Kroetsch asked the simple question, "How do you write in a new country?" In his view this raised some very significant issues:

Our inherited literature, the literature of our European past and of eastern North America, is emphatically the literature of a people who have *not* lived on the prairies. We had, and still have, difficulty finding names for the elements and characteristics of this landscape. The human response to this landscape is so new and ill-defined and complex that our writers come back, uneasily but compulsively, to landscape writing. Like the homesteaders before us, we are compelled to adjust and invent, to remember and forget. ...

... we both, and at once, record and invent these new places. ... That pattern of contraries, all the possibilities implied in *record* and *invent*, for me finds its focus in the model suggested by the phrase: a local pride.

The phrase is from William Carlos Williams — indeed those three words are the opening of his great poem, *Paterson*, about Paterson, New Jersey: *a local pride*.

The feeling must come from an awareness of the authenticity of our own lives. People who feel invisible try to borrow visibility from those who are visible. To understand others is surely difficult. But to understand ourselves becomes impossible if we do not see images of ourselves in the mirror — be that mirror theatre or literature or historical writing. A local pride does not exclude the rest of the world, or other experiences; rather, it makes them both possible. It creates an organizing centre. Or as Williams put it, more radically: the acquiring of a local pride enables us to create our own culture — "by lifting an environment to expression."

How do we lift an environment to expression? How do you write in a new country?¹

Kroetsch's assertion that regional art and literature give us expression can be seen as a response to the growing uniformity of popular culture, on this continent and around the world. At the same time, as much journalistic commentary emphasizes, globalization is transforming economic relations between nations. The world shrinks, and its population seems intent on marching to the beat of the same drummer. But if the contemporary world is

inexorably moving us all toward the same point, our various pasts underline some important differences. This article examines how three artists have attempted to use history to give expression to a specific western Canadian existence. The following pages will argue that the three reflect the kind of vibrant regional culture which Kroetsch feels is so critical to our lives. Thus their work can be interpreted as a vital antidote to the homogenizing images of contemporary culture, which threaten to rob us of any real sense of ourselves as a distinct society.

The artists discussed here are James Keelaghan, a folk singer; Anne Wheeler, a film maker; and Rudy Wiebe, a novelist as well as an academic. All three have turned to the past for a context in which to situate their work, and have considerable experience in handling historical material. Wiebe, a professor at the University of Alberta, has published a good deal of history, including a compilation of primary sources on the 1885 Rebellion.² Wheeler helped to research and write *A Harvest Yet To Reap*,³ a resource book on women's history. Keelaghan only became a professional musician after completing an undergraduate degree in history. In addition to their familiarity with history, the three have turned to material which traditional popular history has dealt with in a less than satisfying manner: topics such as the role of women, the experience of Native peoples and the significance of class. Each gives the past of western Canada a specificity and an authenticity that few others — even professional historians — have been able to achieve.

What are we to make of such work? As its subject matter indicates, this is not the blockbuster popular history of Pierre Berton and Peter Newman, nor is it the kind of thing that garners much attention in refereed journals. Academic historians have yet to take fictionalized history very seriously, whether presented in novels, song or on the silver screen.⁴ Whatever its status, however, there can be no question that to read Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear*, to watch Wheeler's "Bye Bye Blues," or to listen to Keelaghan sing involves confronting a vivid and living history. This is not the sanitized past presented in television period dramas, series such as "Anne of Green Gables," a glowing place where innocence seems to have been sweeter and actions purer. This is the past where Big Bear tells those in a Regina court room:

This land belonged to me. When I had it I never needed your flour and pork. Sometimes I was stiff with Indian agents who looked at me as if I was a child and knew less than a child. Before many of you were born I ran buffalo over this place where you have put this building, and white men ate the meat I gave them. I gave my hand as a brother; I was free, and the smallest Person in my band was as free as I because the Master of Life had given us our place on the earth and that was enough for us. But you have taken our inheritance, and our strength. The land is torn up, black with fires, and empty. *You have done this.* And there is nothing left now but that you must help us.⁵

The work of these three artists is best viewed as a celebration of the local and the unique in the face of the dehumanizing and homogenizing trends of an invasive global culture. This is a culture that is necessarily history-less:

"A global culture is here and now and everywhere, and for its purposes the past only serves to offer some decontextualized example or element for its cosmopolitan patchwork."⁶ Viewed in this way, as a response or counterpoint to the depressing hegemony of global culture, the work of Keelaghan et al. is a western Canadian example of a broader trend, the insistence on a specific culture. But within the Canadian context, it needs to be understood regionally; as Frye has noted — the only perspective from which to comprehend the creative imagination.⁷

Regionalism, of course, is not a simple word — it is different things to different people, differences which reflect regional identities. The linguistic and cultural regionalism of the Quebec is no more and no less authentic than the economic and geographical regionalism of the West. Such regionalisms are asymmetrical: as one scholar has pointed out, these are "one-sided polarities ... a self-designated west but no corresponding east, and a self-conscious French Canada but no parallel English Canada."⁸ And from a regional perspective, the work of Wiebe, Keelaghan and Wheeler is evidence of a mature cultural identity in western Canada. Such a claim can be substantiated by examining this work in some detail — Wiebe's novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Wheeler's film, "Bye Bye Blues," and the songs of James Keelaghan.

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Rudy Wiebe has written a number of novels, as well as short stories and other works, with the explicit purpose of confronting the experiences of those who have lived in western Canada. He does so with a relentless passion and a clear sense of mission. He once drew a parallel between his efforts and those of V.S. Naipul:

He, of course, has with the power of his writing destroyed the "embarrassment" about Port of Spain, something I have not yet achieved with, for example, Steinbach, Manitoba. And if you smiled at that statement, you proved what I am trying to explain: in the fictional worlds of Canada, certain societies are still not really acceptable.⁹

Wiebe has a strong sense of himself as a western Canadian and as a result most of his fiction deals with the prairie West. Central themes are the encounter between Native and European, the meaning of ethnic identity, and the significance of the western environment.

More than either Wheeler or Keelaghan, Wiebe is an established figure on the Canadian cultural stage. His first novel appeared in 1962, and in 1973 he won the Governor General's Award for fiction with *The Temptations of Big Bear*. He has received much critical attention, although many regard *The Temptations of Big Bear*, as well as the subsequent (and related) novel, *The Scorched-Wood People*, as his major contribution to Canadian literature. In a brief book on historical fiction, for example, Dennis Duffy argued that *The Temptations of Big Bear* "stand[s] as the culmination of the Canadian historical novel," while George Woodcock has claimed that

Novels such as Rudy Wiebe's *Temptations of Big Bear* ... introduce a new sense of history merging into myth, of theme coming out of a perception of the land, of

geography as a source of art. In the process they break time down into the nonlinear patterns of authentic memory; they also break down actuality and recreate it in terms of the kind of nonliteral rationality that belongs to dreams.¹⁰

Some of Wiebe's more recent work has received a less enthusiastic critical response, although his latest book has garnered much praise. Even *The Globe and Mail*—as will be seen below, not always an admirer of the culture of the West—was positively effusive, describing it as “quite simply, a wonderful, wonderful book. ... *Playing Dead* is a piece of evocative prose that confirms Rudy Wiebe as an outstanding writer ... whose contribution will endure.”¹¹

The Temptations of Big Bear is a long and complex work, one which demands much from a reader.¹² The novel is set in the Canadian West, from 1876 to 1888. Episodes describe the relationship between the Cree band of Big Bear and the Canadian officials who sought Big Bear's assent to the treaty-making process then underway. The climax of the novel comes at Frog Lake in the spring of 1885, when a number of Europeans were killed by Big Bear's band. But that is a very simple analysis of what the novel is “about,” since Wiebe regards the past as a strange and mysterious place; at times, unknowable. And to further complicate the story, it has no central voice: “the novel is composed as a fugue for several narrative voices of different qualities, each of which emphasizes the tension between references to past and present.”¹³ The book invites the reader to confront that complexity rather than offering any one interpretation of the events that it describes.

Wiebe writes about the past with a respectful diffidence that is both honest and unusual. He tells his reader how the evidence is scattered and contradictory; he pauses to point out the many ironies; and the process of reconstruction often ends with an admission of failure, or at least uncertainty. His article about the composition of the novel, as well as another describing a visit to New York to see Big Bear's power bundle, demonstrate the sensitivity that he brought to the historical material at the centre of the work.¹⁴ The quotation earlier in this paper of Big Bear's Regina address serves as a good example of his research and his style. Wiebe's article on the novel describes the difficulties he encountered in trying to find details of Big Bear's defense, in order to compose that passage. As he suggests, these difficulties were instructive:

though I spent a week in Ottawa doing little else, I could find no trace of his defence in either the Archives or the Department of Justice. So there is nothing left but William Cameron's summary of what Big Bear said, and he concludes with Richardson's answer:

“Big Bear,” said Justice Richardson, and his tone was not unkind, “you have been found guilty by an impartial jury. You cannot be excused from responsibility for the misdoings of your band. The sentence of the court is that you be imprisoned in the penitentiary at Stony Mountain for three years.”

That's recorded forty years after the fact; this is Nicholas Flood Davin's report in *The Leader*, October 1, 1885:

"First came Big Bear, who made a long address to the Court, in the course of which he frequently used such language as, "when we owned the country" and he drew the Court's attention to the fact that he being in prison who was to protect his people.

Judge Richardson in sentencing him told him that they never owned the land[,] that it belonged to the Queen, who allowed them to use it, that when she wanted to make other use of it she called them together through her officers, and gave them the choicest portions of the country and that, as to his people, they would be looked after as though nothing had occurred. He was then sentenced to three years in the Penitentiary."

How time smears edges; how it liberalizes, softens our motivation!¹⁵

Wiebe has been particularly concerned to articulate a Native voice, to remind other Canadians of the experiences of those people who have been marginalized by the country's history. He does this extraordinarily well; his prose has in places an Old Testament grandeur which seems appropriate to the topic. When this similarity was drawn to his attention, Wiebe commented that "the Biblical prophets and Big Bear had a great deal in common, the sense of a heritage that has been sold out."¹⁶ To draw upon the culture of Native people has become a controversial issue, but Wiebe emphatically rejects the argument that he is simply another white man appropriating Native culture: "This is my world; I don't have any other country than this. . . . If I grew up in Big Bear's country, he is my ancestor."¹⁷ At the same time, he has been quick to chastise others who have in his view taken liberties with Native peoples. He reacted angrily, for example, to the publication of W.P. Kinsella's *The Miss Hobbema Beauty Pageant* in 1989. Wiebe regarded this collection of stories as so offensive as to justify the people of Hobbema in taking legal action against Kinsella (a course he recommended that they follow), arguing that if Kinsella "uses an actual place and the actual name of a people, he has the responsibility not to abuse them."¹⁸ An indication of the authenticity of Wiebe's own work may be found in the comment by Native writer, Maria Campbell, that she sensed the spirit of Big Bear controlling Wiebe, in the speeches of the Cree leader provided in his novel.¹⁹

History in *The Temptations of Big Bear* is not straightforward nor even all that easy to comprehend. Each of the novel's many voices uses words in a different way, with a different effect. As Big Bear concludes in his speech in that Regina court room,

A word is power, it comes from nothing into meaning and a Person takes his name with him when he dies. I have said my last words. Who will say a word for my people? Give my people help! I have spoken.²⁰

Wiebe leaves the reader profoundly moved, aware of the ignorance reflected in any dismissal of the Prairies as an essentially dull place, "equal parts of Puritanism, Monotony, Farmers, and Depression." Wiebe is committed to raising us out of that ignorance; in an exuberant passage intended to form part of the introductory chapter to *Big Bear*, Wiebe tells how the story emerged from

the vacuum called history, which in Western Canada is no vacuum at all but rather the great ocean of our ignorance as horizonless as the prairies themselves. ... For if one is once willing to understand that he is beyond doubt thoughtlessly treading water on his ancestral past, on the past of his place, and will dare to plunge in, reckless of life and eyes wide open, he finds in that ocean a teeming of wildlife and tamelife and every other kind of life that takes his ordinary breath away...²¹

It is that response, that astonishment, that Wiebe elicits in the novel.

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Anne Wheeler has been active in the performing arts for some twenty years. During the last decade she has established herself as one of the leaders in the independent film industry of western Canada. Wheeler first became involved in films in the early 1970s as a co-owner of Filmwest Associates, a company that aspired "to make western stories, to tell western stories, to the West and to the world."²² Her first film to reach a large public was released in 1975, the docu-drama "Great Grand Mother," made in association with the National Film Board of Canada. A history of the prairie West from the perspective of the European women who settled there at the turn of the century, "Great Grand Mother" heralded themes that she would explore over the next fifteen years: the Prairies, women, and the past. "Bye Bye Blues" is thus the culmination of a number of years' work, both in terms of her growth as a director and her interests as a writer: "it combines her search for her roots, both personal and regional, her feminist convictions and her passion for story-telling."²³

Although acknowledging the help and tutelage of the National Film Board, Wheeler describes herself as a self-taught director. In fact, she tends to perform many of the key tasks — writer, director, producer — for her films, a reflection of her desire to maintain control of the creative process. Her films are her stories (a word she often uses), and Wheeler sees her work as a film maker as an extension of the role of storyteller in society. She is particularly comfortable with stories that are a mixture of fact and fiction, while emphasizing that "my stories don't have closure. ... I'm the type of person that tries to make new kinds of stories and to look at things differently than they may have been looked at before." During her formal education, history had seemed to her the most boring of subjects (she has an undergraduate degree in science). Her interest in the past was kindled as she researched the film "Great Grand Mother":

It had been because I can imagine myself there, and that leap of what it would have been like made it fascinating for me. It started with my own grandmother, discovering that she was one of Nellie McClung's best friends, something that had never been told to me before, and I thought that that was extraordinary ... I had had no models in terms of history; people like Nellie McClung had never been pointed out to me. ...

When you do one [film based in the past], you get more interested and you realize how much you don't know, and you go a little further. The more I learned, the more I didn't know, and the more I wanted to know. Very curious person.²⁴

"Bye Bye Blues" — made in 1988-89, and her fourth feature film — is a loose reconstruction of her mother's wartime experiences. It is something of a sequel, or parallel narrative, to an earlier film of Wheeler's, "A War Story," made in 1981 with the National Film Board of Canada. Both films are part of what Wheeler describes as "a personal odyssey into understanding my parents and my relationship to them."²⁵ "A War Story" is a powerful docu-drama based on her father's diaries, describing his experiences as a prisoner of the Japanese during the war. "Bye Bye Blues" is the other story, her mother's world on the home front in Alberta, a woman forced to forge a new life with two children, with little money and a husband lost to the war. To make ends meet and to survive the tedium, the main character (Daisy Cooper) becomes a pianist/singer in a local dance band. At first a rather clumsy amateur, she gradually turns into a professional musician, helped by an American trombonist drawn to her by more than a desire to provide music instruction. Her husband finally returns, however, and Daisy quits the band.

While the plot of the movie can be summarized in a few lines, in fact it is a rich and subtle work, crafted with a sharp eye for detail and beautifully filmed. To dismiss the movie as a catalogue of clichés, as did the reviewer in *The Globe and Mail*, is to insist on viewing it only at the most banal level.²⁶ His comparison of "Bye Bye Blues" with such superficial fare as Goldie Hawn's "Swing Shift" indicates the intellectual depth that he brought to bear on the movie. Had Jay Scott wanted to engage in a meaningful comparison, the obvious choice would have been John Boorman's "Hope and Glory." As others have pointed out, Scott's review likely guaranteed the commercial failure of Wheeler's movie in Ontario, despite the standing ovation it won when screened at Toronto's Festival of Festivals.²⁷ The one interesting point to emerge from *The Globe and Mail* review is Scott's inability to see the movie as Canadian or historical; although he contemptuously acknowledges the emotional power of "Bye Bye Blues" ("Hello tear ducts, bye bye brains"), he can only situate the film within the American cultural milieu. To be fair, not all at *The Globe and Mail* shared Scott's assessment. In a column usually devoted to politics, Jeffrey Simpson wrote at length about the movie and its reception in central Canada. He found the film "wonderful," and attempted to reconcile its standing ovation at the Festival of Festivals with the fact that it ran for just two weeks at a Toronto cinema. Simpson ended his column inconclusively, with a question: "will Torontonians, among the most parochial of Canadians despite their pretensions to the contrary, bother with a film made in and about a place as far removed as Alberta?"²⁸ Western Canadians do not take their cue from central Canada, of course, and audiences have embraced the movie as their own.²⁹

The film's real power comes from its sense of authenticity; despite a glowing, at times spectacular, cinematography, it is the attention to detail that draws the viewer into the movie. We begin to care for the women whose lives and relationships are examined:

the interaction and undercurrents give this seemingly languorous, unhurried movie tension. These lives and values are settled, traditional, but momentarily

disrupted. And we're always aware, because of the movie's insistence on a rich social context — that a reckoning or choice is due after the armistice. ...

"Blues" becomes a lament for those few moments of liberation or love — or even just musicianly camaraderie on stage — that can shine through the seemingly unbroken, inevitable routines of ordinary lives: ties, obligations, the chains of war, class and geography.³⁰

At the centre of the movie is Daisy — it is her growth both as an entertainer and as a person that Wheeler is most concerned with charting. But is not a straightforward or simple story, and the movie is true to Wheeler's assertion that her stories do not have closure. Loose ends are not tied, and viewers are left to draw their own conclusions about Daisy's relationship with the American musician, Matt Gramley. We know that it is a relationship that affected her profoundly: in one of the film's final scenes, Daisy goes to tell Matt that her husband is back and that she will not be moving up to Edmonton with the band the next day; in effect, that she is quitting the band. An angry Matt dismisses her and slams the door in her face, but her sweater is caught in the door. The symbolism might be heavy handed but it is to the point. Part of her is left with Matt, something she will never get back. In the very last scene of the film, the camera follows the musicians' bus as it heads to the city, away from the small prairie town. The song "Bye Bye Blues" plays, its words underlining Daisy's ambivalence as she tearfully watches her friends exit from her life.

The history disclosed in the film is intimate and personal, in Wheeler's words, "about the unspoken life of women, which hasn't been seen as important."³¹ The larger conventional history of the time — the events of the war which decide the fate of Daisy's husband — is subtly folded into the characters' lives and experiences. And we always learn of them second-hand — by radio, in conversation, or through letters. In the course of an evening family card game, for example, the news comes over the radio of the bombing of Hiroshima. "Guess that'll show the Japs," comments one person. Daisy's brother Will, a returned soldier who had lost a leg in the war, responds angrily: "Whole goddam city full of people." We learn not just of the event, but the way in which it is filtered through the experiences of the characters, which in turn informs their reactions to the event. People are at the centre of Wheeler's history.

James Keelaghan, a Calgary-based folksinger, grew up in a household that was both musically and historically inclined. His father was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and had collected folk songs in Ireland before World War II. His mother lived through the Blitz in London, and Keelaghan grew up listening to his parents sing. After completing a degree in history at the University of Calgary — "I started doing these little historical songs as a cheap excuse for not doing term papers"³² — he found work as an historical researcher and a musician. By 1988 he was playing the major folk festivals of Canada. With two albums out and a third on the way, he has emerged as a rising star in Canada's rich folk scene.

Keelaghan's songs are largely Canadian social history set to music. These vary from a happy-go-lucky trainman's account of a CPR wreck ("Railway Tune") to more sombre works about the murder of marching miners in Estevan, Saskatchewan in 1931 ("Small Rebellion") and the 1914 Hillcrest mine disaster ("Hillcrest Mine"). What sets his work apart is its subtlety — three-minute songs manage to convey more than many a lecture on the same material. Needless to say, they are also reaching a much larger audience. In addition to their lyrical power, his songs ring with Keelaghan's strong voice and an easy familiarity with the folk tradition.

Like both Wheeler and Wiebe, Keelaghan's lyrics draw from his own experiences and link these with more profound issues. This comes across in such songs as "Boom Gone to Bust," where the Depression of his parent's time is juxtaposed to his own knowledge of the 1980s recession:

My Dad started east some time in the thirties with the On-to-Ottawa men,
 He'd enough of the camps and the dole and the handouts,
 He wanted to work and to tie the loose ends.
 Drifted from factory to foundry to flophouse,
 The war sorted out what mere men could not;
 In Sudbury's forges he worked like a madman,
 His years lost to hunger, Dad never forgot.
 And I headed West when I turned twenty,
 When the factories and foundries had closed.
 And in my mind's eye, I thought I might settle
 Out here where my father was raised and was born.
 I worked as a jughound, a roughneck, a bouncer,
 I worked where I wanted, I drew damn good pay;
 Saw no end to our luck, and so we just pushed it,
 But OPEC and mortgages ate it away.³³

Such personal experiences are pushed to far broader conclusions by the song's close:

It seems to me somehow this nation of migrants,
 From father to daughter, from mother to son,
 Must constantly shift from the east or the west,
 Till we run out of work or of places to run.
 Gone now the days when you lived where your parents,
 And their parents before them, were bred and were born;
 Must go where the work is to live any life, boys,
 Bend like a willow to weather the storm...³⁴

As can be seen, there is a deliberate presentism in his work. Even in a song grounded in a specific event, such as the title song, "Small Rebellion," an account of the march of Bienfait coal miners in Estevan in 1931 which left three of their number dead and many more wounded, Keelaghan is intent on connecting with larger issues:

I am very serious about relating that song, Small Rebellion, to what happened in Tiananmen Square. ... The struggle for rights and the struggle for freedom and the struggle for political beliefs, or the struggle to have the right to express your political beliefs, I think is never-ending, and Small Rebellions is about that.³⁵

In that album, his second, Keelaghan was particularly interested in confronting the past of the West, and with a specific intent:

"Small Rebellions" is very much based in prairie geography; the big thing with people in Saskatchewan and Alberta and Manitoba is more than anywhere else in the country, I think we have a real inferiority complex about our history, because there are no landmarks. ... Because there aren't marvellous stone buildings and things, people think we don't have a history. History for a lot of people seems to be measured in physical structures, and to me it's not; I wanted to deal with some points of history that operate outside of physical structures in a prairie setting.³⁶

Like Wheeler, Keelaghan's work has received a mixed response from "the country's national newspaper." For example, *The Globe and Mail's* review of "Small Rebellions" ignored the content of Keelaghan's songs, commenting only on the form. And at this level, the album was damned with faint praise. The review began: "Very small rebellions. Calgary's James Keelaghan is surely the most traditional of the newest generation of Canadian folk singers and songwriters."³⁷ Audiences have come to their own conclusions — a Keelaghan performance often ends with a standing ovation.

History is almost intrinsic to folk music; the genre is steeped in tradition and memory. Keelaghan's concern with the Canadian past — his use of it as context and meaning for his music — is scarcely unique. Yet his historical songs stand out because they are closely grounded in events, while avoiding the temptation to resort to mere narrative or to engage in heavy-handed preachiness. A good example is a recent song concerning the evacuation of Japanese Canadians from Canada's west coast in 1942; Keelaghan tells the (evidently true) story of a Japanese woman who decided to have her piano pitched off the end of a Steveston wharf rather than see it fall into the hands of others, since all their property was being impounded. In a clever twist, however, the story is told by a sympathetic policeman, who himself struggles to understand the meaning of what is taking place. By contrast, the songs of the late Stan Rogers, the folk musician with whom Keelaghan is frequently compared, tended to focus on the humorous incident or the telling anecdote, to stand outside of a larger and identifiable past.

Keelaghan is by no means the only prairie singer to have reached a broad audience. Others include Connie Kaldor (whose own song "Batoche" is a moving evocation of the 1885 Rebellion), country musicians Ian Tyson and k.d. lang, and the "roots" musicians, Bourne and MacLeod (recent winners of a Juno Award for their debut album "Dance and Celebrate"). The 1990 Vancouver Folk Festival recognized the new wave of talent coming out of Alberta by featuring the province's musicians as one of the highlights of the festival; it also included a workshop on songs about Canadian history, led by Keelaghan.

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The popularity in Canada of works such as the television production of *Anne of Green Gables*, as well as a host of imported period dramas, suggest that the past can evoke a very positive public response. This invention of an idealized world does not always reflect a desire to produce a marketable

commodity for the entertainment industry or to cater to a pervasive nostalgia, of course; the past can be put to innumerable purposes, from selling beer to legitimizing political parties of virtually any ideological stripe. Recently a number of writers have described the ways in which the past has been used, analyzing how it is constituted — by whom, for whom, and with what effect — and the ways in which such representations are shaped by the contexts in which they appear.³⁸ Such discussions often assume that the past has no obvious or direct objective life, maintaining that it is always invented or translated or mediated, for a variety of conscious or unconscious reasons. The argument here is considerably different, shaped not only by the focus on three individuals within a specific regional context, but also by a more optimistic assessment of intent and outcome. The history employed by Wiebe, Wheeler and Keelaghan is part of a process of authentication, of connecting people to the reality of their place. The point, as Eliot put it in a much-quoted poem, “Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.”³⁹

The opening section of this article posed the question of what meaning should be assigned to the work of Keelaghan, Wheeler and Wiebe. We can first of all make clear what this is not — it is not an invented past, a nostalgic and indulgent celebration of a past that was not. The father’s advice in Keelaghan’s “Hillcrest Mine” is scarcely a sanitized version:

I've heard it whispered in the light of dawn,
That mountain sometimes moves;
That bodes ill for the morning shift
And you know what you're gonna lose.
Don't go my son where the deep coal runs,
Turn your back on the mine on the hill,
'Cause if the dust and the dark and the gas don't get you,
Then the goons and the bosses will...⁴⁰

Which is not to argue that their work is simply antiquarian chronicling of life in former times; the subjects and themes are chosen deliberately, to illuminate specific dimensions of the Canadian past. This process of selection — with artists as with historians — is neither simple nor straightforward. As Butterfield once observed, we give the semblance of order to the chaos of the past by virtue of what we leave out. Whether consciously or not, writers use their own criteria of significance to determine what is important, and thus what material deserves to be drawn from the vast amount available.

One confronts traces of the past in many places, in many guises. As Keelaghan suggests, western Canada does not have the stone buildings of earlier centuries such as those that dot the St. Lawrence basin and other landscapes. Its points of reference have to be consciously sought out to be recovered. Wiebe has recounted the difficulties he confronted in this process of reclamation, in an article describing the genesis of *Big Bear*:

Anyway, it was from reading Cameron in the '50s that I first realized the bush homestead where I was born in northern Saskatchewan probably was traversed in June, 1885, by Big Bear and his diminishing band as among the poplars they

easily eluded the clumsy military columns of Strange and Middleton and Otter and Irvine pursuing them; that I first realized that the white sand beaches of Turtle Lake, where Speedwell School had its annual sportsday with Jackpine and Turtleview Schools, right there where that brown little girl had once beaten me in the grade four sprints, a race in which until then I was acknowledged as completely invincible: perhaps on that very beach Big Bear had once stood looking at the clouds trundle up from the north. Of course, thanks to our education system, I had been deprived of this knowledge when I was a child: we studied people with *history* — like Cromwell who removed a king's head, or Lincoln who freed slaves — but I can see now that this neglect contained an ambiguous good. For in forcing me to discover the past of my place on my own as an adult, my public school inadvertently roused an anger in me which has ever since given an impetus to my writing which I trust it will never lose. *All people have history. The stories we tell of our past are by no means merely words: they are meaning and life to us as people, as a particular people.*⁴¹

One has to investigate to find, as Wiebe did, the trail of others on the beach of Turtle Lake. Thus Harrison's point about prairie authors in *Un-named Country* is wide of the mark: "It is as though they regarded their past as something that must be rediscovered because it has somehow been misrepresented to them."⁴² The history of Wiebe and Wheeler and Keelaghan is no more a rediscovery of something that was already known, already in the popular consciousness, than it is invention. Wheeler's comment about the research that she did for her film "Great Grand Mother" is to the point: "so many stories and no one had heard them."⁴³

A sense of place is clear in the work of Keelaghan, Wiebe and Wheeler. All three work within western Canada and their work needs to be understood within that context, historically as well as aesthetically. More than forty-five years ago W.L. Morton spoke of western Canada's inability to "accept a common interpretation of Canadian history or a cultural metropolitanism. ... It has no acceptable alternative to working out its own identity in terms of its own historical experience."⁴⁴ Since then there has been a good deal of discussion both in and about the West, listing its grievances, its uniqueness, and so on; discussions which range across the spectrum from the manifestos of separatist political parties through to the papers and published proceedings of academic conferences. Some of this was self-interested posturing, some of it an angry response to the centralist assumptions of the National Energy Program and other discriminatory federal policies. The West continues to prove itself a fertile breeding ground of political parties, but a recent book is right to claim that there is much more going on in the region and that cultural activity in the West is attaining a new stature and self-confidence.⁴⁵ This latter development could well signal the beginning of a more profound "vernacular mobilization" and "cultural politicization" which will be necessary to survive the turbulent years ahead.⁴⁶ At the very least, the work of the three artists examined here is evidence that the cultural community in the West is forging the identity referred to by Morton, an inclusive identity which encompasses all western Canadians. With the prospect of the country's federal bonds loosening in the coming years, the need to understand such regional identities will become increasingly import-

ant — and the objections of central Canadians to such implicit assertions of difference even less credible.⁴⁷

The emergence of a mature and autonomous cultural community also reflects the end of the West's ingrained deference to imported cultural norms. As in many other areas of the "settler dominions," European cultural expressions in western Canada were until recently essentially derivative, a result of historical experience in an area colonized by Europeans in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite the ethnic diversity of the colonists, the dominant culture was British, and the regional poets, writers and painters of the colonial period employed traditional techniques from "home" to depict their new world. The product of this mismatch between late Victorian sensibilities and the Canadian West was by and large uninspired and insipid. In a world where the climate was extreme, where speculators made easy fortunes while others were exploited mercilessly by the unrestrained greed of assorted representatives of monopoly capitalism, where the sky was larger than anywhere else in the world, something more than a secondhand Victorian aesthetic was clearly in order.⁴⁸

With virtually all their cultural points of reference on the other side of the Atlantic, the colonists remained strangers in the land where they lived. The subsequent dilemma was captured by New Zealand's Allen Curnow. In a memorable poem, he described his inability to connect in any meaningful way with the land in which he had been born. As he contemplated the skeleton of an extinct moa, wired erect in a museum in Christchurch, he drew a parallel between his own life in New Zealand and the fate of that giant bird:

Interesting failure to adapt on islands,
Taller but no more fallen than I, who come
Bone to his bone, peculiarly New Zealand's. ...
Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year,
Will learn the trick of standing upright here.⁴⁹

Such an admission of failure could have come as readily from British descendants in other corners of the globe, in the South Pacific, Africa or North America. A common difficulty united them — how to come to terms with this world in which they found themselves, strangers in their homes, at home in a strange land.

This inability to connect the imagination with the environment is plain in the reminiscences of Wallace Stegner and W.L. Morton, as well as in Wiebe's comments quoted earlier. All three draw attention to the dichotomy they encountered growing up in the West, the juxtaposition of the literature of England with the overpowering reality of the Prairies. Remembering his early reading in southwest Saskatchewan, for example, Stegner reflected that "What strikes me about this in recollection is not my precocious or fictitious reading capacity, and not the durability of memory, but the fact that the information I was gaining from literature and from books on geography and history had not the slightest relevance to the geography, history, or life of the place where I lived."⁵⁰ Resolving this — working out an aesthetic and

cultural adaptation to western Canada — has taken a surprisingly long time, although this is equally true of other colonized areas. In central Canada, for example, one can detect an uneasy didacticism in the claim made in the catalogue accompanying the first exhibition of the Group of Seven in 1920 that “An Art must grow and flower in the land before the country will be a real home for its people.”⁵¹ As recently as 1990, Michael Ondaatje wrote that “memoir and history and fiction blend” in Canadian literature; “the past invades us.”⁵² Robert Kroetsch is the most direct: “we haven’t got an identity until someone tells our story. The fiction makes us real.”⁵³

Canadians share North America with a larger and more powerful English-speaking nation, whose media and culture dominate the continent. The claim that the “Yanks” have colonized our subconscious is perhaps facile, but borne out by the unthinking adoption of so many American symbols, in Canada as well as Europe.⁵⁴ Few cultural domains have survived this imperialist thrust; the most popular (and lucrative) venues, the cinema and television, have proven particularly vulnerable. The efforts of the Canadian state to provide something of a counterbalance to the cultural hegemony of its neighbour have been uneven. Both anglophone and francophone Canadians continually confront absorption, and remain who they are only by deliberate choice.⁵⁵ Without such self-consciousness, the survival of Canada is unlikely. It follows that cultural expressions such as those discussed in this paper have far more than an aesthetic or cultural significance. As Kroetsch claims, they are indeed what makes us real.

NOTES

I am very grateful to James Keelaghan, Anne Wheeler and Rudy Wiebe — busy people all — for finding the time to speak with me about their work. The article was written while I was with the Institute for International Studies at the University of Leeds, and I extend a sincere “thank you” to John Hemery and Allison Moore, who made my time there both pleasant and productive.

1. Robert Kroetsch, “On Being an Alberta Writer: Or, I Wanted To Tell Our Story,” in Howard Palmer and Donald Smith, eds., *The New Provinces: Alberta and Saskatchewan* (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1980), 222-23.
2. Rudy Wiebe and Bob Beal, *War in the West: Voices of the 1885 Rebellion* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).
3. Linda Rasmussen et al., *A Harvest Yet to Reap* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1975).
4. One exception is Dennis Duffy’s *Sounding the Iceberg: An Essay on Canadian Historical Novels* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1986), although this work is primarily a survey of the literature it describes.
5. Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), 398; italics in the original. Earlier, Wiebe has Big Bear ask an assembly of government officials intent on treaty making, and Native leaders, “Who can receive land? From whom would he receive it?” (p. 29)
6. Anthony D. Smith, “Towards a Global Culture?” in Mike Featherstone, ed., *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1990), 177. Similarly, Elizabeth Wilson, in her book *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, 1985), states: “In the fantasy culture of the 1980s there is no real history, no real past; it is replaced by an instant, magical nostalgia, a strangely *unmotivated* appropriation

- of the past." (p. 172) In an earlier book, *The Ethnic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Smith recounted the history and meaning of what he terms ethnic nationalism, an excellent analysis of the "broader trend" mentioned in this paragraph.
7. Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), i-iv.
 8. Peter McCormick, "Regionalism in Canada: Disentangling the Treads," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 13. For another useful discussion of the notion of region, see John G. Reid, "Writing About Regions," in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 71-96, esp. 79-81.
 9. Rudy Wiebe, "In the West, Sir John A. is a Bastard and Riel a Saint. Ever Ask Why?" *The Globe and Mail*, 25 March 1978. Reprinted in W.J. Keith, *A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), 210.
 10. Duffy, *Sounding the Iceberg*, 74; George Woodcock, "Possessing the Land: Notes on Canadian Fiction," in Woodcock, *The World of Canadian Writing: Critiques and Recollections* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1980), 38.
 11. Thomas S. Woods, "On the Silent Majesty," review of *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1989), *The Globe and Mail*, 5 August 1989. With a good deal of justification, Woods compared Wiebe with Durrell in the review: "Playing Dead is to Arctic Canada what Lawrence Durrell's *Reflections on a Marine Venus* is to Rhodes."
 12. For an extended discussion of *Temptations of Big Bear*, see Keith, *A Voice in the Land*, 126-55; W.J. Keith, *Epic Fiction: The Art of Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1981), 62-81; Allen Dueck, "Rudy Wiebe's Approach to Historical Fiction: A Study of *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People*," in John Moss, ed., *The Canadian Novel: Here and Now* (Toronto: NC Press, 1978), 182-200; Allan Beaven, "Introduction," in Wiebe, *Temptations of Big Bear*, ix-xv; Susan Whaley, *Rudy Wiebe and His Works* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1986), 31-37; Duffy, *Sounding the Iceberg*, 71-73. For a fuller bibliography of literature by and about Rudy Wiebe, see Whaley, *Rudy Wiebe*, 56-61; there is also much useful information in *The Rudy Wiebe Papers, First Accession: An Inventory of the Archive at the University of Calgary Libraries* (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1986), especially J.M. Kertzer's "Biocritical Essay," ix-xxvi.
 13. Whaley, *Rudy Wiebe and His Works*, 31.
 14. See "On the Trail of Big Bear" and "Bear Spirit in a Strange Land ("All That's Left of Big Bear")," reprinted in Keith, *A Voice in the Land*. See also the Native stories in Rudy Wiebe, *The Angel of the Tar Sands and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), especially, "Where is the Voice Coming From?" 78-87.
 15. Wiebe, "On the Trail of Big Bear," 139.
 16. In Eli Mandel and Rudy Wiebe, "Where the Voice Comes From," in Keith, *A Voice in the Land*, 152.
 17. Interview with Rudy Wiebe, 31 January 1991; note also Wiebe's comments in a published interview: "I write about Indians because I grew up in communities where they were part of the people," in George Melnyk, "The Western Canadian Imagination: An Interview with Rudy Wiebe," in Keith, *A Voice in the Land*, 205.
 18. Wiebe quoted in "Kinsella 'ripping off' Indians," *The Globe and Mail*, 8 December 1989. Kinsella responded with an ill-tempered dismissal of Wiebe (a "petty little academic drone") and railed against an unspecified group of literary academics, but one which presumably included Wiebe: "Any one of those guys who attack my work would give his left nut to be in my place, but they won't admit it" (Kinsella quoted in "Colleagues attack motivates Kinsella," *The Globe and Mail*, 21 December 1989). A conversation with Wiebe left me with the impression that Kinsella's analysis was considerably wide of the mark.

19. In Keith, *A Voice in the Land*, 151.
20. Wiebe, *Temptations of Big Bear*, 398.
21. From the original introductory chapter of Wiebe, *Temptations of Big Bear*, deleted prior to publication. Quoted in Wiebe, "On the Trail of Big Bear," in Keith, *A Voice in the Land*, 136-37.
22. Wheeler in Jane Evans, "Filmmakers Don't Cry? An Interview with Anne Wheeler," *NeWest Review* (February/March 1990): 16.
23. Gina Mallet, "True Grit," *Homemakers* (March 1990): 36-37.
24. Interview with Anne Wheeler, 6 November 1990.
25. Wheeler, quoted in Mallet, "True Grit," 46.
26. Jay Scott, "Catalogue of clichés is interesting read," *The Globe and Mail*, 15 September 1989. Others, such as *Los Angeles Times* reviewer Michael Wilmington, have been lavish in their praises (see Michael Wilmington, "Wistful Detail Charges 'Bye Bye Blues'," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 September 1990).
27. Don Braid and Sydney Sharpe, *Breakup; Why the West Feels Left Out of Canada* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1990), 58.
28. Jeffrey Simpson, "Singing the box-office blues," *The Globe and Mail*, 12 January 1990.
29. A point also made in Evans, "Filmmakers Don't Cry?" 16.
30. Wilmington, "Wistful Detail Charges 'Bye Bye Blues'."
31. Mallet, "True Grit," 37.
32. Keelaghan, quoted in Paul Rodgers, "The Bard of the Bow," *Alberta Report* 15, no. 33 (1 August 1988), 30.
33. James Keelaghan, "Boom Gone To Bust," words and music, © James Keelaghan.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Interview with James Keelaghan, 14 July 1990.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Mark Miller, "Inside the Sleeve," *The Globe and Mail*, 2 April 1990.
38. See James Overton, "A Newfoundland Culture?" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring/Summer 1988): 5-22; Ian McKay, "Among the Fisherfolk: J.F.B. Livesay and the Invention of Peggy's Cove," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring/Summer 1988): 23-45; E.J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For case studies of "invention," see Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688-1980* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1981); Colin McArthur, "The Dialectic of National Identity: The Glasgow Empire Exhibition of 1938," in Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott, eds., *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 117-34; and Tony Curtis, ed., *Wales: The Imagined Nation* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1986). On the separate, though related, topic of history and nostalgia, see Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, eds., *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989). Also relevant here is the section "History, Politics and Classical Narrative," in Tony Bennett, Susan Boyd-Bowman, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott, eds., *Popular Television and Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1981), 285-352, which is largely a discussion of the BBC television series "Days of Hope." Also see Tony Bennett, "The Politics of the 'Popular' and Popular Culture," in Bennett et al., *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, 6-21.
39. "Little Gidding," T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 222.

40. "Hillcrest Mine," on James Keelaghan's album "Small Rebellions," 1989, words and music, © James Keelaghan. In June 1914, 189 miners died in an explosion in the Hillcrest Mine.
41. Wiebe, "On the Trail of Big Bear," 133-34. Italics in the original.
42. Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), 183.
43. Wheeler, quoted in Evans, "Filmmakers Don't Cry?" 16.
44. W.L. Morton, "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History," in A.B. McKillop, ed., *Contexts of Canada's Past* (1946; Toronto: Macmillan, 1980), 109-10.
45. Braid and Sharpe, "Two: My Light Wasn't There," in *Breakup*, 55-74; the reference in the chapter's title is to a remark of Anne Wheeler's concerning central Canada and its inability to illuminate. The reference to political parties in the text is of course to the populist Reform Party, whose growth has been usefully summarized by Ian Pearson, "Thou Shalt Not Ignore the West," *Saturday Night* (December 1990): 35-43, 74-75. I am aware that there is a group of people who debate with considerable vigour such notions as whether Canada possesses any indigenous literature. I have found the work of this incestuous and arcane collectivity (in which John Metcalf is prominent) irrelevant; to expand upon this remark would require another article. My own analysis is similar to that elaborated by George Woodcock in his study of Canadian literature and regionalism. See, for example, Woodcock, *The World of Canadian Writing and Northern Spring: The Flowering of Canadian Literature* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987).
46. For a discussion of the process of "vernacular mobilization" and "cultural politicization," see Smith, "Towards a Global Culture?" 183.
47. For disparaging comments on a regional approach, see Ramsey Cook, "Regionalism Unmasked," *Acadiensis* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 137-42; and Lovell Clark, "Regionalism? or Irrationalism?" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 13, no. 2 (1978-79): 119-28. Note however the rejoinders by Phillip A. Buckner, "'Limited Identities' and Canadian National Scholarship: An Atlantic Provinces Perspective," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring/Summer 1988): 177-98; and G. Kealey, "The Writing of Social History in English Canada, 1970-1984," *Social History* 10, no. 3 (October 1985): 347-65. As Buckner points out, "Lurking behind many of the criticisms of regionalism is the belief that regionalism is anti-nationalist and provides an intellectual justification for Ottawa-bashing and the de-centralization of federal powers. . . . A nation may be larger than the sum of its parts but it does have parts and one has to understand them before one can understand the whole." (p. 193)
48. A number of scholars have examined the evolving aesthetic in western Canada; see, for example, Susan Jackel, "Images of the Canadian West, 1872-1911" (Ph D dissertation, University of Alberta, 1977); Ronald Rees, *New and Naked Land: Making the Prairies Home* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1988); Ronald Rees, *Land of Earth and Sky: Landscape Painting of Western Canada* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1984); R. Douglas Francis, *Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989); I.S. MacLaren, "Alexander Mackenzie and the Landscapes of Commerce," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 7, no. 2 (1982): 141-50; I.S. MacLaren, "David Thompson's Imaginative Mapping of the Canadian Northwest, 1784-1812," *Ariel* 15, no. 2 (April 1984): 89-106; I.S. MacLaren, "Retaining Captaincy of the Soul. Response to Nature in the First Franklin Expedition," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, no. 28 (Spring 1984): 57-92.
49. Allen Curnow, "The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch," in *Collected Poems 1933-1973* (Wellington: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1974), 142.
50. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow* (New York, Viking Press, 1955), 27. See also, W.L. Morton, "Seeing an Unliterary Landscape," in A.B. McKillop, ed., *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W.L. Morton* (1970; Toronto: Macmillan, 1980), 15-25.

51. Quoted by Ronald Rees, *Land of Earth and Sky*, 44.
52. Michael Ondaatje, "Introduction," *The Faber Book Of Contemporary Short Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), xvi, xiv.
53. Quoted by Rudy Wiebe, in Keith, *A Voice in the Land*, 211.
54. A comment by a character in a Wim Wenders film, "Kings of the Road." I first heard it used by Colin Browne, a British Columbia film historian, in his fascinating paper, "The Phantom Ride," presented to the B.C. Studies conference at Simon Fraser University in November 1988; it was recently repeated by Ronald Bergan, *The Guardian*, 7 March 1991.
55. A similar point is made by Gwyn A. Williams in *When Was Wales?* (London: Penguin, 1991.) In the following, for example, substitute Canada and Canadians for Wales and Welsh:

Wales is an artefact which the Welsh produce. If they want to. It requires an act of choice. Today, it looks as though that choice will be more difficult than ever before. There are roads out towards survival as a people, but they are long and hard and demand sacrifice and are at present unthinkable to most of the Welsh. (p. 304)