

The Iceman Cometh Across: An Interview with Thomas Wharton

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Article abstract

Author Thomas Wharton discusses the process of writing history in his historical novel *Icefields* (1995). He talks about the historical pioneering figures of the Canadian Rockies, the sense of "mountain metaphysics" he writes about, and the tradition of writing about the mountains. He also discusses the influence of modernism on his novel, calling *Icefields* "a modernist novel slightly out of its time." He comments on the relationship between *Icefields* and his second novel, *Salamander*.

The Iceman Cometh Across: An Interview with Thomas Wharton

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY HERB WYILE

THOMAS WHARTON was born in Grande Prairie and spent his teens in Jasper. He moved to Edmonton to do a B.A. in English at the University of Alberta, and subsequently embarked on an M.A. in creative writing. His Master's thesis became his first novel, *Icefields* (1995), a historical novel set in Jasper during the exploration and subsequent commercialization of the Columbia icefields. The novel won a number of prizes, including the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Caribbean and Canada). Wharton went on to pursue his Ph.D. at the University of Calgary, where he wrote his second novel, *Salamander* (2001), a fantastical, Borgesian labyrinth of narratives set in eighteenth-century Europe and New France. *Salamander* was nominated for the Governor General's Award for fiction. I talked to Thomas Wharton in Edmonton in June of 2002. He is not at all icy.

HW Your novel *Icefields* traces the history of the Rockies, and particularly of Jasper and the Columbia *icefields* over the course of half a century. In *Icefields* you provide these wonderful definitions of geological terms, which serve as chapter headings in the novel, and I want to begin with your definition of a "moraine": "Rock debris deposited by the receding ice: a chaotic jumble of fragments, from which history must be reconstructed." How does that description speak to your sense of writing history? Is that a reflection of how you see history and the difficulties of reproducing it or representing it in fiction?

TW One of the reasons I write is my fascination with the complexity of life around us at any moment of our lives — all those things happening in our own lives and in the larger world around us — how all

these things pass into the past so quickly, leaving us with just traces to hang onto, and that's what we end up having to work with, as writers or historians or whatever, to reconstruct what happened in the past. We pick certain things and we make a narrative out of what we feel is important in the past, worth remembering, and string these things together and try to make something logical or at least rational, or something that we can hold on to ...

HW Something coherent.

TW That's the word. I'm fascinated by that fact and what does that mean. Does that mean that history is a kind of fiction, because it's a reshaping of things? To me the moraine is a kind of metaphor for that, because geologists will do the same thing; they'll look at this heap of rubble and they'll say "OK, these pieces obviously came from this layer, and these pieces came from this layer"; they'll reconstruct a mountain out of this rubble.

HW So there's a kind of speculative and, as you suggest, fictional quality to that process.

TW And so much of it just is simply lost. You cannot bring everything together and tell a complete story. It's impossible. It's one of those areas in which writing shades off into those philosophical questions about ... where does everything go? Can somehow everything be captured, in this world or another world?

HW And what kinds of things last, what kind of things are left over, and how does that incomplete record shape what we think of as history?

TW And what does it tell us about who we are, right? That's the other thing, too. We use history to try to figure out for ourselves who we are and why we're in this particular place, time and situation.

HW Let's talk about some of the fragments that precipitated the narrative of *Icfields*. That image of somebody being stuck in a crevasse was, I think, a very early one, and at one point you mentioned one of the episodes out of the tales of Johnny Chinook as being an influence there. Can you talk a little bit about those stories and about the specific tale that stuck in your mind?

TW Well, I can't claim to remember which exact story it was I might have mentioned before, but I know that they were all influential, because at first *Icfields* started out as a collection of short pieces which

were going to bring the Johnny Chinook stories into a contemporary style.

HW And these were oral tales, weren't they? Sort of tall tales out of the oral tradition.

TW Yes, there was this ethnographer from the States, who came to Alberta in the 30s and 40s, and just traveled around and talked to oral storytellers, and he thought, "here's a gold mine, this culture which is relatively new, and people are still transmitting their history like this." But also, a lot of these were tall tales, and so he collected tall tales — mostly that's what he was interested in — and he invents this character called Johnny Chinook, who's sort of the spirit of storytelling. I read these stories and I enjoyed them, and then I found out from my uncle that my grandfather had contributed a couple of these tales to this collection, although he personally isn't mentioned. And I thought, "this is great, I'm following in [his] footsteps."

HW Johnny Chinook — just from the little bit I read — is always accomplishing these epic and somewhat preposterous things.

Sticking to that same image of somebody being stuck in the crevasse: in the original expedition — I think it was in the Bow Valley — involving Norman Collie, one of the expedition members, C.S. Thompson, who appears very briefly in *Icefields* as a character, fell into a crevasse and was, like Edward Byrne, stuck upside down. Was that also an early impetus for the whole narrative, or that side of it?

TW It was. I wanted to use a glacier in this narrative. I knew that I was going to do that. Living in Jasper and going up to the icefields had made a really deep impact on me — that landscape. I knew I wanted to write about that and I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do. I knew that somebody was going to go into the ice or something was, and that time was going to be involved. And then I started reading the historical accounts, and I read Collie's book, and there was this guy who had this mishap, this Thompson, and the writing started to shift more toward history and fact rather than fantasy and tall tale. Thompson was there fairly early on as a template for what happens to Byrne. Collie then became much more interesting to me, once I'd borrowed this idea of falling into the ice. I think it was Collie who said, "well, I'm not married, I'll be the one to climb down and rescue him," and they had this little argument. Collie did make that statement, if I remember correctly, when Thompson was in the ice. And that, to me, was a really fascinating thing for somebody

to say. It said so much about who these guys were, and their time and place and all that. So that then became more interesting, and Byrne then developed on his own as a completely fictional character.

HW (*laughs*) I won't go on about the interlibrary loans that I tried to get, when I was trying to find "Edward Byrne: A Life in Ice."

TW Yeah, I've been taken to task by a few people about that "You can't do this! Putting fake entries in a bibliography."

HW I thought that was so funny when I finally discovered that. Here's a question, and this really fascinates me: in *Icefields* some of the characters are historical figures — Norman Collie, who we just were talking about, Lewis (you call him Lucas) Swift, who lived in Jasper House — whereas others are based on historical figures — Sexsmith, Frank Trask, and Freya Becker. I'm really curious about what goes on behind those decisions about whether a character is going to have the same name, or be quite similar to a historical figure, or is going to be a modified version. What makes you feel that you can leave a historical figure more or less intact, and what kinds of things lead you to decide that a character becomes somebody else? Maybe it's not a conscious decision, but how does a historical figure become a similar but also different character?

TW It's true that, in writing, these decisions sometimes are difficult to reconstruct, but I do know that when I was writing *Icefields* I was pretty cautious about all this kind of thing. As a general rule of thumb, if I knew that somebody was going to become a major person in the narrative, then I decided I needed to fictionalize him a bit more, because I was wary of claiming all sorts of characteristics for people who really existed, imagining things about them. So there's a rough dividing line, I think, between those I'd given their historical name and tried to be accurate about — they generally were the more minor players — and the ones who were the major characters. They may be based on historical people, but, as I say, once I knew that they were going to be major it was time for a name change and all that kind of thing. That had to do mostly with caution and just feeling my way as a writer, since this was my first book and I wasn't sure what I could get away with.

HW And that's also a typical convention of the historical novel, to have the principal historical players on the margins and to concentrate on a fictional character as the protagonist, who is involved in the action but ...

TW You can see how certain historical writers enjoy that so much. For instance, Tolstoy with *War and Peace*; you can almost feel his delight that he can make Napoleon this minor little person who appears once or twice.

HW The Earl of Sexsmith in *Icefields*, of course, is based on the historical Earl of Southesk, an aristocrat who came to the Rockies on a hunting expedition in the nineteenth century. How did Sexsmith come to play such a role in the novel?

TW Well, I was just fascinated by the Earl of Southesk, and I'd written about him in other forms, in a short story and so on. So I had this other material and I thought this would add another layer to *Icefields* that might be interesting, kind of historical, but also it would allow me to introduce mythology into this, native mythology. So I decided to introduce a fictionalized version of this character that I'd written about before.

HW What about the grail motif? The original Earl of Southesk was just interested in hunting and bagging big game, and you added this whole quest for the grail — this vision that he has and his desire to find it up in the mountains, in the *icefields*.

TW I think that was just an offshoot of what I understood of the Earl of Southesk himself, the historical guy. He was a very romantically-minded person, really into Shakespeare, reading by night in the tent, giving these poetic names to things and so on, and I just decided to go further in that direction, and make him somebody who sees the mountains in a very spiritual context, in his own way ...

HW It's a very European way, is that what you're getting at?

TW I think so. I think it comes around to my sense of Jasper when I lived there. It was a very British place. There weren't many First Nations people around when I was growing up there. There was a really strong British heritage and I was quite aware of that, and that coloured my sense of the place.

HW That sense of the Earl of Sexsmith in some ways being very Eurocentric in his outlook is really consolidated through his relationship with his servant, Viraj, who is your invention, right?

TW Right.

HW Southesk's original helper was Métis. So, given your interest in the history of native people in Jasper, which figures fairly prominently in

Icefields, why make your character East Indian? That's quite an interesting jump.

TW I think it just has to do with the way my mind works as a writer. It's one of those decisions that you can't really rationalize. My mind looks for incongruities, it looks for contrasts, it looks for things that stand out or seem strange, or it invents those things if it can't find them. I'd always been interested in the fact that the aboriginal people here were called Indians, by mistake, and so I decided to weave that into the story as well, to take this person from a very, very humid, hot place, and have him describe his first moment of touching ice.

HW Expose him to a world of ice.

TW Just the contrast in that, and the shock to his system, and so on. It also involves this beautiful woman, too, right? All of that comes together, hits him, at the same time.

HW Plus he's half-caste, so there's an interesting parallel between him and the Métis.

TW Right. He's almost a character that could have ... there could have been a novel about him. In some ways I always feel frustrated that, in weaving this together, certain characters only became minor players, when they were really fascinating to me in their own right. I've always thought that about Freya especially. There's probably another book there about her adventures, elsewhere.

HW The character of Freya is influenced by a couple of historical figures: Mary Schaeffer, who was supposedly the first European woman to see Maligne Lake, and also Freya Stark, who was a very prominent mountaineer, but not in the Rockies.

TW No, she explored Arabia and other areas around the Middle East and Asia as well. Freya Stark is a wonderful writer; her prose is beautiful, poetic. I don't think in that sense she's too much like Freya. Freya is more journalistic and looking for ways to get a good story out of something. I just borrowed the name and the sense of an independent woman going out and doing these things that were sort of shocking for a woman to do. Freya Stark was on her own on many of these travels and it was so unusual for a white woman to go out alone in these places. So I guess I borrowed some of that for Freya Becker, the fictional character.

HW And of course the name Freya gives that character a certain mythic resonance, as well.

TW It's part of the whole Nordic thing that I'm doing there. My idea was that this book was going to be cold and icy in so many ways, and so I borrowed her name from Norse mythology. It's just one more little nudge in that direction.

HW How do you view the whole history of discovery, particularly in the Rockies? I'm thinking of the portrait of Norman Collie, which I find is somewhat ambivalent in the novel, because on the one hand he's portrayed as a renaissance man, almost — he's incredibly accomplished and versatile as a mountaineer, as a scientist — but on the other hand he's also a kind of extension of colonial conquest, you know, the sort of path that Sexsmith is cutting in the narrative, and it made me wonder about your view of the bigger picture of discovery, how you see its role in the history of Canada.

TW A character like Collie becomes ambivalent probably because I feel ambivalent about that whole process of discovery. On the one hand I feel a great deal of affection for people like him and A.P. Coleman, for instance, who came out to the Rockies as a professor of geology, supposedly wanting to write about the geology of the place.

HW He was at the University of Toronto.

TW Right. And he ended up writing books that became very poetic and appreciative of the landscape and the people he met, and it's interesting to see the scientist and the — I don't know what you'd call the other half — poet, I guess, in the same person, writing, shifting back and forth between these. So, I have a lot of affection and appreciation for these guys, because they were amazing in a lot of ways. But it's true, on the other hand, they were one of the less noxious examples of the awful things that were done in the name of spreading a particular kind of civilization around the world, right? I mean, they were out there, no doubt at least partly, for a similar kind of reason: to expand the knowledge base of what was seen as the centre of civilization, British, European civilization. And so in some ways it's tied into all the other sorts of exploitations and things that happened in North America and all over the place. So I guess as a writer I want to exercise my critical faculties but I try not to be too judgmental, from my point of view. I want to see if I can present a much more balanced picture of these people. I think Sexsmith tips over into ...

HW Satire.

TW But these other guys, these later Victorian explorers and writers, I didn't see them in quite the same way.

HW It strikes me that there's an interesting duality to it, in the sense that mountaineering is a kind of conquest on the one hand, but it's also an aesthetic experience, and that makes these figures very ambivalent. There is a lot to admire there, but it is part of a staking out of territory, a claiming of territory.

TW "Because we have seen this and we have been here it now belongs to us," in a sense. But I'm attracted to these characters and these people because part of what they get out of going there is similar to my feelings about the place and having lived there and my feelings towards the mountains and the wilderness. So I feel I can understand them, at least partly.

HW Is it that there's a similar appreciation of the sublime? Is that a word you want to trot out here?

TW That's part of it. I guess I mean more in terms of something in their character that makes them come out to these places, the urge to get away from civilization, not so much to be a representative of civilization but to get away from it.

HW That strikes me as a really interesting paradox: getting away from civilization but bringing it with you at the same time, and that's the paradox of tourism, too. In some ways the patterns of tourism that you're looking at later on in the novel are a kind of extension of what you've described of these earlier explorers.

Continuing with the historical influences behind various characters: Frank Trask, the guide and entrepreneur in *Icelfields*, is based at least in part on the Brewster family, a family of entrepreneurs behind what is now a substantial tourism operation in the West, particularly in the Rockies. Can you talk a little about their role in opening up the mountains to tourism and to commercializing the Rockies?

TW Well, they were really crucial. They were there almost from the beginning. There were four brothers, and two of them started up an outfitting and guiding operation in Banff, and a lot of what they did was taking people up through the Bow River Valley up towards Jasper, and I think they helped out at least one of Collie's expeditions, if I'm not mistaken. I know that they were involved with many people who came and did exploration and other people, too, out there to draw and sketch

and paint and so on. Eventually two other brothers set up an outfitting operation in Jasper, too. So all the way along they were part of that. I've always felt a little guilty about my portrayal of Trask. I guess I just let him be who he was and it was only afterwards that I thought, "Well, he's not really like these Brewster boys at all," from what I understood of them. They weren't so crassly...

HW Commercial.

TW Yeah, commercial or materialistic as he was. They had much more of an appreciation for leaving things as they were. Eventually their company got bigger and bigger until they finally — I think it was in the 60s — sold out to Greyhound or something.

HW They did, like Trask, develop snowcoach tours up onto the *icefields*, and that certainly had a great deal to do with the level of penetration of tourism into the Rockies.

TW I guess with Trask I let my imagination run wild, with this diorama business and all of these other things that he wanted to do. I don't think they were really like that, you know. So in a sense he really seems to me to be a complete invention. There never was someone like that. But he was fun to write.

HW Well, he provides some wonderful opportunities for satire of some of the excesses of tourist promotion. Speaking of Trask, there were a couple of guides, I think, who accompanied the original Collie expedition. One of them was the legendary Bill Peyto, who figures pretty prominently in the history of the Rockies. Is he behind the scenes at all?

TW I think there's a bit of him in Trask for sure, the crustiness and the playing up of the business of being a mountain man. Trask was like that to a certain extent. But there's also a bit of him in Byrne, oddly enough, in that Peyto was a guy who really wanted to get away from it all. He was a totally independent person who was happy living in a cabin by himself for months at a time. There's a famous story about how another mountain man, I think it was Jimmy Simpson, came to stay with him for a couple of weeks up in his trapping cabin somewhere, and they hardly said two words to each other for several weeks. They just went about their business, and finally one day Peyto said, "So, when are you leaving?" It was like, "Get out of here!" Yeah, he's a wonderful, fascinating, colourful, romantic figure, and in a sense he was almost too good to use ...

HW Straight up.

TW Straight up. I felt it would be too easy to just take him and stick him into a book like this, and so I stayed away from him to a certain extent, but I did put something of that nature — going and hiding up in a hut on a glacier — into what Byrne does.

HW That makes for an interesting reversal, because of course Byrne and Trask are really pitted against each other in the novel. In a lot of ways Trask is responsible for interrupting that solitude by promoting the *icefields* and making a lot of people want to get away from it all there, in the same place, together.

TW I really noticed that the last time I was at the *icefields*. They built a huge new hotel there, and my wife and kids and I stopped there on the way back from B.C. I was floored by how many people there were that day. The parking lot was just full, and the hotel and the gift shop were packed with people. It had never been like that before, that I'd seen.

HW Had you spent quite a bit of time there as a kid, exploring? How old were you when you lived in Jasper?

TW I lived there from the age of fourteen to ... I guess it would have been eighteen. So not that long. And it was all tied up with being a teenager and all that stuff. Oftentimes I just went off by myself because of teen angst or whatever, needing to be alone and think about things.

HW That's right. What great possibilities for being alone.

TW So it's all bound up in my memory of that place, and that time of life and so on.

HW Speaking of Peyto as a colourful figure, there are a lot of colourful figures who populate the history of Jasper and the Rockies — Jim Simpson is one that you mentioned. Were there some interesting stories and figures that it might have been tempting to bring into the book but that never made it? Or do you want to save those up?

TW There are some I may use later. I did have a lot more little nuggets of information in the manuscript at one point, and when I was working on it with Rudy Wiebe, who was my editor with NeWest Press, he said something like, "Put everything you know into the book, not everything you can think of." That was the way he put it. So there were a lot more of these things and I had to cut some of them out because they were just there because I found them fascinating, thought I'd just put them into the collage; they just didn't belong, really. They were there like

a kind of gossip around the story: “this also happened, too; did you know that?” But there are some wacky stories. The Rockies collected more than their fair share of kooks ...

HW ... and eccentrics.

TW Oh yeah. I don't know if you've heard of the story of Operation Habakkuk, but during the Second World War, all these ships were being sunk in the Atlantic by the U-boats, and Churchill was looking for some way to get the supply lines across the ocean more secure, and this person named Jeffrey Pike, who was in a mental hospital at the time or something, suggested, “What about ships of ice?” They would look like icebergs, and they would go by unmolested by the U-boats, right? So they decided, “Well, OK, let's try this. Nothing else seems to work.” They set up this operation at Patricia Lake in Jasper, the town, and it was all hush-hush. And this Jeffrey Pike was put in charge of this and soon found that ... you know, he tried to create these chunks of ice and they sunk too much. And he tried to float them by putting wood chips ... he invented this stuff he called Pike-crete, after himself; it was wood chips mixed with ice, but it still didn't work. And then the people who were working with him on the project, the labourers, were Doukhobors, from B.C. or somewhere; when they discovered that this project was actually for the war effort, they put their tools down and quit. So the whole thing was just a farce from beginning to end, and was finally scrapped.

HW Going back to A.P. Coleman, whom you mentioned earlier, and the kinds of ideas and experience that he represents: through Edward Byrne, who's a fictional character, you're engaging with a number of Victorian scientists whose geological interests and metaphysical qualms were somehow behind their fascination with glaciers and with mountaineering. I wonder if you could talk a bit about figures like Louis Agassiz, and John Tyndall, and Coleman, and what attracts you about them as figures, and their obsession with glaciers and mountaineering.

TW Originally I was seeking out their books for the sake of information, primarily it was just research, but I really became attracted to their writing, and what drew me towards them as characters was the beauty of their writing about weather, about ice, about rock. All three of them are really lovely, wonderful prose writers, Tyndall especially. His descriptions of clouds and glaciation and so on are really, really lovely, and so that deepened my sense of these people and added a layer to the writing of the book. It added a layer of — I'm not sure what to call it — mountain

metaphysics or something. Here we had these people who were ostensibly trying to be very scientific about everything but they were still in an age in history where they were allowed to wax poetic about things in a way that science has kind of completely sealed itself off from. There still are popularizers of science who are very good writers and so there's still that kind of thing going on, but ...

HW It seems to me that there's an element of wonder there that's tinged with religion or metaphysics or something that distinguishes it from popular science writing today.

TW Sure. I think it goes a long way back in the history of writing about mountains, thinking about mountains. For a long time in Europe mountains were thought of as frightening places; you stay away from them, right? They're just dangerous and awful and scary, and that gradually becomes this notion of the sublime, something that's terrifying and awe-inspiring about nature and that mountains are a very powerful example of. That goes way back, and you can see that in their writing as well. They're allowing themselves to be overcome by that at times. I know, in a sense, that whole thing has been deconstructed as kind of a cultural ...

HW Construct.

TW Yeah, but at the same time I feel that it's real, too, in a way, that I have felt those feelings, right, before I'd ever heard it ...

HW Deconstructed.

TW Or whatever. And so, as I said before, I just have a sense of sympathy with these people, a sort of understanding.

HW You want to retain a sense of wonder and in some ways there's just too great a degree of cynicism in that elimination of immediacy from one's experience of nature and particularly of the mountains.

TW I think that was one of the main concerns for me, to find a way to write about this place that would avoid clichés of writing about the mountains and would if possible somehow be close to that wordless experience of a place. That was the challenge and that was why the book ended up in the form and style that it did. I've talked many times about trying to mime the landscape in my writing and in the structure of the book, and that's why it's so fragmentary and sparse, because I'm looking for a way to make the language reflect something about this place — the language itself, as a form and as a shape and as a sound.

HW In the novel there seems to be an ongoing comparison between historical time and geological time. There's a real contrast between the — I guess the only word I can think of is glacial — progress of changes in the landscape and the speed with which change is happening in the social and cultural world of the Rockies and the world outside. Any reflections on that?

TW It goes back to what I was saying before about my fascination with the way things slip into the past and then we're left with trying to put together bits and pieces that we choose from the past. That then becomes a kind of fascination with time, too; what is time, and how does it flow, and why does it seem to flow at different rates at different times in our lives and so on, and how things do persist — how we consider ourselves living at this particular moment in time but we are also, in some ways, still Victorians and we are people of earlier eras in certain ways, right, that can be seen when we read books or texts or look at documents from those past eras, and you can make these connections and realize that something has persisted and has cropped up again in us.

HW I suppose there's a tendency to think of progress and evolution as absolutely uniform.

TW Yeah, right. I don't believe in that at all. I think that all of the centuries of human development are still in some ways present in the present moment. So I guess I began to see the glacier as a kind of metaphor for that. The ice comes down and covers the landscape and when it recedes the landscape is changed, and things can be embedded in the ice, pop out later unexpectedly. In a sense, then, that's a metaphor for time covering things over so that we think that they're gone, and then they can somehow come to life again, be extracted or found. It's one of those strange paradoxes that strikes you once in a while, in a particular moment seems very crystal clear; I suddenly realize, "My God, I'm still thinking like a Victorian!"

HW But that contrast also — and this is sort of a cliché — is tied up with that sense of awe. Looking at the incredibly gradual rate of geological change in some ways diminishes the importance of human history, I guess, or change in human societies, makes what we think of as historical cataclysms seem very minor and almost ephemeral.

TW (*significant pause, laughter*) Yeah, I'd say that. I'm at a loss for what to add to that.

HW I know that one of your main interests is modernism. *Icefields* really strikes me as a confrontation with or engagement with modernism, much like Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* is a real engagement with modernism, but in an urban context, as opposed to *Icefields*, which is obviously dealing with the — well, you can't really say countryside — with the wilderness, with the mountains.

TW It's true. When I started out writing the book I hadn't really made any kind of a connection between my interest in modernism — in Joyce, in Yeats, people like that — and what I was doing. But at a certain point I realized that I had various motifs that were running through the book and that were recurring; for instance, there's a motif of tea-drinking and hot liquids that keeps cropping up throughout the book. I realized I have sort of organized things to make these connections between these points that don't necessarily seem to be connected at first, and I see that as a very modernist way of approaching a book; in some ways it's a Joycean way. This novel, to me at any rate, doesn't feel at all Joycean in style, but at least in the way it was put together. Joyce conceived of each chapter of his novel and how certain motifs would crop up again in later parts of the novel but a different riff would be played on them, and that's how I worked there. So in a sense I was supplying, for myself perhaps, a modernist novel that Canada had never had, right, at the actual time high modernism — or whatever you want to call it — was at its peak. There wasn't anything like that in Canada. Canada was still struggling to develop any kind of a literature at that point and there wasn't any experimentation and so on going on. I like to think of *Icefields* as a modernist novel slightly out of its time.

HW But what about its engagement with the modern age — maybe modernity is a better word — the whole idea of progress and the development of what we see as a modern society and all these amenities coming to the Rockies? It goes back in some ways to the idea of civilization penetrating into the wilderness.

TW It allowed me to explore a leading edge of that process happening, and that's part of the reason why I brought myth into it, you know, the story of the girl named Athabasca. Her story doesn't quite make sense, it doesn't click together with what comes later with the Europeans and so on. There's something missing there or something's lost in the translation, and modernity does that because it wants to make sense out of things that don't make sense in the way that it sees the world. Certainly Sexsmith is

a kind of prototype of that, not being able to understand, wanting to see things in his own way, through ...

HW Through his own cultural prism.

TW To make use in his way of something that to her might mean something entirely different. So that's definitely happening there, but what's also happening is that I, as a writer, am borrowing from myth to inform the book and its motifs and its interests, so in a sense I'm doing something similar to what other modernists might have done, like Joyce taking the Odysseus myth and writing that through the modern world and making parallels and ironic contrasts between the mythic and the modern.

HW Right. But at the same time, there's a certain amount of self-consciousness, or self-reflexivity, in the narrative — the description of a moraine that we started out the conversation with — that in some ways affiliates the book with postmodernism as well. Would you go for that?

TW I don't know if I would. I try to stay away from that particular label. It seems to me to have grown to mean just about anything that's come after, right, and so I don't find it all that useful and it doesn't really help me to understand the process of actually writing, because these things aren't really conscious choices, you know. You don't set out to do something postmodernly, as a writer. That wasn't anywhere in the original impulse. A book becomes, for me ... certain premises are laid down and certain things I want to explore, and then it takes on its own life, you know, it starts to take its own shape. I think what happens with those moments of self-reflexivity is that what sustains me through the writing of the book is my fascination with character, let's say, or place or landscape or whatever, but also the process I'm going through, but I don't consciously think about that. It's just that the energy of the writing gets diverted at times into comments or statements or suggestions or echoes in the book that are in some way about what I'm doing. But it's often only later that people point them out to me, and then I go, "Oh I see, you're right, that's true. I am kind of talking about what I'm doing."

HW But that doesn't have to be a function of self-identification — you know, "I'm a postmodern writer and therefore I write postmodernly" — but in some ways it goes back to history and the historical moment in which this kind of reflection on the activity one is engaged in is becoming really quite recurrent and certainly a recurrent artistic motif or conscious strategy. That drawing attention to artifice, which is part of the

satire of tourism, at least as I see it, shares certain characteristics with those reflections on the process of writing, on the process of reconstructing or representing the past. But that doesn't mean you have to go around wearing a T-shirt that says "I am postmodern!"

TW That's right. I know that, because I was fascinated by the modernists and reading a lot of theory and criticism and so on, these things probably creep in, but very rarely are they intended. Often when I catch myself doing something like that deliberately, I will edit it out, because ...

HW That's not where you want to go.

TW Well, I want to discover it as I go along. One of the main reasons I write is because I'm a reader, and I love reading, and I want to read a book that I haven't read before and I can't find it anywhere, so I have to write it. So I don't like to be too many steps ahead of what I'm writing. I get a lot of my energy from not knowing how it's all going to develop.

HW That's interesting.

Going back to this engagement with modernity, that whole idea of progress: what place does the First World War play in that? The First World War is appearing in a lot of contemporary historical fiction, and so I found it really interesting how it plays a pretty pivotal and cataclysmic role in *Icefields*, in this history of a world — I'm talking about the mountains here — which is really so far removed from it geographically. How did that burst into the narrative? Was it just a matter of that was the era you were dealing with and therefore this was going to be a part of it?

TW I had decided to set the opening of the book at this historical moment in 1898, when Europeans first saw the Columbia *icefields*, and it was a question then of what was happening in the world at that time. When I got to the early twentieth century, there was no avoiding the First World War, really, at all. I think it also had to do with the Britishness of the place — many of the people who I knew when I was in Jasper, the older people, the parents of friends of mine, who had stories about the past, and their sense of their link with the British empire, and the feeling that Jasper was part of that; even though it was far away, they were somehow going to maintain certain aspects of Britishness in this far-off place. And there was an old fellow, who was dead before we moved there — I can't remember his name, unfortunately — but he had been in the First World War and he had come back home to Jasper, and he became sort of the town eccentric. People thought that maybe something had happened

to him there, had affected him in some way. He became famous for all these weird things that he would do. He dug tunnels under his house, sort of going towards his neighbours' houses — they were never finished and he had assembled all sorts of machines down there, old junk that he dragged down there. Sometimes he'd sit up on his roof, I guess, and play the fiddle, or something like that. So he was always in the back of my mind, and when I was looking for a way to bring the war right into my story, I think that I was borrowing from that and bringing it into the story of Hal.

HW It really seems like an intrusion of history, a certain kind of history, cataclysmic history into this, not idyllic world, but peaceful and remote world. I found that really interesting in terms of the novel's obsession or engagement with history as a whole.

TW You know, in a place like Jasper, really the decisions that were made there were made by people mostly of British heritage, so you see things like, for instance, the mountain that's now known as Edith Cavell, which was Montaigne de la Grande Traverse at one time when the fur trade was going through there, and of course, you know, the name couldn't stay French. It was changed to Fitzhugh, and then during the First World War, there was this huge patriotic indignation about the shooting of this nurse who had helped these Allied soldiers escape in ...

HW Belgium.

TW In Belgium, right. So you see that somebody from somewhere, not in Jasper, makes the decision to change the name of this mountain to reflect this patriotic feeling. Somebody of the centre just arbitrarily decides to rename this mountain far away.

HW The railway plays a huge part in the novel, and the railway baron, the character Anton Sibelius, is a bit of a sketch of William Cornelius van Horne, who was a huge force behind the building of the trans-continental railway. Now, *Icefields* doesn't strike me as exactly celebrating the railway. It seems to be definitely a kind of intrusion into the wilderness and particularly into the lives of the native people living in the area, and that comes through in Sara's cold reception of Byrne when he returns to the mountains later. How do you see the railway's role in Canadian history and particularly in the history of the Rockies?

TW I grew up with the National Dream story, the Pierre Berton myth of the railway as this epic, heroic project that sewed the country

together and so, years later, coming to look at this place and write about it, I realized that I needed to deal with the whole story of the railroad. I certainly, by that time, wasn't interested in retelling the same old story, right? And I became aware, in looking at the history of Jasper, that there had been a whole community of people displaced so that this thing could come through, and that to me seemed much more worthy of telling, rather than just retelling the same old story. The building of this railroad is still a magnificent story in its own right but, as I say, there's more to it than that. There are these other little stories that have been buried, and aren't well known, and as a writer I guess I'm looking for those fragments that somebody else hasn't noticed.

HW Because they're all part of the picture and in some ways it's a righting of the picture, which is distorted in these very epic and celebratory terms. Even though the accomplishment itself is certainly momentous, it's not the whole picture.

TW No.

HW Let's talk a bit about the environmental dimensions of the novel. In your portrait of the commercialization of the environment, essentially the opening up of the Rockies to tourism, and in Trask's use of job creation in defence of his development schemes — when he's arguing with Byrne, trying to justify making the region attractive to tourists and knocking down trees and so on — I find that the novel really comes across as highly anachronistic, that is, really speaking of the present as it represents the past. So it's addressing pressing ecological concerns of today through the way it seems to be presenting to us a past era. Was that something that was quite conscious on your part?

TW Well, I think the story of Byrne at some point deliberately became a story that was meant to show a development of an environmental consciousness. He kind of stands for that larger movement in history of people becoming aware that maybe civilization isn't all it's cracked up to be, so, rather than just march right into these places that have yet to be developed, we should somehow protect them. I think over the course of the novel he moves towards what we see today as an environmental, ecologically oriented attitude.

HW Well, the spoofing of some of Trask's development schemes — for instance, when he wants to import penguins and have them swimming in the meltwater pool, and his desire to construct this very cheesy façade

around his bus terminal — really just made me think of the present and the way that everything is all spectacle, all artifice and simulacrum.

TW Life does imitate fiction there, because they now do have this huge diorama of Athabasca glacier. It's in this new chalet hotel and it's a great big representation of what you can actually see outside, with little pointers to show you what this and that is, and you can walk underneath it.

HW Just on that note of Byrne as a proto-environmentalist: at one point Elspeth asks Byrne to take this stone that she's been given by a guest at the chalet, this young boy, to take it back to its place of origin, basically put it back in nature. Is this a sort of metaphor that really speaks for your feelings about the natural world, your own ecological attitude — that it's all about leaving as small a footprint as possible?

TW I think in some way I felt like a bit of a plunderer, I guess you could say. I had talked to people in Jasper who weren't too happy to find out that I'd fictionalized things. A couple of people complained to me, "We have enough trouble getting the tourists to understand what really happened here. Why are you doing this, changing things around, changing the landscape?" That bothered me and made me a little wary of what I was doing. I was aware that putting that stone back was in some way a gesture that I was trying to make towards the place.

Later, long after I'd finished the book, I came across George Steiner's theory of the fourfold aspect of translation, in his book *After Babel*. There are four aspects to translation. There's — I can't even remember the four — there's incursion and extraction, and the last one is reciprocity. That's his idea that a translator has to somehow give something back to the original, and I was delighted by that idea because I thought maybe in some way I was trying to do that too. My way of somehow giving something back to the wordless place — you know, nature, wilderness — was giving an excess of meaning. There are so many different points of view in this book about what the ice means and what the landscape means, and the story jumps around and looks at this place from different angles and at different time periods. That kind of excess of meaning and excess of ways of constructing, I feel, is a way of leaving it somehow inexplicable too.

HW Inexplicable and less depleted.

TW Yeah. The very process of saying, "Hey, you can look at this in different ways" also suggests that no one way is the truth, and there's some

thing that's always going to be beyond us or out of our reach in some ways.

HW Well, you've really anticipated my next couple of questions. When you're writing about history or when you're writing about a particular place, there's a real tendency for authenticity, for accuracy, to become bones of contention with readers, particularly as you've just described. How much should a writer be concerned with authenticity, with getting it right, with this responsibility to be true in one way or another to a history, to a particular place?

TW As I said before, a book for me takes on its own life, and in a way I find that what I have to be authentic to is my vision of the book, as opposed to something out of the real world. What I said earlier, about looking at things from different points of view, I guess is my way of dealing with that worry that somehow I'm misrepresenting something. So for me as a writer the concern isn't so much to make sure that I stick with one particular truth as it is to explore the story around a truth, perhaps, and see that there are other ways of seeing something.

When the book first came out, the first review was by a fellow who lives in Canmore, named Bob Sanford, and he runs an interpretive company there, and I was pretty apprehensive about this — you know, reviews by people who lived there, in the mountains. And his review starts out by saying, "When I first picked up this book I was thinking 'Oh no, here's somebody who's gone and screwed up the historical record and played with the landscape,'" and I thought "Oh, no." But as the review progressed he came to appreciate what I had done. He was glad to see that somebody was really trying to see a place in many different ways and really concentrating an artistic vision on a place that was important to him and important to a lot of people. I really, really appreciated that. It confirmed to me that, "Yes, you can do these things, you can go ahead and do them and people will ... there will be people who don't understand and will be angry, but there will be people who will appreciate it."

HW This is related but I think a very different question at the same time: in the novel, you're portraying Trask as commodifying nature. Are you worried that in turn you are commodifying nature, or history, or even both of them? Is that something you struggled with?

TW No. (*laughs*) Yeah, I guess it's a concern but it's not a major one, because in the end I think that the place that I've written about is

still what it is, and then there is this book that is about this place, which is like that real place, but it is its own world, and it's no longer the real Jasper, and I know that, and so ... I had something else that was just so brilliant to say, but ...

HW Well, just think about it for a second, because I do think this is a key question, and it's a really complex one. It's tied up with these questions of wonder and the sublime that we were talking about earlier, trying to get through this impasse of any vision being a kind of social construct. In reading the book I could see that a ready criticism would be that the writer is essentially doing something similar to the activity of a key character in the novel who is being satirized, is being implicitly criticized, so maybe it'll help to ask the question in a different way. How is your approach to the mountains, in creating a kind of aesthetic experience for your reader, different from what Trask is doing in trying to create a kind of aesthetic experience for the visitor? Does that help?

TW I see where you're going with that. I guess I just have to reiterate something that I said before, and that is I'm hoping to present a sense of multiple points of view and of multiple ways of seeing something, and some of them are more critical than others, more judgmental than others. In that way I guess I am not trying to wrap everything up in a package that totally aestheticizes a place and says, "This is a place of sheer wonder." I think there's more going on there than that, and I know that for me, personally, that's also the case. As I said before, I'm aware that this landscape has been and is constructed in a romantic way and that I kind of buy into that, but I'm not satisfied with just saying that, because I know that there's more to it. But as a writer, I guess, I wanted to have both if I possibly could, to be critical and to maybe make the reader say, "Hey, look, what is it that we're doing when we come to this place, and what should we be doing?" These are the sorts of questions that do get raised.

HW To draw attention to the way that the mountains and wilderness are aestheticized.

TW Yeah, and also how, as you said way back at the beginning, tourism becomes a kind of resource extraction, and it is an incursion as well; slowly these activities have a deleterious effect on the wildlife and on all these things, right? So I know that I'm thinking about these things and I want the reader to think about them, at the same time that I want the reader to have an aesthetic experience. I've had lots of people come

up to me and say, “I really felt that, in writing that book, you captured something of the spirit of that place that I had felt too,” and I certainly don’t want to discount that. I think if people want to make that connection between my work and the feelings they’ve had, then that’s a perfectly valid way to read, and I appreciate that, but I don’t think that’s completely what’s going on when you read it.

HW Last question on *Icefields*. There’s an interesting description of Freya’s writing, a reflection of Hal’s, and it struck me again as one of those moments of self-reflection in the novel, and really quite an important one. This is what he thinks: “*If she places herself in the foreground of her narratives it is because she knows this, that her words can only be a transcription of an elusive, endlessly recurring moment of first contact. In her swift passage through a new world she moves like a bullet. A small violence. Her writing a record of damage.*” So in other words he’s drawing attention to her consciousness of the fact that her presence changes a place. I guess it’s a variation on the Heisenberg principle that objects change their behaviour under observation. Can we apply that description to your own writing about history? And I guess we could add place to that, just to make it a hard question.

TW This is one of those things that I hadn’t even noticed before somebody pointed it out; this is a classic example of that. I think that it’s true that there may not be an “I” in the center of this story, but there is me writing, and there’s me aware that my observations are subjective in some ways. So when I am thinking about a place and trying to write about it and transcribing it, I am looking for those things I didn’t know before, or looking to be hit in the face with a realization about something that I hadn’t considered before, relating to this place. So there’s some way in which that’s really quite accurate, and certainly I’m aware that I’m damaging certain stories, too, at the same time. There’s the myth of the heroic creation of the railways, you know. I’m doing a small damage to that heroic story by suggesting there were some less than heroic aspects to it, right? So, yeah, I like that a lot.

HW He’s also admiring a certain kind of honesty in her writing, that she recognizes that intrusion and the effects that it has, and it seems to me that quite a bit of contemporary historical fiction and even writing about history itself is really foregrounding that recognition, that there’s no objectivity in writing about history, and that the presence of the viewer has an incredible influence on what kind of picture we get of history.

TW I think it's something that I'm still exploring as a writer.

HW I'd like to finish with just a couple of questions about your second novel, *Salamander*. I'm really struck by just how different a kettle of ... well, stories it is; it's just so different from *Icefields*.

TW My editor at McClelland & Stewart had read *Icefields* and liked it a lot, and she was kind of flabbergasted by this complete shift in time, place, you name it. I don't know; I think that for me every book becomes, as I said, its own world, and I'm looking for a book that I always wanted to read, and in the case of *Salamander*, as with *Icefields*, there's a book that I want to read, or wanted to read, or have been looking for ...

HW And it wasn't there ...

TW And it wasn't there and I've gotta write it. *Icefields* is more concerned with looking for a book about a place I've lived that isn't there, whereas *Salamander* is more concerned with looking for a book that I've always been looking for, that isn't there. And so that's why there's a fairy-tale quality in this book. In the writing of it I was searching back through my history as a reader and how I was always motivated by looking for a book that wasn't there. A particular book might suggest to me something and then I'd go looking for that, and so that's the kind of shape that it took. In some way it's a meditation on reading; it's really a book about reading. And so it had to take its own shape, and the shape that it took was really influenced by my whole history as a reader, going back to fairy tales in childhood.

HW On that note, on the whole fairy tale, fabular quality of *Salamander*, there's an interesting contrast between the two books. It seems to me that in *Icefields* the fantastical and the magical are hovering on the edge of the historical and the real — I'm thinking particularly of the image of the angel — but then in *Salamander* the opposite is the case: we can feel the presence of history — whether it's the conquest of Quebec or the fall of the Ottoman empire — hovering at the edges of this very fantastic world that Nicholas Flood and his daughter Pica travel through. Any thoughts about the different role of history in the two books?

TW I guess it was more my impatience with realism, as a reader, primarily — with realism as a strand in history and literature, and one that's fairly recent — than a conscious decision to push history to the fringe. You can see its development and how it has become the central mode of

fiction, a kind of decision to ground things in a solid factual basis. It's also ... the idea of realism is also a construct, too.

HW If the historical is just on the edge of the narrative in *Salamanca*, given your reservations about realism, why is it there at all — those historical edges, those historical details that help to situate it in place and time (somewhat anyway), whereas most of the novel is really in the rarified air of the fairy tale?

TW Yeah, it is in the air of the fairy tale, but everything that happens comes out of something that I was aware of, that was in operation at that time in history, the eighteenth century — the whole fascination with automatons and porcelain, and all the wars going on and all of these things, they're tied to history — but I guess I said to myself, as a reader/writer, "I want to let this book go wherever it wants to go and explore reading in whatever way it wants to do it, and I'm not going to look too far ahead. I've chosen this era and so I'm going to let myself dream an eighteenth century which is somehow tied to history, use history as a base, and just dream my own kind of eighteenth century."

I guess it's a primal impulse that's right there at the heart of writing, too, to have my own world, to make my own world — and whatever psychological or whatever reasons you want to find for that, I'm sure there are some. My mind feeds off historical tidbits, stories, fragments that I find and that I think I can make use of, or that seem to me fascinating and that I want to explore. With this book I just let that process go, completely, whereas with *Icefields* I was much more concerned to be tied to the historical record.

HW How about the fact that the whole series of narratives in this book is framed by this little story, set in Canada, during the fall of Quebec in 1759? Why that particular historical marker?

TW It was like an anchor for me so that, no matter what happened, no matter where I lost my way, I would know that there was something that I could come back to, and in looking at the eighteenth century, and reading about it, and exploring it, there was that seminal moment for Canadian history, so I kept coming back to that and thinking there's some way in which I've got to make use of it, if only to give myself a link to Canada, as an idea, so that as a Canadian writer I can say, "Yes, somehow this has something to do with Canada." (*laughs*) So that I don't get completely lost, right?

HW Just going back to the fact that it's a fairly fairy tale world — despite that, the principal character, Nicholas Flood, is himself a historical figure, or are you pulling my leg again?

TW (*laughs*) Yes, I did the same damn thing. I made up a book to put in the bibliography.

HW I wondered about that, because I read an interview, and somebody said that Nicholas Flood was a historical figure.

TW Yeah, I read that too. There was a Robert Flood, who was an alchemist and sort of proto-scientist, in the Elizabethan era, and his work, as far as I understand, is a kind of amalgam of mysticism and science, and I think I just borrowed the name. That's about it.

HW So why this predilection for fictionalized bibliographical entries?

TW I don't know what it ... I think that when I finish a book, I feel like I'm not finished playing fictionally. Somehow I like to have the fiction bleed over into the real world in some small way. I don't know why; it's an odd impulse, all right. I guess it seals the book off with a buried statement: don't believe everything you read. I don't know.

HW Keeping that boundary between the fictional and the real nice and blurred.

TW For sure.

HW I was very surprised to see Anthony Henday — who, of course, was the first European to cross the Prairies within sight of the Rockies — and here he pops up in *Salamander* as the proprietor of a London coffee house that Nicholas Flood stumbles into at one point. What inspired the injection of him into the narrative?

TW It's similar to that idea of starting the book in Quebec. It's a way to bring my world into this book, the specific place that I live and looking into the history of that time — what was going on here, from a European perspective. It was almost nothing, but then you have this Henday coming here; he was trying to make contact with the Blackfoot actually. He was using the Cree as an intermediary to try to find these people, so that they could trade with him, and when he finally does find them, they're so uninterested. "We have our own way of life. Why the hell should we trap a bunch of animals and haul them north for you guys? What use is that to us?" They just sort of dismiss him, and I've always been interested in that

character and maybe will write about him again in some larger story.

HW So just a little cameo here.

TW Yeah, I guess you could say that. Actually, at the time that the novel happens he would have been here, so I had to depart from the historical record to even have him there at the coffee shop, but it's interesting that he did kind of disappear, right? He did his yeoman service for the Hudson's Bay Company and melted into the crowd and was never heard of again. There was some suggestion that he might have been a smuggler, before and maybe after; he might have been in more shady sorts of transactions. There's not a lot that's known about the guy.

HW Now, your first two books obviously in very different ways have been set in the past, so can we expect to see the past in your work in the future?

TW Yes.

HW Well, that's great. Thank you very much.