

## Then and Now Converging: Lionel Kearns's Complicated Nation

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Volume 35, Number 1, 2010

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc135\\_1art02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc135_1art02)

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Langston, J. (2010). Then and Now Converging:: Lionel Kearns's Complicated Nation. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 35(1), 40–55.

# Then and Now Converging: Lionel Kearns's Complicated Nation

JESSICA LANGSTON

SINCE DOROTHY LIVESAY'S OBSERVATIONS in the pivotal essay "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre" (and, according to Manina Jones, partially spurred by them), a number of Canadian writers (poets, novelists, and playwrights) have contributed to the tradition that Livesay names, taking it even further (and literally) by including actual documents in their fictional texts. Robert Kroetsch's *The Ledger* (1975) and *Seed Catalogue* (1977), Kim Morrissey's *Batoche* (1989), and Margaret Sweatman's *Fox* (1991) are just a few examples of this trend. These documentary works deal with pivotal periods of Canada's past, incorporating records from a historical period into their imaginative revision of it and thus positioning these texts somewhere between fact and fiction. As Stephen Scobie points out, by drawing on and foregrounding the document as a source, this genre makes "an appeal to the authoritativeness of fact," with the document also acting as "the necessary link" between the reader and the historical moment (122-23). Simultaneously, however, by rejecting the typical privileging of fact over fiction, these texts both disrupt the qualities of authority, objectivity, and truth telling typically assigned to the document and elevate the potential power of an imagined, creative version of events.

This "systematic blurring of limits" (Scobie 122) not only highlights the complexity of historiography; it also signals the writer's own struggle with the paradox of historical representation, namely with how to recognize that history is always already mediated without being paralyzed or silenced by such an acknowledgement. These texts engage with the tension between history as representation and history as accessible fact, the tension between the instability of knowledge and the desire to believe that there is something significant and concrete accessible through historical documentation. For most Canadian documentary literature, this grappling with history is tied up with a rethinking of Canada's national identity. If nations are "imagined," as Benedict Anderson would have it, or "invented," as Eric Hobsbawm suggests, then a huge component

of such a construction is tied up with memory and narrative. As Homi Bhabha explains in “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” the nation exists in a kind of “double-time” wherein it is narrated both as an outcome of the past and as an ongoing production in the present — a production that is poised to become the past (294). The excerpts operate on this fissure and are used by these writers in both a pedagogical and a performative way; their appearance is partially meant to educate readers about the production of Canada, but their reframing in this new poetic context is also an act of producing nation itself.

Although contemporary Canadian writers have used this documentary genre as a way into many different periods of Canadian history,<sup>1</sup> in this paper I would like to focus on a very specific type of documentary literature, one that narrates the exploration period of Canadian history through excerpting and reframing the journal entries of early explorers. This sub-genre of documentary literature not only relies on Canadian exploration history and texts but is itself an exploration of this period, its key figures, and its role in the production of national self-concepts. Because these literary texts are concerned with the beginnings of the European presence in North America, and hence a period that preceded Canada’s founding, they provide an important context for thinking about the ways that Canadian history is used to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct national identity.

Even though it predates the establishment of Canada as a nation-state, the exploration period is often figured as a significant period or event in Canada’s development, often as the beginning of Canada’s “story.” This conception of the exploration period can be seen, for instance, in Carl Klinck’s *Literary History of Canada* and in many anthologies of Canadian literature, such as Donna Bennett and Russell Brown’s *A New Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* and Cynthia Sugars and Laura Moss’s *Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts*, both of which begin with selections from explorers’ journals. Television documentary series, such as *Canada: A People’s History*, and history textbooks, such as J.M.S. Careless’s *Canada: A Celebration of Our Heritage*, typically plot Canada’s story as starting with European exploration. A literary text that revisits this period is then inevitably engaging with this discursive tradition.

Certainly we can see this conception of the exploration period in the poetry written on or around Canada's centennial. Coming out of a time of both national fortification and fragility,<sup>2</sup> the documentary poems of John Newlove, Marion Smith, and Jon Whyte all bespeak an abiding interest in buttressing Canada's identity and plotting the country's narrative as one of progress and continuity. In "The Pride" (1968), Newlove charts the movement from an intellectual and detached approach to the country's origins through to a sort of emotional indigenization. This movement is enabled, in part, by the incorporation of early explorer David Thompson's journals. Newlove's changes to, and omissions of parts of, these journals create an idealized and romanticized version of the past and seem to offer the reader direct access to this part of Canada's history, thereby enabling a connection between the "we" of the poem and Aboriginal people that feature so prominently in Thompson's writing. Smith's long poem *Koo-koo-sint* (1976) also reframes Thompson's journals, casting the explorer as a sort of primordial Canadian and using the narrative surrounding the journal excerpts to "find" "the heart" of Thompson and thereby find the heart of the nation itself (6). Finally, Whyte's *Homage, Henry Kelsey* (published in 1981 but finished several years earlier) does indeed act as a sort of "homage" to Canadian history, celebrating Kelsey and his poem "Now Reader Read" by using excerpts from Kelsey's records to bridge the gap between the physical or concrete exploration of the landscape and the abstract search for personal and national identity in which the poet and reader are engaged. These poems all try to provide a sort of direct access to history, operating as educational tools and as nationalist meta-narratives during a pivotal point in the construction of Canadian identity.

However, the definition of exploration as a founding moment of the nation is ultimately unstable because it is a manufactured understanding; the national significance of the exploration period is one that has been applied retrospectively, after the fact. These explorers were not invested in the idea of Canada since Canada, as a national entity, had not been conceived of when these men came to the New World as representatives of the British and French Empires. The very fact that they have become national symbols highlights the constructed nature of Canada's history. It is largely this paradox that informs Lionel Kearns's long poem *Convergences* (1984), which revisits the exploration period through an imaginative engagement with its documents. The incor-

poration of excerpts from these documents in the poem itself underlines and even prefigures the disruption of Canada's story that takes place in the texts themselves. Simultaneously, however, because these explorers and the exploration period represent a time before the Canadian state, there is the potential for going back to the beginning of the nation in and through these explorers' journals; they provide an opportunity to imagine a new narrative. The historical documents are used to enact a deconstruction and reconstruction of a Canadian narrative in Kearns's text; their presence and their reframing encapsulate the struggle to represent history.

For the earlier exploration documentary poetry mentioned above, the main point of this constant return to the book(s) of history is a search for connections and continuity between then and now. This search is the ostensible subject of Kearns's *Convergences*, as well: "If these words of mine become words in your head and so connect our lives . . . this will be meaning. Correspondence is what we seek, shreds of similarity, understanding, compassion" (n. pag.). Kearns's prose poem showcases moments of "convergence" between past and present by imaginatively reconstructing, with help from oral tradition and the journals of the men on the two ships, the early encounters (in 1778) of British explorer James Cook and his crew with the Mooachaht people of Canada's West Coast, while simultaneously charting the contemporary writer's experience and reflections on history. However, Kearns is ultimately interested in a more critical project, one that actually disrupts the narrative of historical progress and the concept of nation as the culmination and expression of this progress. Reframing excerpts from Cook's company records in a way that works to uncover correspondences or commonalities for (or with) the reader, Kearns's poem also demonstrates the randomness of these connections — the coincidences of history — as well as exposing moments of disconnection. Kearns makes Cook and his men more immediate, more sympathetic, and yet more complicated and less heroic. By underlining this lack of heroism, Kearns helps readers trouble the portraits of explorers contained in narratives such as those discussed above. *Convergences* confronts us with the dark underbelly of Canada's "discovery" and "founding," forcing a recognition of the flawed actions of these flawed explorers, which, in turn, suggests a need to revisit and rethink Canadian history and our responsibility for the manner in which it was, and continues to be, produced. As Kearns

explains on the final page, “we also participate in those events, you and I” (n. pag.).

What sets Kearns’s text apart from those by Newlowe, Smith, and Whyte is its self-conscious engagement with the problem of historical inheritance. As the title of the poem suggests, Kearns is interested in “convergences” between past and present. However, he is also alert to the difficulties inherent in such a quest, particularly in the assertion of links between the colonial past and the future. The first page of the poem sets up this paradox by positioning the opposing sides of the debate side by side. In one column, Kearns portrays the explorers and their role in Canada’s past as “neither good nor bad.” The term and the idea of *history*, Kearns suggests here, is just a name we give to “a process” of “flux” that “engulfs us all.” In other words, history is made up of random happenings, changes, and mutations. There is no pattern or logic except that which we impose upon it after the fact. In the facing column, and dialoguing with the ideas in the first one, Kearns describes time as forward moving, as “a ritual exchange,” thereby suggesting that there is some chronology and order to history and that there are connections to be drawn between the past, the present, and the future.

As Kearns is aware, however, this insistence on descent may potentially render the present author complicit in a colonial ethos. The convergence that emerges as most viable in Kearns’s poem is the issue of responsibility: how are we to acknowledge our responsibility to events of the past without necessarily embracing a teleological or evolutionary notion of this connection? Kearns does so by self-consciously structuring his poem, and its citation of historical documents, in a dialogic fashion that refuses any final genealogical links between past and present.

The book’s structure presents the most visible instance of the poem’s representation of this dilemma of historical convergence. Containing multiple discourses — historical narrative, explorers’ journals, illustrations, and images, and commentary or criticism — Kearns’s poem is set up in such a way that the discourses continually interrupt or even undermine each other. Kearns is interested in setting up a dialogue that is at cross purposes (and this is structurally emblemized by the format of the poem) in order to highlight the crisis of historical representation. The text, as already mentioned, is divided into two columns. The column in large typeface presents the story of the first encounter of Cook and the Moochahts, told partially by a third-person omniscient

narrator who, drawing on First Nations' oral history and on European historical records, imagines both the Europeans' and the Mooachahts' experiences and thoughts. This column also contains the excerpts from the journals of Cook's men, which Kearns marks off by italicizing them and by identifying the original authors. Appearing on the outer margin of the page, and running parallel to the historical narrative, is a column written in smaller type that contains Kearns's own experiences with, and reflections on, the history that the other column describes, as well as many direct addresses to the reader that pull him or her into the reading of history with which the Kearns of this smaller typeface column is engaged. As Lianne Moyes explains, the marginal column "continually interrupt[s] the historical material and vice versa, thereby frustrating both the eye's continuous movement from the top left-hand corner of the left page to the bottom right-hand corner of the right page and the impulse to finish reading one typeface before beginning another" (16). In other words, it becomes literally impossible to disentangle the narrative of the past from that of the present (both Kearns's present as writer and our own present as readers reading).

These two columns, however, can be (and have been) interpreted in quite a different manner. In "Reading Against Consumption: Metafiction in Lionel Kearns's *Convergences*," Grant Williams argues that the two texts are, in fact, wholly divorced from one another. The outer or marginal column actually "encloses the narrative of Cook's interaction with the Nootka Indians within the narrow confines of a hermeneutical prison: divided not only by a vertical fissure but by contrasting typescript and print size, the two columns imply that the texts of the sailors' journals and the narrator's commentary inhabit two distinctly different temporal planes" (42). The space between the two columns, Williams goes on to explain, ends up "protect[ing] the narrator's reading" from the narrative being read (43). And yet, Williams's reading registers a contradiction in Kearns's structure by suggesting that the outer or marginal column "tells us how to read the inner columns," including how to read the excerpts contained therein. Although he does not foreground this contradiction, Williams may be correct in perceiving a distinct ambiguity in Kearns's poem. Kearns's regulative voice reframes the history that his poem contains in an interpretative act that both crosses and creates a desired gap between the shameful colonial past and our wiser, more politically correct present nation.

These disparate readings of Kearns's poem by Moyes and Williams are both valid; in particular, the tension between longing for distance and longing for connection can be seen in Kearns's reframing of the exploration excerpts. In some cases, the outer column is used to engender a feeling of sympathy toward the European explorers. The first excerpt Kearns uses in the inner column is from Midshipman Trevenen's journal and contains a vitriolic description of Lieutenant Williamson (a fellow crew member): "Our first lieutenant, Williamson, is a wretch, feared and hated by his inferiors, detested by his equals and despised by his superiors, a very devil" (n. pag.). This excerpt becomes a jumping-off point for Kearns to muse in the outer column on the treatment of men by history and to suggest that perhaps these men were not as "despicable" as the records would have it: "the villainous William Bligh . . . on this voyage is the peerless sailing master of the *Resolution*. Bligh, age twenty-four, and as yet without a commission, is reputed to be next only to Cook in navigational skill. He is perhaps not such a despicable fellow, but historical fiction has treated him badly" (n. pag.). Of course, this observation begs the question of whether the records do in fact suggest that these men were despicable. Perhaps this understanding of these men as "despicable" exists not within the records themselves but in the framing of them, an idea that is implied by Kearns's reference to *Mutiny on the Bounty* and the idea that historical fiction, in general, misrepresents figures from the past. Kearns's reference to *Mutiny on the Bounty* is ostensibly made in order to allow the reader to connect to the excerpts contained in the poem and the men who wrote them: "You have seen those movies too, the men being lashed and keel-hauled" (n. pag.). However, Kearns is also reminding the reader that such representations of history, which lead the reader to "imagine" Bligh as "Charles Laughton or Trevor Howard," are not really the truth either.<sup>3</sup> Kearns concludes his reflections in this marginal column by pondering, "I wonder how [history] will treat me, or you" (n. pag.), thereby putting his reader in the place of these men and forcing a consideration of his or her own failings and position in space and time. The narratorial voice in the outer column thus speaks the very contradiction that the poem as a whole considers and enacts: the impossibility of escaping the paradox of historical representation. Yet this voice is also concerned with the problem of getting it right since he wonders whether he or "you" will be treated sympathetically in hindsight. Will the interpreter of the future



be able to enact a process of empathetic convergence? And if so, how is that implicated in the truth that one seeks in the past? If empathy is an “imaginative” act, does it ultimately highlight the radical incongruence between past and present? While Kearns’s commentary may engender sympathy for, and even a feeling of alliance with, the explorers, it also leads the reader to question who these explorers were, rendering these men and their actions too elusive to ever connect to.

That said, throughout the poem, much of the outer column is engaged with drawing out similarities (convergences) between these explorers and the citizens of the modern nation they ostensibly helped found. As above, Kearns often uses these similarities to counteract the potentially distancing effect of the contents of some of the excerpts. For example, a midshipman’s description of the Mooachaht as “*the dirtiest beings ever beheld*” may represent the type of perspective from which the contemporary Canadian wants distance, and the quote from Second Lieutenant Rickman’s journal referring to Canada as “*that void space in our maps*” may represent a pre-nation period that the modern-day citizen has problems imagining. The description of Canada as a “void” may also remind the politically astute reader of the early conception of the New World as uninhabited, a conception that helped justify colonization. Kearns uses the outer-column commentary to arrest the likely impulse of the reader to experience a feeling of alienation from Rickman’s vision of Canada or to want to distance him or herself from the midshipman’s prejudice. Surrounding these two excerpts is an address to the reader that mocks his or her world view, making it seem just as small and unknowledgeable as that of these two men: “Now what is the matter with you? Things are bad. . . . So you gulp another beer or martini” (n. pag.). Further, Kearns argues that these men were “much like you. . . . They had problems like yours until they stepped on board those ships” (n. pag.). Such a comparison helps Kearns suggest a common human experience, an experience, in some sense, defined by the fact that problems, flaws, and mistakes are common to all of us. However, Kearns is also letting us know that these men were unexceptional, thus making a statement about the narrative of history and nation that has been imposed upon them. They are just like you and me, so their privileged position in Canada’s history is held up to re-examination. Since ideas of convergence, connection, and continuity are linked (at least in nationalist ideologies) to notions of destiny or progress, Kearns’s reassessment of

the explorers' heroism calls into question the concept of Canada itself as a product of these preordained links.

Even as he troubles the notion of convergence, Kearns seems to be proposing a particular understanding of historical connection that enables him to tease out the problems of the radical pastness of the past. The "links" in Kearns's poem are not presented as part of some mythic notion of national destiny, but rather the idea of a common humanity and our participation in this humanity is what leads Kearns to view us as "the links in a chain that binds the universe" (n. pag.). Kearns creates this sense of shared responsibility, in part, by collapsing the divisions of time and space. As Moyes explains, "'Here' . . . is Nootka Sound, the speaker-composer's desk, his porch near the seashore, the West Coast reservations, and the reader's circumstances. . . . 'Now' is the meeting of Cook and the Moochahts, the writing of the journal accounts, the writing of *Convergences*, and its reading" (22). This drawing together of then and now, here and there, renders the events the poem describes not only more immediate for the reader but actually seems to involve the reader in these moments and records of colonization. In the poem's first marginal column, Kearns describes time as "a ritual exchange, though the gifts move in a single direction" (n. pag.). *Convergences* itself may be understood as participating in this ritual exchange, bequeathing quotations to its readers (Jones 113). By accepting the gifts left by our ancestors, we are acquiescing to — even participating in — the socio-historical context of the gifts' production. However, as Kearns makes clear throughout the poem, we need to look at these "gifts" instead of accepting them blindly because to accept a gift is also to accept the burden of responsibility for its origins and, in the case of the excerpts, for the circumstances in which they were written and the events that they describe.

Kearns uses the poem's marginal or outer column to make us aware of and question the origins of these gifts. After all, how can we have an "exchange" if the gifts only move in one direction? Kearns seems to be interrogating this notion of convergences by asking whether we really want to be connected to these men and their gifts while also asking whether we have a choice. For example, toward the end of *Convergences*, Kearns excerpts entries from both Cook's and Ledyard's<sup>4</sup> journals that comment on the First Nations' notions of proprietorship. Cook writes: "*I have nowhere met with Indians with more high notions of the country*

*and the produce being their exclusive property*" (n. pag.). Ledyard also notes the belief of the First Nations that the country belongs to them: "*They intimated to us that the country all around further than we could see was theirs*" (n. pag.). While both men treat such claims as preposterous, Kearns reframes this perspective by reflecting in the outer column that this is, in fact, "a legal matter" (n. pag.). These excerpts actually prove that the Mooachahts did have prior possession of the land before the Europeans came: "It is on record: the reasons and the testimony and the response. The claim is there in writing from these first instances of contact" (n. pag.). Kearns's comments draw out the unintended irony of the historical documents and show how the explorers' record keeping ultimately confounds their imperialist mission. The "gifts" our history has left us have been stolen from another people's past.

A similar sentiment is evoked by Kearns's inclusion of John Webber's<sup>5</sup> drawings of the Mooachaht people. Like the excerpts, these drawings represent the (mis)perceptions early European colonizers had of the country's Native peoples, (mis)perceptions that have been handed down through time like a "ritual exchange" moving "in one direction" (n. pag.).<sup>6</sup> The drawings are of a Mooachaht man and woman: two portraits on adjoining pages. On one side of the portraits is a commentary in which Kearns expresses the typical acceptance of historical records as truthful and objective: "The realism and authenticity of Webber's illustrations are almost photographic. . . . Webber's art was documentary. It focused on the surface of the world he witnessed" (n. pag.). While this column seems to frame the illustrations in a context of truth telling, there are some slips in what seems to be initially a validation of Webber's work. Webber's work is "*almost* photographic"; it deals with the "*surface* of the world *he* witnessed." This covert challenge to Webber's "documentary" drawings is laid out clearly in the column on the other side of the two portraits. Here Kearns explains the changes that Webber actually made to his sketches when preparing them for public consumption, for "the authorized version of the voyage" (n. pag.). However, instead of placing the blame for such "manipulation of words and images" on their author, Kearns points outwards at the "audience": "Such textual liberties, even when taken by me, are entirely for your edification, I assure you" (n. pag.). "A man," Kearns writes, "consents to a universe commissioned by his community, consigned by his culture" (n. pag.). Early in the poem, Kearns points to the problem with culture. Culture,

he writes, is “knowing what you do, doing what you know, living in a place with people, a people who do what they know and know what they do” (n. pag.). Culture, in Kearns’s definition, seems to be linked to willful narrowness — we are more comfortable with what we know, but, given the connection between Webber’s misrepresentations and culture, perhaps such narrowness also leads us to not see truthfully. The reader, Kearns argues, is not only the passive recipient of the past; the reader actually informs the content and presentation of these gifts; the reader consents to and produces culture. We are connected to history by being the audience to and re-gifters of its “words and images” time and time again.

At the same time as Kearns works to create these convergences, and thereby invoke a sense of responsibility or culpability in his reader for the actions of key figures of national history, his text also creates a distance between the past (and its documents) and the present. So while we may be pictured as “links in a chain that binds the universe,” Kearns concludes this metaphor and his poem with the qualification that the universe and our chain are simultaneously “fl[ying] apart” (n. pag.). Despite reframing many of the excerpts with commentary that is meant to forge a connection between the contemporary reader and the historical text, *Convergences* also expresses a detachment from, even disavows, these same texts and the historical events and figures they represent. Kearns himself expresses frustration at this unbridgeable gap — “Them, and me, and you — the gaps between us, the intervals” (n. pag.) — stating in the outer margin that “I want to tell you everything but how can I proceed when I know so little?” (n. pag.). By thus foregrounding the problem of historical representation, Kearns draws attention to the impossibility of ever wholly “converging” with the past. This gap extends outwards, into the future, with Kearns continually wondering what the reader is thinking and doing, even wondering who the reader is.<sup>7</sup> The reader’s “circumstances” (the reader’s frame or context or, as Kearns puts it, “the circle in which we stand” [n. pag.]) will inform his or her reading of the poem, just as the “circumstances” of the poem inform its reading of the excerpts. Ultimately, though, Kearns is concerned with the “now” — “the *now* that has moved through each of them in turn, is moving through me, towards you. In fact, it has reached you now” (n. pag.) — and he cautions his reader against attaching too

strongly to the linearity of time as “the fascination lies in the living” (n. pag.).

Kearns refers to this quest for narrative connection between past and present frequently in the outer-column commentary, stating, for instance, that “happening is what is real, but we try to grasp it by storing it as imagery that falls into hazy sequence as we bring it back or speak it out or write it down, so that it forms a structure we must call something, so we call it time, and for those who store these experiences in words on paper, time becomes a line” (n. pag.). On one level, Kearns is referring to the unreliability of his own project, the poem we are now reading, which will be only a pale version of “happening.” Later in the poem, Kearns suggests that the reader should not even rely on the excerpts themselves being accurate: “I will give you no assurance as to the absolute accuracy and authenticity of the quotations” (n. pag.). However, Kearns is also referring to the problem of historiography more generally, a reference that is made clear by the excerpt which appears on the page’s inner column. Here we have a quotation from Heinrich Zimmerman’s journal in which a meeting with Aboriginal peoples is described in vivid imagery. We are told that the men had “40 or 50 canoes,” an “exactness of rhythm” and “charm[ing]” “music”; each party had “one member dressed like a harlequin in many coloured garments, which he changed holding different masks before his face” (n. pag.). Kearns hints that the reader should question such documentary writing — how accurate are Zimmerman’s “observations”? — and its contribution to historical and national narration. “Do not fasten on that line,” the narrator states, hoping to dissolve the notions of progress and destiny so often associated with history and nation. “It is all flux, without order or meaning or purpose,” he argues: “That is what is given. The rest is consciousness: selection, composition, that is our business, my work for today.” Historical and national narratives and the narrative of *Convergences* itself draw connections to create sequences and chronologies; narratives work to make sense of random events. Kearns is aware of this process and endeavours to undercut this impulse toward narrative in historical and cultural meaning making. However, there may be a flip side to this disengagement from historical teleology that is less liberating. While Kearns does not deny the material consequences of history, his presentation of Canada’s history as a disconnected series of events also seems to diminish very real, concrete issues of political responsibility. This diminishment

occurs in a very curious passage toward the beginning of *Convergences*, in which an overt linking of generations is undercut by an appeal to the randomness of evolution. Kearns opens his poem with the suggestion that a biological process involving a melding of genes has led to or enables a melding with place: “They [the Europeans] are in this area at this precise moment, their spirits merging with the indigenous ghosts of the place. Their genes move into positions on old chromosomal chains, composing and encoding characteristic details of following generations” (n. pag.). Kearns sees this merging in the past and the present as merely the natural course of the universe: “It is neither good nor bad. It is flux. It flows in waves and engulfs us all, a process whose partial record we call history” (n. pag.). Strangely, it seems that Kearns is depicting history as inaccessible yet also, somehow, neutral, an approach that stands in direct opposition to the problematic underside of colonialism that has been represented elsewhere in the poem. By appealing to the neutral “flux” of history, Kearns may also be accused of suggesting that Canada is the end product of a natural evolutionary process.

This notion of evolution appears early in the book when an excerpt by Surgeon’s Mate David Samwell on “*the barbarous and uncultivated state of the people*” is reframed by Kearns’s discussion of the Moochahts’ attempts at communication, misunderstood by the Europeans. The English, he tells us, heard “the Moochahts repeating *nu-tka-sshi’a*” and assumed it was the name of the place, when what was really being said was simply “*Come around the point into this cove*” (n. pag.). This misunderstanding led to the English renaming the Moochahts Nootka, a misnomer that stuck: “The word and its mistaken reference go into records and onto the charts and eventually into the minds of all of us” (n. pag.). Instead of exploring the colonial implications of this re/mis-naming, Kearns depicts “the random and accidental” error as an evolutionary step: “Mistakes and their perpetuation are the essence of evolution.” Kearns tempers this statement with the question: “what is it that evolves here, and to what end?” (n. pag.). However, this question does not entirely counteract what seems to be the message of the outer-column poem, which is that the British renaming of the Moochahts and the continuation of this renaming is a value-free, even integral, component of a natural process.

The concept of natural process recurs throughout *Convergences*, particularly in reference to the impositions of British imperialism. Kearns frequently describes the meeting of the two cultures, Nootka and English, with the metaphor of two waves coming together. For example, an excerpt from Ledyard's journal that notes the absence of any religion and highlights the typically savage characters of these people: "*they are bold and ferocious, sly and reserved, not easily provoked, but revengeful . . . and if they sacrifice it is to the God of liberty.*" Kearns's presentation downplays this assumed superiority as merely the words of one world that will "move together" with the Mooachaht world to "produce" the nation in which Kearns and the reader now live. This nation, Kearns goes on to explain in later pages, is still home to the Mooachaht people, who are "licking Canadian stamps for their occasional letters" (n. pag.), and while their loss of the land is recognized, Kearns depicts this loss as part of the ongoing evolution of humanity: "It has been happening for two hundred years, the people coming and turning into this, the context of my life" (n. pag.).

The logical conclusion of Kearns's position is problematic since it could be used to support a politics of apathy or resignation, one that is at odds with a postcolonial vision of causal contingency. Ultimately, such a vision of history is troubling because it erases both the past nation's (and the explorers') responsibility as well as the present nation's (and the writer and reader's) responsibility for the negative effects of imperialism. However, it seems to me that such an erasure in *Convergences* is always incomplete and, perhaps, deliberately palimpsestic. Kearns's poem foregrounds the dilemma of convergence between past and present, truth and representation, with a complexity lacking in its predecessors. By representing history as chronological, cumulative, and connected while, simultaneously, as a series of accidents, coincidences, and non-convergences, Kearns is able to suggest, in a unique way, that history is both convergent and non-convergent but not entirely either. On one hand, *Convergences* seems to abdicate any moral engagement with national history by actually deconstructing the whole idea of national history or nation itself. On the other hand, the drawing of clear connections between now and then forces the reader (and writer) to confront his or her own participation in, and answerability for, Canada's colonial beginnings. Through balancing these two potential understandings of history, the poem, finally, acknowledges the impossibility of ever representing

history properly while also arguing for the necessity of trying to do so. Kearns's poem represents a significant attempt to straddle this divide through a re-engagement with the documentary tradition of Canadian exploration history.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988), for instance, focus on the settlement period; Robert Kroetsch's *The Man from the Creeks* (1998) and Rudy Wiebe's *The Scorched Wood People* (1977) deal with the development of the country; and texts such as Wendy Lill's *The Fighting Days* (1985) and Marilyn Bowering's *Grandfather Was a Soldier* (1987) explore Canada's role in the Great War.

<sup>2</sup> During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, many transformative events for Canada took place, including the World Exposition in Montreal, Pierre Elliott Trudeau's election, and the burgeoning interest in and funding of Canadian literature (e.g., Klinck's *Literary History of Canada*, the Conference on the Canadian Novel at the University of Calgary, and the appearance of smaller presses such as Anansi and Coach House). However, there was also a growing concern over the threat of Americanization (see George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*), a growing awareness of First Nations' land-rights issues, and the worry voiced by various Canadian writers and critics over Canada's lack of identity and history (for instance in Earle Birney's "Can.Lit." and Dennis Lee's "Cadence, Country, Silence").

<sup>3</sup> After a tour as sailing master of James Cook's final voyage, Lieutenant William Bligh was assigned to the *Bounty*, a ship owned by the Royal Navy. Control of the *Bounty* was seized from Bligh by Fletcher Christian, who took command illegally through a mutiny. Since then, Bligh has been represented as an exemplar of the abusive sea captain in literature, such as in Lord Byron's poem *The Island* (1823), Jules Verne's *Les révoltés de la Bounty* (1879), *The Bounty Trilogy* by Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall (1932), and in the film *Mutiny on the Bounty*. In the film's original version (1935), Bligh was played by Charles Laughton, and in the 1962 remake he was played by Trevor Howard.

<sup>4</sup> According to Kearns, John Ledyard was a "corporal in the marine detachment on board [Cook's ship] the *Resolution*" (n. pag.).

<sup>5</sup> John Webber was a Swiss artist who accompanied Cook on his expedition with the purpose of recording, in detail, the land and people of the New World.

<sup>6</sup> By drawing our attention to and complicating such perceptions, Kearns is suggesting the same type of representation that Terry Goldie discusses in *Fear and Temptation*, namely a "Quaker Oats box" process of signification in which the Aboriginal has become all signifier or referent, leaving the real Aboriginal, the signified, unattainable (4).

<sup>7</sup> At one point, Kearns comments in the margins that he "cannot even dream of" what the reader will "bring to this occasion," referring to both his own poem and the excerpt from Cook's journal that appears on the same page. Later he asks the reader what the words of Bayly's journals mean to him or her, "at a time and place known only to yourself" (n. pag.)



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