1

Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew

This is the first of four lectures which I will be delivering over the course of the next two weeks, barring sudden illnesses or hurricanes. These lectures are roughly grouped around certain image-clusters that have appeared and reappeared in Canadian literature, and which are connected with the Canadian North.

A great deal has been made, from time to time, of the search for 'the Canadian identity'; sometimes we are told that this item is simply something we have mislaid, like the car keys, and might find down behind the sofa if we are only diligent enough, whereas at other times we have been told that the object in question doesn't really exist and we are pursuing a phantom. Sometimes we are told that although we don't have one of these 'identities', we ought to, because other countries do. Those doing the telling are usually academics or newspaper columnists, who seem to be under the illusion that everyone knows what 'the British identity' or 'the French identity' is, and that these things are concrete and indivisible nouns—something you could put on a tourist brochure, like the Eiffel

Tower or a beefeater, rather than aggregates of a great number of different items, cultural artefacts, places, and memories. If all we want is a costume for the Miss Universe contest, there's always the Mounties.

But surely the search for the fabled Canadian identity is like a dog chasing its own tail. Round about and round about it goes, with the tail whisking out of sight; whereupon it proclaims the tail elusive, fragile, threatened, or absent. And yet, as everyone can plainly see, there is the tail, as firmly attached to the dog as ever, continuing to wag or on the contrary to droop, according to the climate—climate is very important in Canada—or the climate of opinion.

What, then, does everyone else—that is, those not obsessed with the hopelessness of the quest—plainly see? What we plainly see, when we look for this 'identity' anywhere else, is, on first sight, a collection of clichéd images—that is, images that have been repeated so often and absorbed so fully that they are instantly recognized. These clichéd images—or cliché-images, to coin a phrase—are usually based on fact or historical reality of some sort, and they need to exist before art or literature can play with them, that is, make variations on them, explore them more deeply, utilize their imaginative power—for they do have imaginative power—or turn them inside out. What art can't do is ignore them altogether; unless, of course, the artist chooses to play with someone else's cliché-images, as some do.

What do we mean by 'the North'?

Until you get to the North Pole, 'North', being a direction, is relative. 'The North' is thought of as a place, but it's a place with shifting boundaries. It's also a state of mind. It can mean 'wilderness' or 'frontier'. But we know—or think we know—what sorts of things go on there. In the Canadian North of popular image, the Mounties with their barking dog teams relentlessly pursue madmen through the snow, prospectors stumble raving out of the bush clutching their little bags of

gold-dust, jolly voyageurs rollick in their canoes, Indians rescue hapless whites who get endlessly lost in the woods, wolves devour lone hunters, or not, as the case may be; Eskimoes . . . well, you get the picture. The picture is that such pictures, and many more, exist and are fully recognizable to their society, and get used by politicians, by picture postcards, by cartoonists, by contestants in the Miss Universe beauty pageant, and also by literary writers. The ends pursued by literature are more obscure, its pathways more oblique, but the chief features of the terrain—the signposts—have remained strangely constant although the values ascribed to them have varied considerably.

I realize that I am addressing a British audience, not a Canadian one, and I will try to avoid using specialized vocabulary, such as 'toe rubbers', 'blackfly', and 'Chinook', without clarification. But I'm aware also that there may be some closet Canadians lurking incognito in the audience—they're everywhere, after all, and it's hard for the uninitiated to tell them apart from Americans or shrubs—and I apologize to such persons in advance for telling them things they may already know, such as the answer to the question 'When was the War of 1812?'

My first lecture will introduce you to some motifs of the North through the disastrous Franklin expedition of the mid-nineteenth century. The second one will explore the curious and anxiety-ridden phenomenon of whites reinventing themselves as Native people, and seeing the wilderness not as where you go to die but as where you go to renew life. The third will trace the fortunes of the legendary and cannibalistic Wendigo—in the land of the Wendigoes, it's not who you know but who you eat. And the fourth will explore a subject that at least half the audience will probably have been expecting—that is, how Canadian *women* writers have bent these wilderness literary traditions to their own sometimes devious purposes.

But before I start talking about Franklin, his dire fate, and his literary life after death, I think it would be helpful for me to say in advance what these lectures are not.

First, they are not an attempt to prove to you that such a thing as Canadian Literature actually exists. If I'd been delivering them twenty or thirty years ago, they might have been. Back then, it was a standard witticism in some quarters—even in Canada, especially in Canada—to say that the term 'Canadian Literature' was an oxymoron. Poets wrote satirical poems about its shoddy and derivative state, including recipes for its concoction that included such ingredients as one beaver, two Mounties, a sprinkling of maple leaves, and so on. In 1972 I myself published a book called *Survival*, which was dedicated to the premiss that there really was a Canadian Literature, that it was not the same as either American or English literature, and that it reflected some disquieting as well as some enlightening things about the society that had produced it. This book was bought and read by a great many people, hundreds of whom wrote me letters saying they were glad to know there was a Canadian Literature, because their high-school teacher had told them there wasn't. I wouldn't have got the same kind of letters in 1920 or even 1930, when school readers were full of Canadian pieces which were later tossed out because they were not considered modern enough. And I doubt that I would get the same kinds of letters today, although you never know. High-school teachers still seem dedicated to the premiss that what the young mind really craves is *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Second, these lectures are not a survey of what is usually called 'the field'. No four lectures could be, unless they were to consist of nothing but titles. Nor do they attempt to be fair or all-inclusive in their coverage, even of their own topics. I am neither a scholar nor a specialist, and my choices are the result, not of extensive research, but of my own amateur enthusiasms. If you ask a writer to give a lecture, you'll get a

writer's lecture; and as we all know, the insides of writers' heads resemble squirrels' nests more than they do neatly arranged filing-cabinets.

Third, I have not dealt with works written in French—not only because of the political ambiguities involved, but also for the simple reason that to do so would have kept you in your seats much longer than would be conscionable. The human rear can only endure so much reality. Fourth, these lectures are not about style, nor are they about individual authors and their *œuvres*; but neither do they take the point of view that individual authors can't be said to exist. (As an author, I've always had some difficulty with that.) They are not about rhetoric; they do not deconstruct anything, they do not problematize texts, and they will not leave you gazing vertiginously into the linguistic abyss or watching in alarm while the meaning of 'meaning' pops like bubble-gum and language vanishes up its own nether end.

These lectures depart from the position that, although in every culture many stories are told, only some are told and retold, and that these recurring stories bear examining. If such stories were parts of a symphony you'd call them leitmotifs, if they were personality traits you'd call them obsessions, and if it were your parents telling them at the dinner-table during your adolescence you'd call them boring. But, in literature, they hold a curious fascination both for those who tell them and for those who hear them; they are handed down and reworked, and story-tellers come back to them time and time again, approaching them from various angles and discovering new and different meanings each time the story, or a part of it, is given a fresh incarnation.

In Canadian literature, one such story is the Franklin expedition. For Americans, of course, the word *Franklin* means Benjamin, or else a stove. But for Canadians it means a disaster. Canadians are fond of a good disaster, especially if it has

ice, water, or snow in it. You thought the national flag was about a leaf, didn't you? Look harder. It's where someone got axed in the snow.

The facts of the Franklin fiasco are fairly well known. In May of 1845 Sir John Franklin and 135 men, including the other Arctic veterans Captain Francis Crozier and Commander James Fitzjames, sailed from England on a voyage of discovery. Their two ships were named, with horrible prescience, the *Terror* and the *Erebus*. These ships had fortified hulls which were supposed to be able to withstand the tremendous pressure of pack-ice; they were provisioned for three years; and they contained many extras, such as hot water, steam heating, instruments for scientific research, and two libraries with a total of 2,900 volumes. For their time, they were the most technologically advanced and luxurious ships ever sent on such an expedition. They even had steam-driven screw propellers, a striking innovation for 1845.

Franklin's intent was to discover the North-west Passage, which Europeans had been trying to do without success for over 300 years. If charted, such a passage—in those days before the Panama Canal—would have made trade with China and India much faster, and therefore much more lucrative. The real goal of the expedition, then, was financial; but both the excited press of the time and later recountings have glorified it with other and loftier adjectives, of the *brave*, *heroic*, *gallant*, *daring*, and *selfless* variety. At the time, this venture was launched with unqualified optimism: the Franklin expedition, it was felt, would run no real risks and could not possibly fail, due to the wisdom of its leaders and, especially, to the up-to-date nature of its ships and supplies.

The expedition was last sighted in Baffin Bay, in July of 1845, by two whaling ships. After that the *Terror* and *Erebus* vanished, and none of their men were ever seen alive again. I say 'alive', because some of them *were* seen dead, under unusual circumstances.

When the expedition did not return, great efforts were made to find it. Several dozen other expeditions were sent out, and large rewards were offered—one by Lady Jane Franklin, Sir John's wife. In August of 1850 some graves dated the winter of 1846 were discovered on Beechey Island. They were the graves of three expedition members who must have died while still aboard ship: Braine, Hartnell, and Torrington. After that, a large cairn of discarded food tins was located—but no other clues, and no other corpses.

In 1854 the surveyor John Rae obtained second-hand news of the expedition's fate through some Inuit hunters, who reported that the ships had been crushed in the ice and the expedition's men had starved to death while trying to make their way south, indulging in a little cannibalism along the way. (Mention has been made, for instance, of a bootful of human flesh.[1]) When the subject was first brought up, the Inuit were indignantly denounced as barbaric liars, because a Briton could not possibly have behaved so hungrily; though later research has proved them true.[2] The Inuit had picked up various items from the expedition, including some monogrammed silver spoons, which Rae was able to purchase and display as proofs of his story. In its reporting, the Toronto *Globe* put a Tower of Babylon or Prometheus-the-Fire-Stealer spin on this story, turning it into a parable about overreaching yourself by foolishly trying to storm 'winter's citadel'.

In May 1859 a joint expedition headed by Captain Francis McClintock and William Hobson uncovered some harder evidence. Hobson discovered a message left in a stone cairn, which indicated that the ships had been deserted after having been 'beset'—that is, frozen in and unable to get out—for three years, and that the men had headed overland to try to

[1] From accounts by explorer Charles Francis Hall; see Owen Beattie and John Geiger, *Frozen in Time* (Saskatoon, 1989), 44 and 60.

[2] See e.g. the reports by physical anthropologist Anne Keenleyside in 'Bones of Contention' by Barry Ranford, *Equinox*, 74 (Spring 1994), 69.

locate the Back Fish River hundreds of miles to the south. By this time Franklin himself was already dead; the truth was—according to Native sources anyway—that the man was always somewhat of a fool, and had on previous occasions ignored local advice and gone places he'd been told not to. Possibly that was what had happened this time; coupled with a run of unusually cold weather, it spelled calamity. Meanwhile, McClintock had located some actual bodies, grouped in and around a ship's boat which these men had been trying to drag across land. The boat was filled with all kinds of useless junk—useless, that is, for basic survival: pocket combs, soap, slippers, toothbrushes, and a copy of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. The odd thing was the evidence of crazed behaviour: the boat was pointing the wrong way, and its provisioning was bizarre, to say the least. Whatever the men had been up to, it was obvious that they had not been thinking very clearly at the time.

In the early 1980s, a team of anthropologists, including University of Alberta forensic specialist Owen Beattie and his partner, Arctic archaeologist James Savelle, located the three sailors' graves and carefully exhumed Torrington, Braine, and Hartnell, who had been permafrosted ever since 1846. From samples of hair and fingernails they examined, the scientists concluded that these three men had been suffering from high levels of lead poisoning at the time of their deaths. In the 1840s the art of canning food had not yet been perfected. The seams of the cans were soldered with lead—the effects of which were not understood at the time—and the lead seeped into the food. The Franklin expedition, through its reliance on 'state-of-the-art' technology, had unwittingly poisoned itself. This would explain the disorientation of the men in their final days, and their apparent inability to devise and carry out the necessary survival strategies. If they'd been relying on more 'primitive' methods, such as hunting and fishing, they would have stood a much better chance. (Should you wish to know

more about this remarkable piece of forensic deduction, read *Frozen in Time* by Owen Beattie and John Geiger, from which all of this information has been taken.)

These are the bare bones—as it were—of the Franklin story. But what has the Canadian literary imagination made of it?

Let's start with something that is not, in origin, Canadian at all, but English—the nineteenth-century ballad 'Lord Franklin' (though Franklin was not a lord, death seems to have promoted him)—or, in its many variations, 'Lady Franklin's Lament' or 'The Franklin Expedition'. This song is best known in England through the version sung by squeezebox-player A. L. Lloyd on the Ewan McColl record *Row, Bullies, Row.* There are several other versions still sung in Canada, with both different words and different music; the well-known Canadian song-writer Wade Hemsworth presents one of them, commenting, 'This song is meant to be sung solo in a country way. The balladeer stands up, supporting himself on the back of a chair usually, and roars it across the parlour in the old-fashioned way. . . . You find people down east who still do it—there are people in northern Ontario who will do it, and in Québec—but particularly down east. . . . They sing without accompaniment.'[3]

THE FRANKLIN EXPEDITION

The other night on the rolling deep
While in my hammock I lay asleep,
I dreamed a dream, and I thought it true,
Concerning Franklin and his gallant crew.

[3] Wade Hemsworth, *The Songs of Wade Hemsworth*, ed. Hugh Verrier (Waterloo, Ont., 1990), 132.

With a hundred seamen he sailed away,
To the frozen ocean in the month of May,
To seek that passage beyond the pole,
Where we poor seamen do sometimes go.

Through cruel hardships they vainly strove,
Their ships on mountains of ice were drove,
Where the Eskimo in his skin canoe
Is the only one who ever gets through.

In Baffin's Bay where the whale-fish blow,
The fate of Franklin no man may know;
The fate of Franklin no man can tell,
Lord Franklin along with his poor sailors do dwell.

And now my mem'ry it gives me pain,
For my long-lost Franklin I would cross the main;
Ten thousand pounds I would freely give
To know on earth that my Franklin do live.[4]

Beattie quotes the last two verses of this song in *Frozen in Time*, saying that the speaker is supposed to be Lady Franklin, who did indeed search long and hard for her vanished husband. Maybe the 'ten thousand pounds' point to her, but the narrator in the rest of the song is surely a man, a 'poor sailor' like the ones lost, and the identification is that of a man who can imagine himself in a similar plight—trapped in the frozen wastes, unable—unlike the local Eskimo inhabitants—to make his way through. The dream that is thought 'true' is the dream of finding what is lost, but by the end of the song that dream has proven false and the speaker is left with the ghostlike demi-existence, not only of Franklin, but of his entire expedition. As we know from other stories of mysterious vanishings at sea, those vanished have an odd quality of continued existence. Because Franklin was never really 'found', he continues to live on as a haunting presence; certainly in Canadian literature.

[4] Traditional.

However, the Franklin disaster did not take root in the Canadian imagination immediately; possibly because, at the time, the whole thing—enwrapped as it was in the Union Jack and in sentiments of the most grovelling patriotism—was thought of as too British. Although the rewards offered, and the findings of physical evidence, were given big space in the Toronto *Globe*, on at least one occasion the same paper complained that Tom Thumb the Midget's Toronto appearance vastly outdrew a public lecture on Franklin.[5]

But that was in the mid-nineteenth century. Later on, when Canada was beginning to identify its very own nightmares, the Franklin expedition was among them.

Before getting to literary treatments of the Franklin expedition proper, I'd like to mention the body of mystic-North imagery both built up and exploited by a turn-of-the-century poet whose work is usually ignored by serious critics—Robert W. Service. Service, of Sam McGee and Dan McGrew fame, wrote a great deal of Kiplingesque verse, much of which centred around his experiences in the Yukon during the Gold Rush. He was reflecting an already-existing body of lore and cliché—some of which was paralleled by actual travellers' tales—when he wrote poem after poem describing both the uncanny lure of the North and the awful things it could do to you, which included freezing you stiff and driving you crazy. Here are a couple of samples—the last verse of a poem called 'The Land God Forgot', for instance:

> O outcast land! O leper land!
> Let the lone wolf-cry express
> The hate insensate of thy hand,
> Thy heart's abysmal loneliness.[6]

Or, better, a snippet from 'Death in the Arctic', which is about a sole survivor wondering whether to shoot himself as he

[5] Owen and Geiger, *Frozen in Time*, 28.

[6] Robert W. Service, *The Complete Poems of Robert Service* (New York, 1945), p. xviii.

crouches in an igloo with the rest of his group, laid out in a gelid row in their sleeping-bags (why he didn't put them outside, like a sensible fellow, the poem does not say):

> Oh would you know how earth can be
> A hell—go north of Eighty-three![7]

Or how about 'The Law of the Yukon':

Staggering blind through the storm-whirl, stumbling mad through the snow,
Frozen stiff in the ice-pack, brittle and bent like a bow;
Featureless, formless, forsaken, scented by wolves in their flight,
Left for the wind to make music through ribs that are glittering white;
Gnawing the black crust of failure, searching the pit of despair . . .[8]

. . . etc.

Service also has a lot of poems in which the North is endowed with beckoning voices; the title of his first collection is 'The Spell of the Yukon'—the Yukon is a 'she', and says things like,

> I am the land that listens, I am the land that broods;
> Steeped in eternal beauty, crystalline waters and woods.
> Long have I waited lonely, shunned as a thing accurst, . . .
> And I wait for the men who will win me . . .[9]

and so forth.

Service habitually personifies the North as a savage but fascinating female, and a talkative one at that. He's fond of titles such as 'The Call of the Wild' and 'The Lure of Little Voices'. These latter 'calling from the wilderness, the vast and God-like spaces, | The stark and sullen solitudes that sentinel the Pole', say to the narrator's wife—a rival female—'He was ours before you got him, and we want him once again.'[10]

A real-life footnote: in 1918 the painter Tom Thomson,

[7] Robert W. Service, *The Complete Poems of Robert Service* (New York, 1945), p.221.
[8] Ibid. 11. [9] Ibid. 12. [10] Ibid. 23.

known for his canvasses of the North, was found floating face-down beside his canoe. He was an experienced woodsman, and was in the habit of going off for long trips, by himself, to paint. There was no indication of how he had come to drown. But everyone knew, or thought they did: the Spirit of the North had claimed him as her own. The death of Tom Thomson was treated as somehow legendary, somehow exemplary. Now, a lot of people in Canada fall off their kitchen step-ladders and break their necks, and many others die in car crashes; and yet there is no mythology centring around these deaths, no Spirit of the Kitchen or Spirit of the Automobile that lures you on or claims you as its own. Significant deaths, like significant lives, are those we choose to find significant. Tom Thomson's death was found significant because it fitted in with preconceived notions of what a death in the North ought to be.

To sum up: popular lore, and popular literature, established early that the North was uncanny, awe-inspiring in an almost religious way, hostile to white men, but alluring; that it would lead you on and do you in; that it would drive you crazy, and, finally, would claim you for its own.

The first Canadian poet I know of who was fascinated by the Franklin story was E. J. Pratt. Pratt was a Newfoundlander who specialized in narrative poems dealing with epic ventures, in which—typically—groups of men struggle against odds imposed largely by an immense and difficult and usually very cold Nature. Writing between the 1920s and the 1950s, Pratt identified so many stories that were, and possibly still are, central to the Canadian literary imagination—including the building of the great railroads and the tale of the martyred French Jesuits of the seventeenth century—that you'd almost have to wonder what was wrong with the Franklin expedition if Pratt *hadn't* been interested in it.

But, as it turns out, he was. He made a couple of attempts to write about it and he had certainly read several accounts of

it, such as Henty's *North Overland with Franklin* and Frank Shaw's *Famous Shipwrecks*, but he felt he couldn't undertake his planned Franklin epic without seeing the actual terrain for himself; and back in the 1930s it wasn't at all easy to get up to Baffin Island.[11]

In 1933 he was on the verge of starting his major Franklin poem; but, frustrated again in his attempts to head north, he tackled instead another saga of disaster—the sinking of the *Titanic*. It is the contention of this lecture that, in the hands of Pratt at least, the stories are very similar; that Pratt incorporated some of his thinking about the North and the Franklin catastrophe into his *Titanic* poem; and that, had he written the Franklin poem instead of the *Titanic* one, he would have given it much the same moral twist.

Pratt, like Shakespeare, gets the 'argument' out of the way at the beginning, in order to leave the decks clear for the action. (Or, rather, for the *in*action; as in the case of the Franklin expedition, there isn't a lot for the men to *do*, in the circumstances, except endure, and Pratt reserves his highest heroic points for those who hold back and let others scramble into the lifeboats. To paraphrase Milton, They also serve who only stand and sink.)

As in a history play, Pratt assumes that we already know the story: how the *Titanic* was thought to be unsinkable, how it was the most luxurious liner ever built, how, in its rash and heedless rush across the Atlantic, hoping to establish a record, it bumped into an iceberg, which opened it up like a can of sardines, and how a great many people subsequently drowned, some of them behaving well, others badly.

But what to make of this? Pratt had read Thomas Hardy's treatment of the *Titanic*—'The Convergence of the Twain'—with interest; but, in theory anyway, he repudiated Hardy's fatalistic vision. The *Titanic* disaster was not a case of the

[11] David G. Pitt, *E. J. Pratt: The Master Years, 1927–1964* (Toronto, 1987), 124–5.

Great Ironist arranging a predestined meeting between ship and iceberg, but of man's overweening arrogance. The second section of the poem, which deals with the *Titanic* as an engineering wonder, is a small hymn by man to himself, modelled on the press clippings of the time—and with Pratt's commentary on it added at the end.

> Completed! Waiting for her trial spin—
> Levers and telegraphs and valves within
> Her intercostal spaces ready to start
> The power pulsing through her lungs and heart.
> . . . . . .
> No storm could hurt that hull—the papers said so.
> The perfect ship at last—the first unsinkable,
> Proved in advance—had not the folders read so?
> Such was the steel strength of her double floors
> Along the whole length of the keel, and such
> The fine adjustment of the bulkhead doors
> . . . . . .
> That in collision with iceberg or rock
> Or passing ship she could survive the shock,
> . . . . . .
> And this belief had reached its climax when,
> Through wireless waves as yet unstaled by use,
> The wonder of the ether had begun
> To fold the heavens up and reinduce
> That ancient *hubris* in the dreams of men,
> Which would have slain the cattle of the sun,
> And filched the lightnings from the fist of Zeus.[12]

In one corner, then, the ship, a sort of twentieth-century Frankenstein creation—notice it has a heart and lungs—composed of equal parts technology and hubris. In the other corner, the iceberg: a little bit of that cold white mystic North

[12] E. J. Pratt, *Complete Poems*, part 1, ed. Sandra Djwa and R. G. Moyles (Toronto, 1989), 303–4.

that will claim you for its own. Here is Pratt's description, following from the birth of the iceberg in Greenland and its journey south to Labrador:

> Pressure and glacial time had stratified
> The berg to the consistency of flint,
> And kept inviolate, through clash of tide
> And gale, facade and columns with their hint
> Of inward altars and of steepled bells . . .[13]

Pratt of course had no way of knowing what the real iceberg actually looked like, so these religious images are purely fictional. Their purpose is to create an ironic illusion—the berg is not pure and holy and Christian, though it may appear so—and they are quickly melted when the berg gets far enough south:

> The sun which left its crystal peaks aflame
> In the sub-arctic noons, began to fret
> The arches, flute the spires and deform
> The features, till the batteries of storm,
> Playing above the slow-eroding base,
> Demolished the last temple touch of grace.[14]

What's underneath? Those who have followed the Nature-as-metaphor battle that raged throughout the nineteenth century—in which Wordsworthian good-mother imagery wrestled with Darwinian bad-mother imagery, and, by and large, lost—and especially those steeped in, say, Rider Haggard's *She* and Bram Stoker's account of Lucy's metamorphosis from bride to vampire, in *Dracula*, will know better than to trust anything wrapped in white. Here's what Pratt does:

> Another month, and nothing but the brute
> And paleolithic outline of a face
> Fronted the transatlantic shipping route.

[13] E. J. Pratt, *Complete Poems*, part 1, ed. Sandra Djwa and R. G. Moyles (Toronto, 1989), 305.

[14] Ibid.

A sloping spur that tapered to a claw
And lying twenty feet below and made
It lurch and shamble like a plantigrade;
But with an impulse governed by the raw
Mechanics of its birth, it drifted where
Ambushed, fog-grey, it stumbled on its lair . . .[15]

The iceberg, of course, is not alive, not really. But Pratt renders it as semi-alive, a sort of *Night of the Living Dead* zombie, complete with a face, a claw, a lair, and an 'impulse'. Pratt tried to avoid Hardyesque predestination, but, as his biographer David Pitt says, 'the more facts he unearthed . . . the more "incredible," "bizarre," "grotesque," "ironic," and "macabre" did they appear'. Pratt himself commented that it was 'as if some power with intelligence and resource had organized and directed a conspiracy'.[16] These are the intuitions he seems to have incorporated into the shambling, semi-alive, paleolithic figure of the iceberg itself—that chunk of the malignant North. Pratt doesn't say what gender it is, but we get a hint after the ship has gone down, with 1,400 people still aboard it and the band still playing. Here are the last lines of the poem:

And out there in the starlight, with no trace
Upon it of its deed but the last wave
From the *Titanic* fretting at its base,
Silent, composed, ringed by its icy broods,
They grey shape with the paleolithic face
Was still the master of the longitudes.[17]

That phrase 'ringed by its icy broods', so closely connected with hens and chicks, pushes the berg in the direction of the female. It might be argued that the word 'master' pushes it back towards the neuter or even the male; but surely five words and an end-rhyme count for more, and, anyway, the full weight of the Service tradition hangs in the balance.

[15] Ibid. [16] Pitt, *E. J. Pratt*, 148. [17] Pratt, *Complete Poems*, part 1, 338.

The first full-fledged literary—as opposed to historical—treatment of the Franklin expedition proper that I know about is an astonishing verse drama called *Terror and Erebus*, written by the poet Gwendolyn MacEwen, then in her early twenties, and initially broadcast on the CBC around 1963. Complete with electronic music and icy sound-effects, it was a hair-raiser.

Gwendolyn MacEwen had not read *Frozen in Time*, because it hadn't yet been written, and the lead-poisoning theory was unknown. But had she read Robert Service? Had she read Pratt's *Titanic*? The only extensive study of her work that I am aware of does not say. But everybody of our generation knew some Service, and Pratt was taught in high school, and MacEwen was an avid reader. However that may be, she power-packs her play with a good deal of imagery that you will not, by now, find totally unfamiliar.

The speakers in the play are Franklin himself, Crozier, the explorer Rasmussen—speaking almost 100 years after the Franklin expedition itself, and after the North-west Passage had indeed been discovered—and an Inuit character called Qaqortingneq. The story-line is book-ended by Rasmussen's commentary, and also by a sort of addendum spoken by Qaqortingneq; but the main narration is by Franklin and Crozier, and follows the historic expedition fairly closely: the three years in the ice, the sickness among the men, the death of Franklin, the abandonment of the ships and the attempt at an overland march to the south.

The language of *Terror and Erebus* is organized around several groups of metaphors, all having to do with the effect of the North itself upon the human body and imagination. One group uses images of religion—remember Service's 'vast and God-like spaces' and Pratt's altars, spires, steeples, and bells—and is introduced by Rasmussen, who says:

So I've followed you here
Like a dozen others, looking for relics
of your ships, your men.
Here to this awful monastery
where you, where Crozier died,
and all the men with you died,
Seeking a passage from imagination to
reality,
Seeking a passage from land to land
by sea.

Now in the arctic night
I can almost suppose you did not die,
But are somewhere walking between
The icons of ice, pensively
like a priest,
Wrapped in the cold holiness of snow . . .[18]

Here we have 'relics', 'awful monastery', 'icons', 'priest', and the 'cold holiness of snow', all in a mere dozen lines or so. There's a question which isn't asked, but is implicit—given these metaphors, what god presides here, or is being worshipped?

The second group of metaphors has to do with madness. When Rasmussen first mentions finding the bodies and bones of the lost men, he compares them to 'shattered compasses, like sciences | Gone mad'. Franklin himself speaks of the strait where they are trapped as a 'white asylum', and continues:

The ice clamps and will not open,
For a year it has not opened
Though we bash against it
Like lunatics at padded walls.[19]

If the men on the overland march stop, they will 'stand like catatonics | In this static house of bone'. Part of this imagery

[18] Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Afterworlds* (Toronto, 1987), 42–3. [19] Ibid. 43.

of insanity has to do with the collapse of science in circumstances in which rationality and objectivity cease to have meaning because they have become useless. As Rasmussen says, 'The ice | Is its own argument,' and the men leave all their measuring implements strewn behind them: 'compasses, tins, tools, all of them. | We came to the end of science.' But part of it is traditional: going mad is what you do in the North.

The third group of images is sexual, but sexual in a very sinister way: the ships are wombs, leaving them is a forced birth, the 'giant virginal strait of Victoria' is depicted as holding the men 'Crushed forever in her stubborn loins, | her horrible house, | her white asylum in an ugly marriage'. This last passage is the only personification of geography in the entire poem, and it's noteworthy that the figure conjured up is giant, female, icy, connected with madness, and destructive: a sort of Nature white in tooth and claw. As they die, suffering from famine, insanity, exposure, and snow-blindness (they don't even have the sense to adapt Eskimo-style wooden snow-goggles), the men pray to the standard Christian God, but their prayers are prayers of despair; the implication is that they're talking to the wrong God here.

When Qaqortingneq speaks, however, there is none of this sort of language: no madness, no religious metaphors, no sinister sexuality. Qaqortingneq's speech is a simple account of how his ancestors, while out hunting seals, found the ice-locked ships, went inside them, discovered some very dead men in there, and bored holes in the sides of the ships to let the light in, causing the ships to sink. (This last detail is fairly implausible—Inuit people are not so dumb about boats, and would know that if you make a hole in one it is likely to have adverse effects upon the boat. Also, the ships were copper-hulled; boring holes in them would not have been work for an idle afternoon. But MacEwen obviously felt a poetic need for this passage: the ships of death with their cargoes of corpses—placed there by MacEwen herself, not by the historical

record—settling down under the icy water. My own theory is that these ships sink in MacEwen's poem because the *Titanic* sank in Pratt's, and she just had to get those ships down to the bottom of the sea somehow, because it was so obviously—poetically—the right place for them. But I have no way of proving it.) None of the evil-Nature horrors that assail the Franklin expedition seem to bother the Inuit at all: not the ice, not the snow-blindness, not the disorientation and madness, not the lack of food. Qaqortingneq doesn't even mention the cold. MacEwen knows her ballad lore: in her drama, as in 'Lord Franklin', it's 'the Eskimo in his skin canoe' who is 'the only one who ever got through'.

It's Rasmussen who has the last word, however. At the beginning of the drama, he says to Franklin:

> The earth insists
> There is but one geography, but then
> There is another still—
> The complex, crushed geography of men.
>
> You carried all maps within you;
> Land masses moved in relation to you—
> As though you created the Passage
> By *willing* it to be.
> Ah Franklin!
> To follow you one does not need geography.
> . . . . . .
> The eye *creates* the horizon,
> The ear *invents* the wind,
> The hand reaching out from a parka sleeve
> By touch demands that the touched thing
> be.[20]

And at the end, Rasmussen returns to this point of view:

[20] Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Afterworlds* (Toronto, 1987), 42.

Now the great passage is open,
The one you dreamed of, Franklin,
And great white ships plough through it
Over and over again,
Packed with cargo and carefree men.
It is as though no one had to prove it
because the passage was always there.
Or . . . is it that the way was *invented*,
Franklin?
That you cracked the passage open
With the forces of sheer certainty?[21]

Here is the 'heroic' version of Franklin, with a vengeance—Franklin blasting his way through geology by thought-rays alone. This point of view—that the imagination and the will invent reality—has a corollary: if it was a success of the imagination that 'created' the Passage, it was a failure of the imagination that created the failure of the expedition itself. In simple terms: if you don't think right about the North, the ice-goddess will get you.

After MacEwen's verse play, something happened in the real world that tended to undercut the heroic version of Franklin: air travel became common, and a lot of the flights went right over the North-west Passage, where so many had died—viewed from an airplane vantage-point—like ants. My next glimpse of Franklin is in a short 1967 poem by Al Purdy, spoken from inside a jumbo jet, and called—no surprise—'The North West Passage'. It ends this way:

The North West Passage is found
And poor old Lady Franklin well
she doesn't answer the phone
tho once she traded her tears for ships
to scour the Arctic seas for her husband
but the *Terror* and *Erebus* sank long ago

[21] Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Afterworlds* (Toronto, 1987), 56–7.

and it's still half an hour before dinner
and there isn't much to do but write letters
and I can't think of anything more to say
about the North West Passage
but I'll think of something
maybe
a break-thru
to strawberries and ice cream for dinner[22]

After such a diminuendo, what resurrection is possible? Quite a few, as it happens. You can't keep a good myth down, and Franklin keeps popping up in unexpected places. For instance, the original ballad makes an appearance in Graeme Gibson's 1982 novel *Perpetual Motion*, which is set in nineteenth-century Ontario. The protagonist of this novel is an obsessive Scot named Robert Fraser, devoted to technological progress, which in him takes the form of a desire to build a perpetual-motion machine; so devoted is he, in fact, that he is willing to destroy Nature itself in order to do it. But it's not Robert Fraser who sings the Franklin ballad: it's his son Angus, who rebels against his father and, shortly after singing the Franklin song, and sickened by the slaughter of the Passenger Pigeons from which is father is making the money to finance his infernal machine, runs away and turns into a crazed wild man in the forest; becoming 'lost' himself, and taking, as it were, the side of Nature in the conflict between Nature and technology. Or being taken by Nature, claimed as one of her own. Here's the passage:

Angus interrupts with a drawn-out note, a phrase that becomes the song, a lament for the Erebus and the Terror, for Lord Franklin, beloved Franklin in the Frozen Ocean, for gallant seamen drifting like flowers beneath mountains of ice.[23]

[22] Al Purdy, *The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*, ed. Russell Brown (Toronto, 1986), 80, 81.

[23] Graeme Gibson, *Perpetual Motion* (Toronto, 1982), 213.

Again, as in MacEwen, there's a curious insistence on placing the lost Franklin expedition *down* or *under*. *Drifting* would certainly suggest that the sailors are drowned, are underneath the arctic ice-floes; yet, from all the evidence, they died on land. And *flowers* suggests something still more or less alive, or at least fresh-frozen. Gibson does not say *dead* flowers. I suspect that, again, the Franklin story and the *Titanic* story have interpenetrated one another. It was the *Titanic* that went down with a cargo of the living, not the *Terror* and the *Erebus*.

Or perhaps this dislocation has something to do with the tendency of Canadian literature to locate the oracular voice, not in a cave or on top of a mountain or in a church or temple, but under the water—or, to cite the title of a book by poet Alden Nowlan, *Under the Ice*. Did English-Canadian literature inherit this tendency from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, haunted by drowned Arthur Henry Hallam? Or does it have a real-life basis—does it have to do with the amount of water in and around Canada, and the number of people who seem incapable of keeping their heads above it? Or have the *Titanic*, the Franklin expedition, and the Victorian predilection for drowned poets all made their contribution? I don't know. I do know that I have always been baffled by Duncan Campbell Scott's 'The Piper of Arll',[24] in which a whole crew that appears to have something to do with Art sinks to the bottom of the sea, without even any holes being bored in the ship; and I have been equally intrigued by the end of A. M. Klein's long poem 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape', in which the prophetic poet 'shines | like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea'. Why there? Because, apparently, that's where Klein felt it appropriate to place him.[25]

[24] Duncan Campbell Scott, in A. J. Smith (ed.), *The Book of Canadian Poetry: A Critical and Historical Anthology*, 3rd edn. (Toronto, 1957), 208.

[25] A. M. Klein, *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (Toronto, 1948), 50.

The very latest writer to have a go at Franklin is Mordecai Richler, in his 1989 novel *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. *Solomon Gursky* is a big, sprawling book that is mostly, ostensibly, sort of, about the unconventional behaviour of a very rich Jewish family of ex-bootleggers in and around Montreal; but it is about many other things as well. Richler has always been a parodist as well as a satirist, and one of the many things *Solomon Gursky* delivers is an outrageous burlesque of the Franklin story.

Richler has done his homework. Among the sources he lists at the back of the book are, wouldn't you know, *Frozen in Time*, by Owen Beattie and John Geiger. He has also delved into the files of the *Beaver*, which, it should be explained, is the venerable publication on the North put out by the Hudson's Bay Company. And, yes, he knows his ballads. There it is, at the beginning of chapter 6: the last verse of the Franklin ballad, quoted from the one you've heard this evening.

After this tip of the hat to tradition and pathos, Richler goes to town. Drawing heavily on *Frozen in Time*, he recounts the provisioning of the expedition—'thousands of cans filled with preserved meat', and so forth—but he smuggles in some foodstuffs—and a couple of extra seamen—of his own:

> And then on the dark night before they sailed out of Stromness Harbour, in the Orkneys, their last home port, there was the curious case of the assistant surgeon of the Erebus boarding with a cabin boy wearing a silk top hat, the two of them lugging sacks of personal provisions. Six coils of stuffed derma, four dozen kosher salamis, a keg of schmaltz herring and uncounted jars of chicken fat . . .[26]

The expedition duly vanishes, and Richler then recounts the search for it—the efforts of Rae and McClintock—and the finding of the longboat with its corpses and its useless provisions scattered around it. But he appends, slyly, a jar of chicken fat. And to the souvenirs collected and brought back

[26] Mordecai Richler, *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (Markham, Ont., 1989), 46.

to England, he adds 'a black satin skullcap with curious symbols embroidered on it'. Some of the stupider English—the English are quite stupid in this book—ascribe the problematical hat to an Eskimo shaman. One of Richler's twentieth-century Jewish characters proposes to his historical society that possibly this yarmulka—for that is what it is—is proof that several Jews embarked with the Franklin expedition, but he is pooh-poohed; upon which he announces that, according to 'understandably unpublished accounts', the items found abandoned on Beechey Island included 'a filigreed black suspender belt, several pairs of frothy garters, some silk panties, three corsets, two female wigs, and four diaphanous petticoats'. Funny, though anachronistic. But the historical association does not laugh, and there are fisticuffs over whether or not the Franklin expedition included Jews.

Richler settles the matter by creating a team of archaeologists, who dig up one of the buried seamen, à la *Frozen in Time*. This man, supposedly the ship's doctor, turns out to have been buried not only in a prayer shawl, but with a bunch of spurious recommendations and a phoney medical degree.

This is the *dead* Jew. The other one—the cabin-boy—gets away, and turns out to be Ephraim Gursky, grandfather of the Solomon of the title, and embodiment of every available Robert W. Service man-of-the-North cliché-image, plus a few outrages Richler has added on.

Solomon Gursky is Richler's most 'Canadian' book. In his own left-handed way, it's a reclamation of his native territory. In many of his other books, the movement is in the opposite direction: his protagonists can hardly wait to get *out* of Canada. But Ephraim is willing to commit physical injury in order to get *in*, and getting in means getting into the mythology. 'Solomon Gursky Was Here' is like 'Kilroy Was Here': Kilroy never existed, but, during the war, he was here, there, and everywhere; and so it is with the Gurskys. If there has no hitherto been room for them in such solemn tales as the Franklin

expedition, Richler will jolly well make room for them, even if he has to do it by travesty. *Especially* if he has to do it by travesty, because travesty is his preferred mode. The Richler version of Franklin is amusing enough by itself, but when read in context—*against* the reverential Canadian literary treatments of Franklin—it's like a fart in church: hilarious but, well, sacrilegious. As Richler intends.

Several other novelists have written about Franklin, most notably Rudy Wiebe.[27] But now I'd like to backtrack a little, and end with another song: this time not a traditional folk-song, but a song written by the well-known Canadian singer Stan Rogers. It's called 'The Northwest Passage', it appears on a 1981 Rogers tape of the same name, and it's worth noting that Stan Rogers died in pure *Titanic* style, in an airplane fire during which he stood aside and helped others to escape. His song is a reprise of the spirit of earlier exploration, seen in its heroic aspect; the other names mentioned are all those of northern explores. Like MacEwen's Rasmussen, he speaks from the vantage-point of one for whom exploration has become a metaphor for a spiritual journey, because the real, physical puzzle has been solved and the way made easy; but it's been solved by the dead explorers, who are somehow there, incarnate, in the routes they helped to trace. Watch the chorus, in which 'the hand of Franklin' is still active, still 'reaching', still 'tracing'. Make no mistake about it, ladies and gentlemen: Franklin lives.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Chorus

Ah, for just one time, I would take the Northwest Passage
To find the hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea
Tracing one warm line through a land so wide and savage
And make a Northwest Passage to the sea.

[27] Rudy Wiebe, *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic* (Edmonton, 1989)—a collection of essays—and *A Discovery of Strangers* (Toronto, 1994)—a book about Franklin but an earlier expedition.

Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew

Verse 1

Westward from the Davis Strait, 'tis there 'twas said to lie
The sea-route to the Orient for which so many died
Seeking gold and glory, leaving weathered broken bones
And a long-forgotten lonely cairn of stones.

Verse 2

Three centuries thereafter, I take passage overland
In the footsteps of brave Kelso, where his 'sea of flowers' began
Watching cities rise before me, then behind me sink again
This tardiest explorer, driving hard across the plain.

Verse 3

And through the night, behind the wheel, the mileage clicking West
I think upon Mackenzie, David Thompson and the rest
Who cracked the mountain ramparts, and did show a path for me
To race the roaring Fraser to the sea.

Verse 4

How then am I so different from the first men through this way?
Like them I left a settled life, I threw it all away
To seek a Northwest Passage at the call of many men
To find there but the road back home again.[28]

[28] Stan Rogers, from Chris Gudgeon, *An Unfinished Conversation: The Life and Music of Stan Rogers* (Toronto, 1993), 182, 183.