

Island Ecology and Early Canadian Women Writers

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Article abstract

The island, and the fresh water island in particular, is a recurring motif in the work of early Canadian women writers. Using an eco-critical perspective to explore Susan Frances Harrison's short story "The Idyl of the Island" (1886), Marjorie Pickthall's short story "On Ile de Paradis" (1906), and Katherine Hale's long poem, "The Island (Experiment in Magic)" (1934), as well as "island" lyrics by all three authors, we discover tentative but compelling expressions of nature as a place of ambiguous potential and power, depending on the attitude and actions of those who approach it. Focusing as they do on the interaction between human beings and nature, the island texts of early Canadian women writers may be more anthropocentric than biocentric, but they are nonetheless illuminated in the light of three areas of concern in the field of island biogeography: colonization, competition, and trophic cascade. Nature as a virgin to be violated has been a longstanding trope of masculine writing about the wilderness, but Harrison, Pickthall, and Hale point us instead in the direction of nature as mother and sister. In their work, the island conveys an unforgettable message—that it is folly for us to believe we can conquer nature, come to her unprepared, or expect to separate ourselves from her fate.

Island Ecology and Early Canadian Women Writers

WANDA CAMPBELL

If our minds are maps of the real, then why not redraw them? If nature is a text then why not rewrite it? As their greenwor(l)ds reveal, Canadian women poets have been redrawing the map and rewriting the text since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, but they did so in the context of their own experience, their own culture, their own historical moment.

— Diana M.A. Relke, *Greenwor(l)ds* (323)

WHAT ISLANDS REVEAL ABOUT equilibrium and extinction has played a central role in the development of conservation theory, and thus the theory of island biogeography has been called “the most important ecological theory of the twentieth century” (Fraser 19). As the two scientists who wrote the seminal book on the subject, Robert MacArthur and Edward Wilson, point out, an island is “an intrinsically appealing study object. . . . [,] the first unit that the mind can pick out and begin to comprehend” (3). Islands, as Charles Darwin discovered on the Galapagos, are ideal places to explore and test theories about the complex natural world. Real and imaginary islands have served a similar purpose in literary works as diverse as *The Odyssey*, *Utopia*, *The Tempest*, and *Gulliver’s Travels*. As Jean Arnold argues, “liberated from the diffuse influences circulating in a large, complicated mainland culture, islands and their literary counterparts serve as laboratories where variables can be reduced and the essence of an idea or its application can be sought and understood” (24).

The island, the freshwater island in particular, is a recurring motif in the work of early Canadian women writers. Using an ecocritical perspective to explore Susan Frances Harrison’s short story “The Idyl of the Island” (1886), Marjorie Pickthall’s short story “On Ile de Paradis” (1906), and Katherine Hale’s long poem “The Island (*Experiment in Magic*)” (1934), as well as “island” lyrics by all three authors, we discover tentative but compelling expressions of nature as a place of ambiguous

potential and power, depending on the attitudes and actions of those who approach it. It would be misleading to suggest that these works are way ahead of their time as environmental commentaries, open as they are to multiple interpretations ranging from the conservative to the radical, but they still manage to challenge our thinking in relation to ecological concerns.

Ecofeminist critics have often focused on shorelines in the work of women writers because, according to Susan Rosen, “by critically examining edge spaces where water and land meet, women nature writers raise new variations on critical questions of relationships between nature and culture and of the relationship between women and nature” (30). Early women writers explored the littoral, Rosen argues, because of “their awareness that the coast could be extended, through metaphor, to reflect domestic issues, environmental issues, societal issues” (21). In a discussion of Rachel Carson’s work, Marnie M. Sullivan writes that a “persistent preoccupation with marginal landscapes and their inhabitants model[s] patterns of engagement with the ‘other’ that fosters an ethic of care that avoids domination or exploitation” (78). A study of islands in the work of early Canadian women writers reveals a great deal about how we might relate to the wilderness, because, as Harrison says of Canadians, “Mariners all are we” (qtd. in Campbell 205). Focusing as they do on the relationship between human beings and nature, the island texts of early Canadian women writers might be more anthropocentric than biocentric, but they are illuminated nonetheless in the light of three areas of concern in the field of island biogeography: colonization, competition, and trophic cascade. Because islands sustain fewer species than would fill a similar area on the mainland, they are prone to impoverishment, making them especially vulnerable to these three ecological effects.

Colonization

Ecologically speaking, colonization is the process by which species encroach on and establish themselves in new regions. In *Empire Islands: Castaways, Cannibals, and Fantasies of Conquest*, Rebecca Weaver-Hightower writes, “The island, with its natural geographic borders, becomes the perfect imaginary space for an individual person to inhabit and solely command — to, in short, colonize” (xx), an attitude epitomized in William Cowper’s famous line “I am monarch of all I survey”

(305). The paradox of an island is that the very isolation and compact beauty that attract outsiders to it as a kind of refuge inevitably lead to thoughts of conquest. The irresistible lure of islands is a theme in several of Harrison's poems, including "The Thousand Islands," which appeared in her first poetry collection, *Pine, Rose, and Fleur de Lis* (1891): "The Islands appear and as longing for land they have found us. / And their beauty of birch and their selvedge of shadow hath bound us / In bonds that bewitch as we blindly approach and adore —" (Campbell 196-97). However, it is in Harrison's short story "The Idyl of the Island" that the island as a site of colonization receives its fullest treatment.

First appearing in the 1886 fiction collection entitled *Crowded Out! and Other Sketches* that Harrison published in Ottawa at her own expense, "The Idyl of the Island" has been frequently anthologized since being selected by Rosemary Sullivan for *Stories by Canadian Women* (1984). The long opening paragraph provides an evocative description of the island:

There lies mid-way between parallels 48 and 49 of latitude, and degrees 89 and 90 of longitude, in the northern hemisphere of the New World, serenely anchored on an ever-rippling and excited surface, an exquisitely lovely island. No tropical wonder of palm-treed stateliness, or hot tangle of gaudy bird and glowing creeper, can compare with it; no other northern isle, cool and green and refreshing to the eye like itself, can surpass it. (45)

The geographical coordinates that Harrison provides place her island either in Lake Superior, the largest freshwater lake in the world, or Lake Nipigon, the largest lake entirely within Ontario (Ware 181). In keeping with her preface, in which Harrison states that some of the stories are true and "others have been written through the medium of Fancy, which can find and inhabit as large a field in Canada as elsewhere" (7), she explores both a literal and an imagined terrain. She uses numerous emotionally loaded adjectives to describe the tiny island and the elements that cover and surround it. The island, as she describes it, has "two distinct and different sides" (45), which become symbolically significant as the story unfolds. One side is a limestone cliff, and the other, green-clad, slopes away to the water, never at rest. One side inhibits, the other invites, suggesting the dynamic equilibrium between extinction and immigration that is typical of islands.

The Englishman who comes upon this island at five o'clock on a July morning discovers a young Canadian woman sleeping on a bed of moss, a perfect "union of art with nature" that matches the "contradictory yet consistent" charms of the occupant (Harrison 46). The way in which the woman has worked to combine the indigenous and the imported, nature and culture, marks her as a kind of artist possessed of "skilful" hands and "a beautiful mind" (46); the island is her sanctuary, a place of freedom and creativity. But when the man encounters her on the island, she is not actively involved in artistic pursuits but a sleeping beauty, passive and prone. The man thinks that he "ought to be fishing" (46) (i.e., exploiting the natural resources), but the woman and her beautiful island hold him captive. Weaver-Hightower points out that, ironically, in both the Elizabethan and the Victorian eras, in which the British imperial figures were women, wildly popular castaway narratives were overwhelmingly masculine, with women presented as physically and mentally weak or altogether absent (55). Unlike these castaway women, Harrison's heroine is quite capable once she is awakened by the cry of the loon, described variously as weird, unearthly, maniacal, and melancholy. She is a camper, not a castaway, and "camping out," as she tells the Englishman, is "a genuine Canadian experience" (Harrison 47). She has found a niche, however temporary, in the local ecosystem.

Ecological release, the introduction of a species to an environment other than its native habitat, can be devastating when the invasive species takes over in the absence of predators. However, it can be positive if the colonizer flourishes without threatening those who are already there. In fact, freed from the constraints of their ancestral communities, small species are likely to enlarge on an island over time, just as large species are likely to decrease in size. Harrison's heroine, who would have been subject to a variety of circumscriptions in the Victorian world of separate spheres, is here "released" into greater aptitude and autonomy. Caught gawking, the intruding male stranger is betrayed, as is the woman whose private space is invaded. Rather than succumbing to embarrassment at being awakened to such scrutiny, the woman extends hospitality and welcomes the stranger ashore. On her island, she has grown large enough to subvert traditional hierarchies and assume the role of tutor for the newcomer.

Invited to make himself useful gathering firewood, the man immediately falls in love with the object of his gaze, uttering a radiant "Oh"

as a strand of her chestnut hair blows across his face. Enchantment as a double-edged sword is the experience of Harrison's island, as it is with the brave new world of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Indeed, Ferdinand's log gathering, his instant passion for the lady of the island, and Miranda's tears are all echoed in Harrison's tale, but the difference is that this Miranda is not a maid available for conquest. The woman, like the island, remains unnamed, but the reader discovers that the Englishman's name is Amherst, later to be known as Admiral Amherst. This choice of name is significant, for it was the Englishman Jeffery Amherst who made a conquest first of the *island* of Cape Breton at Louisbourg (1758) and then of the *island* of Montreal (1760), insisting that "I have come to take Canada and I will take nothing less" (qtd. in Long 133). Amherst became the governor general of British North America in 1760 before facilitating the capture of the *islands* of Dominica (1761), Martinique (1762), and Cuba (1762), on behalf of the British. In Harrison's story, unknown to Amherst, both woman and island are already "taken." Not content merely to enjoy, he seeks to claim and colonize, though he is warned to "keep to the open water, unless you wish to be seriously handled . . ." (47).

The subtle pattern of military imagery introduced by the precise coordinates of the island is repeated in Harrison's description of the stones of the campfire as "fortifications" (49), Amherst's kiss as an "involuntary salute" (52), and the Othello-like description of the island's "too lovely occupant" (53). Othello is accused of witchcraft in managing to secure the love of Desdemona, but in Harrison's story it is the woman and the island that are described as "charming" and "bewitching" in an echo of the classical references to Odyssean islands in her poetry. Suddenly discovering that he has been misled by the absence of visible signs of colonization, flags, or wedding rings, the admiral-to-be makes a hasty retreat, nearly overturning the boat of his adversary, the woman's plump and pleasant husband returning from fishing. The question of the woman's happiness remains unanswered. "Was she happy, was she a loved and loving wife? Somehow the conviction forced itself upon him that she was not. Yet he could not ask her, it must remain her secret" (52). The story invites us to equate the woman and the island, but an environmental reading suggests that Harrison has given both woman and island a measure of power when left to their own devices without the conquest of men. Harrison alerts us to the dangers of colonization

and invites us to ponder nature's subjection to human occupation as unsatisfactory.

Curiously, the story is narrated in the first person, not, as one might expect, by either of the central characters, but by a friend of the admiral who unsuccessfully attempts to bring about a romantic resolution. The admiral, however, will not attempt further contact, preferring instead to refer to a little chart of the island that he has made from memory that brings back in exquisite, even erotic, detail all that he has seen of this cool northern isle. If an artistic rendering can repeatedly restore the experience to him, then he does not need to conquer the geographic space literally, as he attempted to do by kissing the woman: "the encounter, though short, had been one of singular idyllic charm until he had by his own rash act spoilt it" (Harrison 51). Harrison chooses to call her story an "idyl," and it does contain pastoral and descriptive elements, but the conclusion is less than idyllic. The independence gained by the unnamed Canadian with red-brown hair is only temporary. There is no island, however wild and self-reliant, that is not subject to colonization. Yet lessons taught by an intense and passionate encounter with nature forever change those who have learned them. Amherst discovers that the island and its occupant "remained to the last as realities" (53) for him and the friend to whom he so vividly described them because he chooses to remember rather than reign. A similar desire to "read" nature rather than rule over it emerges in Harrison's essay on the pleasures of being an amateur geologist, published the same year as this story:

For, from the first day of creation, there has never been any fairytale so brilliant, so absorbing, so instructive, as the tale of "How the Earth Grew;" and, although I shall never be a scientist . . . I still feel, whether drifting about in my bark canoe, or sleeping in my tent on some mossy northern island where the pine-scented air is so keen and health-giving, that I am in my humble but enthusiastic way, slowly learning to read that greatest of great legends. (qtd. in Ware 223)

Competition

Because of their isolation, islands are especially subject to competition in which two organisms compete for resources in short supply. Typically, competitors either adapt or die. In her poetry, Marjorie Pickthall focuses, like Harrison, on islands not primarily as contested spaces but

as places of allure and enchantment. According to Anne Compton, “Nature was Pickthall’s narcotic. Poems moving from urgent openings to easeful surrender, report its effect, a slippage into spell” (21). In “Three Island Songs” (1913), written while Pickthall was vacationing in Ontario’s Thousand Islands, she expresses a genuine symbiosis: “For the blue ways of the islands are wound about my soul” (qtd. in Campbell 386). Yet even here the struggle becomes apparent: “Why should sorrow seek me and I so young and kind?” (qtd. in Campbell 386). In a 1911 letter, Pickthall describes “a wonderful face in the rock on one island” that takes her breath away: “It is some living thing bowed down and *blunted* into the granite, waiting with awful patience. I call it Eve” (qtd. in Pierce 76). Like Harrison, Pickthall associates the wild island space with a female, one who is subject to patriarchal interpretation and masculine conquest. Pickthall also admits to the same temptation for ownership and colonization: “There is an islet here I’d love to own. . . . It nearly makes you cry it is so small and perfect. Last, loneliest, loveliest, exquisite, apart” (qtd. in Pierce 76), but like Admiral Amherst the poet ultimately settles for a detailed record of what has so moved and inspired her.

As with Harrison, it is a short story in which Pickthall explores the equilibrium of islands most fully. “On Ile de Paradis” first appeared in *Canadian Magazine* in 1906, and in the opening paragraph Pickthall states that the “magic” of an island can be dark or light depending on the attitude of the intruder. In the struggle for survival in a realm of finite resources, “the wilderness . . . is a sister to those who seek her in comradeship, a mother to those who seek her in sorrow, but a step-mother to those who seek her in ignorance” (159). Pickthall alliteratively describes the island of her title as “a big rock set among brawling rapids . . . producing balsams, berry-bushes and bears in season” (159). It is also, we are told, full of caves and believed to be haunted by a *loup-garou* or werewolf. The clergyman who finds himself stranded on this island is Antoine MacMurray, the son of a French mother from whom he inherits “his soft heart and his skill in cookery” and a Scottish father who gives him “an uncompromising conscience and an iron will” (159). Lorraine McMullen and Sandra Campbell, who selected this story for *New Women: Short Stories by Canadian Women 1900-1920*, note that Pickthall’s male protagonists can emerge from her own musings on femininity. Although Pickthall feels that she is “a misfit of the worst

kind” as a woman, she argues that, “As a man, you could go ahead and stir things up *fine*” (McMullen and Campbell 158).

Pickthall, like Harrison, associates the island with a woman and then proceeds to explore the differing outcomes for the men who land on her shores and proceed to engage in competition with the wilderness, each other, and themselves. MacMurray does not even intend to go to Ile de Paradis, but, en route to comfort a man crushed by a falling branch, he finds his canoe swamped by a careering log. The context here is one of nature’s formidable power against the weak and careless. Although his “shipwreck” is unexpected, MacMurray the minister is fully prepared with a Bible, the Westminster Confession, three fish-hooks, a tiny surgical case, a watertight box of matches, and half a dozen ham sandwiches, all that he needs to maintain his spiritual, mental, and physical well-being in conjunction with the bounty provided by the natural world. He calmly lights a torch and speculates on his chances of rescue, but before long he realizes that he is not alone, that other eyes are watching him from the heart of the cavern. His Scotch side wishes for a rifle, but his French side recalls the legends of the *loup-garou* told about this island.

By morning, he realizes that “this Thing from the caves” had once been a human being who lost everything by coming to the wilderness ill equipped and ignorant: “There was less to him, less character, less nature, than there is to a beast” (Pickthall, “On Ile de Paradis” 165). When MacMurray is eventually rescued from Ile de Paradis, his rescuers are not surprised by “this Thing” that had once been a man. They explain that this outcome is almost “commonplace” when a “tenderfoot” sets out into the wilderness in winter without a guide, unprepared to meet nature’s challenges. In this isolated world of competition and extremity, he loses everything: “Brains fail so easily, so easily, in the wilds. It is all perfectly simple, perfectly explicable, perfectly horrible” (166).

The adaptable MacMurray and his “three-parts Indian” (160) guide survive their “shipwreck” relatively intact because of local knowledge, experience, determination, and common sense. Pickthall explores the co-dependent relationship between settler and indigene more fully in other stories, such as “The Third Generation,” in which, as Misao Dean puts it, “the abject is inseparable from the subject, and the Aboriginal inseparable from the nation” (28), but it is clear even here that the white

man fares best when he travels in a canoe with an individual armed with ancient knowledge. The “tenderfoot” who “would take no guide,” on the other hand, is doomed to fail. He never recovers “feeling, speech, or thought” and soon dies as “unclaimed flotsam of the wilderness” (Pickthall, “On Ile de Paradis” 167). He is ultimately defeated by nature because of ignorance. The force that might have been a benevolent mother or sister instead becomes the cruel stepmother of fairytales, bent on his destruction. We are told earlier that MacMurray knows his fairytales but is also “strong on the sins of the Laodiceans” (159), a church chastised in the third chapter of Revelations for being neither hot nor cold but merely lukewarm. This and other scripture references in Pickthall’s story suggest that we read it as a spiritual parable about being prepared for our encounter with paradise, but it is also possible to read it as an environmental parable about being prepared for our encounter with a different kind of paradise and the perils of a passive or lukewarm approach. When competition is fierce and resources are finite, only those who adapt will endure. Pickthall suggests that the wilderness comes to us as we come to it and that there is no room for detachment when our very survival is at stake.

Cascade

Another ecological term that can be useful in interpreting these island texts is “trophic cascade,” which refers to a chain of extinctions following the loss of one or more species that play a critical role in an ecosystem, just as the demise of a pollinator as small as a bee can affect the entire food chain. Islands are a sober reminder that this domino effect will ultimately affect even keystone species such as humans. Ontario poet and journalist Katherine Hale (née Amelia Beers Warnock) also takes a small northern island as her subject for her long poem “The Island (*Experiment in Magic*),” published in 1934. Her poem shares affinities with the stories of Harrison and Pickthall in its setting, length, narrative structure, use of character, and tendency to use free verse as opposed to rhyme. Although Hale made her poetic debut with the conventional rhyming war poetry in collections such as *Grey Knitting* (1914), in both *Morning in the West* (1923) and *The Island, and Other Poems* (1934) she “imagines a highly emotive and spiritualized Canadian landscape . . . combined with a more innovative poetic structure” (Walbohm 69) that both impressed and puzzled readers. “Critics

found a curious inability to dissect or explain these verses,” wrote Lotta Dempsey of her later work (84), and “The Island” is indeed an experiment in form as well as content.

An experiment is an act designed to discover, test, or illustrate a truth, but in this case the experiment tests both natural and supernatural phenomena that illustrate the principle of interconnectedness that trophic cascade so tragically demonstrates. Hale’s island, like Harrison’s, initially strikes those who discover it as strange and enchanting. It looks “like a legend” (7), a myth, or perhaps a chart to explain the symbols of the allegory that they are about to enter. And this island, like Harrison’s and Pickthall’s islands, is also associated with a woman, in this case a woman who sings an ancient song that, like the song of the sirens, entangles entirely with a quickening of both body and spirit.

Hale and her husband, John Garvin, were members of the Muskoka Assembly of the Canadian Chautauqua Association, organized in 1921 at an inn on an island in Lake Rousseau, about 200 kilometres north of Toronto. According to Sylvia DuVernet, the institution was intended as a “visionary undertaking intended to combine a Muskoka holiday with spiritual and cultural enrichment . . . [.] a summer recreation resort but also a literary center which seeks to interpret the best in Canadian thought and ideals” (qtd. in Walbohm 77). Among these ideals were the theosophical principles of social welfare, sexual equality, and finding the divine in nature. According to Samara Walbohm, “In direct contrast to the exploitive and (masculine) tyranny over landscape frequently recognized in more familiar modernist poetry (such as that of F.R. Scott, E.J. Pratt and A.J.M. Smith), Hale’s work celebrates a more forgiving and harmonious feminine perspective” (80). Among the concepts propounded by theosophy’s founder, Helena Blavatsky, in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and elsewhere that seem relevant to Hale’s poem are the symbolic significance of the circle and “the sacred island,” particularly the one that “*is our globe*” (2: 326), and vibration as a force that connects all things.

Hale’s poem opens with “Discovery,” which describes the arrival of two lovers on “a glowing island / [They] had never seen” (7). They ask “Are you fact or fancy?” and the island responds, “I am an old song” (7). In contrast to F.R. Scott’s 1928 poem “Old Song,” in which the “elemental song” that emerges from the stone throat is “a quiet calling / of no mind” and “no note,” in Hale’s poem nature engages those who come

to it with a voice that is at once lyrical and invigorating. In the second section, entitled “Air,” Hale stresses the “exotic charm” (8) of the island, sky, and stars that transports the lovers out of an ordinary Canadian existence, making the narrator uncertain whether the trembling is that of the island or the small breasts of the beloved. Significantly, the gender of the lover is not made clear, allowing for the Sapphic interpretation that Walbohm applies to other Hale poems. Continuing a trajectory begun by Isabella Valancy Crawford and Pauline Johnson, Hale’s poetry “tells not of a relationship *to* nature, but one that is mysterious, liberating, sexual and wholly feminine, *within* nature” (Walbohm 74).

Only the water seems northern and cool, and it is immersion in this element that allows the lovers to feel “fully alive” and “coldly free” in a kind of reverse evolution that illuminates their kinship with the natural world: “Electrons in the sun, / Or stars in space / Or little shining fish were we —” (Hale 9). Like Harrison before her, Hale notes that the seclusion of an island invites a kind of erotic abandon; “I could not help doing as I did, it was so electrical!” says Amherst after stealing a kiss (Harrison 51). However, as one might expect half a century later, both the actions of the lovers and the description of those actions are more explicit in Hale’s poetry: “The island gathered shape again / Beneath our pulsing limbs” (9).

In Hale’s poem, as in *Paradise Lost*, Eden is interrupted at the hour of noon. However, the Indian guide “circling in and out” (10) in his grey canoe offers not temptation but admonition; he warns the lovers that the island is damned because it is too low and too near the water, an ambiguous interpolation given the earlier identification of the water with sexual freedom. Drawing on his knowledge and experience, he offers to take them to a good fishing spot where they can make the most of the renewable natural resources in preparation for the leaner seasons to come. The lovers decline his offer of trout and claim that they have leased the island “forever,” entitling them to forbid poaching. Like the “tenderfoot” of Pickthall’s tale, the campers refuse the warnings of a Native guide and are thus unprepared for what follows.

The new arrivals have sought, like the protagonist of Harrison’s tale, to tame and domesticate their island by creating imported structures out of indigenous ingredients, a pine table and a balsam bed, and the results are similarly magical. Yet, when the two try to paddle out to the world of tourists and inns that they have left behind, the spell of the

island lures them back: “And something reached out of the twilight, / Something so old and magnetic / Something so sure and prevailing / It seemed we might better obey —” (Hale 11). In the penultimate section, entitled “Night,” nature begins to reassert its hold on the tiny parcel of wilderness through encroaching winter and its bitter weapons of darkness, wind, and frost. The description of the frost as “pistol frost” (13) joins mortality with technology. The Promethean element, the fire that the newcomers have built, seems to be no match for the primitive power of earth, air, and water. The hollowness of the claim that they made to the Native guide soon becomes apparent. A lease in perpetuity is as impossible as ownership. What right have they? The magic that marked their union with one another and the island that welcomed and warmed them is called into question. They have played house on the island, but what is kind in summer becomes cruel in winter, triggering a fall in many senses of the word, from summer to autumn, from innocence to experience, from ecological dominance to trophic cascade.

The final section, entitled “Detention,” reveals the dark side of discovery. “Creeping about like trespassers” (Hale 14), they decide that they must leave the island with the cold coming on, but the island, Calypso-like, does not immediately let them go. They find themselves held by a place that they had aspired to hold. They had earlier achieved an intimacy with each other and the elements that only an island allows, but now these elements conspire against their departure. The water steals their paddles; the wind refuses to fill their sail:

We were merged again in a mystery
 That defied our fluttering will,
 So we came like abject children
 Back to our cold doorsill —
 Suddenly cold and gray. (14-15)

The island detains them until they learn their lesson, and the lesson is this: they cannot lay claim to and capture enchantment without destroying it, but they can carry it away with them arranged as art, modified as music. Such creations become the paradise within, solace for unattainable Edens. The environmental message of the whole poem is emphasized in the lines of the island’s final song, the only lines out of over two hundred that are italicized:

*If you would ask me I should say:
 Not if you fell on your knees to pray,
 Not for a year and not for a day,
 And my days are long and long. . . .
 For you have found what you came to see
 And I am you and you are me
 And you are part of a song —
 An old, old song
 Old song. (15)*

Since several questions have been posed, it is not entirely clear which one the island is responding to, but the most likely candidate is the last one: “We’ve a lease of this island forever, / Forever, do you hear?” (13). The island seems to suggest that no arrangement, financial or otherwise, can give anyone exclusive rights to the beauty and bounty of the natural world. And the words “*I am you and you are me*” powerfully illustrate that what affects the island also affects its inhabitants. What happens to one happens to all. Once it is set in motion, there is no escaping from trophic cascade. However, if we are prepared to engage in conversation rather than conquest, nature just might speak to us and through us. The experiment of Hale’s title suggests not chemistry so much as alchemy, a mystical process that transforms lead into gold, sorrow into song. In reviewing “The Island” for *Saturday Night* in 1934, B.K. Sandwell wrote this:

But at intervals there comes to us in this world of fact a mystical experience telling us that what seems external is not really external but is part with ourselves in some dimly felt and all-embracing unity. While that experience is ours, and to a lesser extent while we can revive it, or have it revived within us by genuine poetry, we cease to be alone, we cease to be mortal, we cease to be afraid. [Hale] does not so much describe [the island] as make the reader live on it and with it, until at the end it extinguishes all sense of personality, and itself sings the closing lines of the last poem. . . . The experiment is successful; the magic works. (50)

Corridors

Island biogeography holds particular relevance for the conservation movement because it has been successfully applied to “habitat islands” or landlocked wild places surrounded by a “sea” of human-altered

environments, where the forces of colonization, competition, and cascade can be felt even more keenly than on actual islands. Among the factors that affect biodiversity of such inland “islands” is their size, fragmentation, isolation, and edge effects relating to the permeability of buffer zones (Ladle and Whittaker 192), but most conservationists agree that, despite the risks, connectivity is to be encouraged. A primary means of connectivity is the establishment and maintenance of wildlife corridors that increase migration and dispersal among islands, allowing for the “rescue effect,” in which new arrivals can save threatened populations from extinction. These terrestrial corridors and their aquatic counterparts with the lyrical name of riparian ribbons allow creatures to come and go. The island texts offered by early Canadian women writers can be considered “corridors” that connect us to the wild places.

Whether the Canadian landscape is viewed through a romantic, gothic, or theosophical lens, or some ironic version of it, the texts of these three authors offer a tiny island defined as both a physical space and an allegorical space, both a refuge that releases and reveals and a prison that contains and conceals, depending on how it is approached. The islands described by Harrison, Pickthall, and Hale, though too small to sustain permanent habitation, still manage to teach important ecological lessons about human interactions with the natural world. Would-be invaders return to their own larger realms enriched but also chastened by their intimate encounters with the wilderness. Nature as a virgin to be violated has been a long-standing trope of masculine writing about the frontier, but Harrison, Pickthall, and Hale point us instead in the direction of nature as mother and sister. If we can be content to enjoy without ownership, to “camp out” rather than colonize, then our diverse if demanding natural inheritance might well endure. In each case, the island conveys an unforgettable message — that it is folly for us to believe that we can conquer nature, come to it unprepared, or expect to separate ourselves from its fate.

“Islands beget islands,” writes Gretel Ehrlich in *Islands, the Universe, Home*: “A terrestrial island is surrounded by an island of water, which is surrounded by an island of air, all of which makes up our island universe. . . . To sit on an island, then, is not a way of disconnecting ourselves but, rather, a way we can understand relatedness” (64). If, as Greta Gaard argues, “the fundamental realization of ecofeminism” is that “our cultural, economic and ecological crises stem from a separation

of self from other,” then it is worth examining texts that encourage a diminishment of that distance, as do the tiny islands on which they are set, and perhaps even to “uncover and to generate the means for healing this fundamental alienation” (245). Our hierarchical relationship with nature, in which we assume that we are monarchs of all that we survey, must be overturned.

There has been considerable debate over whether “island studies” can be used to establish definitive conservation guidelines, yet island texts can be compelling calls to action and advocacy because, as Daniel S. Simberloff points out, “islands are paradigms for geographic entities ranging in size from tiny habitat patches to continents or even the entire earth” (161). It has become painfully clear that what happens on little islands can happen on our big blue island floating in space if we are not more careful to cherish the earth and learn the hard lessons that these writers seek to teach. As William Wordsworth reminds us in *The Prelude*, we must live

Not in Utopia, — subterranean fields, —
 Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
 But in the very world which is the world
 Of all of us, — the place where, in the end,
 We find our happiness, or not at all! (399)

Any critical lens through which we look at early Canadian women writers is most fruitfully applied, of course, “in the context of their own experience, their own culture, their own historical moment” (Relke 323). In *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting 1920-1940*, Ann Davis considers how theosophy and other mystical movements influenced Canadian art from 1920 to 1940, but the degree to which theosophy influenced early environmental thinking in Canada has yet to be fully explored, especially the relevance of an emanationist view of evolution, in which the divine spark that has descended into matter climbs back up to be reunited with its source, and the value of listening for “the voice of the silence.” As Blavatsky phrases it, “For as the sacred River’s roaring voice whereby all Nature-sounds are echoed back, so must the heart of him ‘who in the stream would enter,’ thrill in response to every sigh and thought of all that lives and breathes” (*Voice of the Silence* 50-51). In “The Rock and the Pool,” an essay that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1913, Pickthall writes, “The grief of it is that I

cannot reach the rock by day or by night without disturbing life that is so much finer, if less conscious, than my own" (430). In the essay's penultimate paragraph, she lays her own face "to the face of the rock" and asks, "O earth, my mother and maker, is all well with you?" (431). A century later her question is all the more urgent.

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