

Murder on the Atwood Express

Margaret Atwood. *Strange Things: the Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995. 126pp.

In September 1996, about a year after the publication of *Strange Things*, Jan Wong wrote in the *Globe and Mail* that *Alias Grace* is "Ms. Atwood's first murder mystery." Wong must not have read *Strange Things*, four lectures "printed as they were originally given" (v) at Oxford University in 1991, in which Atwood plays the murderer and Canlit the corpse. Indeed, Atwood is a serial offender, her other victim being Canadian literary criticism, dispatched by her neglect. The mystery is why—why she hacked at a literature of a nation she loves; why she did it before an audience that surely would have listened at least respectfully to something competent, and would not have expected to witness an antic butchery; why sanity did not prevail to prevent a repeat offense, in printed form, four years later.

The lectures spin out from four Atwoodian themes—death (the absent text of Franklin's voyage in 1845 in search of the Northwest Passage), the process of going Native (Grey Owl, the invented persona of Archie Belaney), cannibalism (the figure of the Wendigo), and the female figure in the wilderness ("the tourist, the coper, and something we might call 'dismayed'" [97]). If read as a whydunit rather than as a set of lectures that any academic or non-academic would be ashamed to give, they offer few clues to a motive. There is little to be learned about the literary North or about Canadian Literature by non-Natives from these expensive 126 pages. A gross problem arises by book's end, when it is clear that Atwood is determined to make North synonymous with wilderness, wherever in Canada it is. Anywhere malevolent, anything malevolent is North. No rigour governs this line of enquiry. Much more of that can be found in Allison Mitcham's brief thematic study, *Northern Imagination* (1980), which, although she lists it, Atwood apparently read as carelessly as she reads the novels and few poems of her predecessors and peers.

An example of such carelessness is her being simply mistaken in thinking that "poetic need" (26) prompted her late friend Gwendolyn MacEwen, in her radio play "Terror and Erebus," to tell of Inuit sinking one of Franklin's ships by boring a hole in the hull below the water-line; MacEwen only repeated the story related in Knud Rasmussen's book,

Across Arctic America. Atwood's "own theory that these ships sink in MacEwen's poem" for reasons other than the "historical record" (26, 27) instances the pitfalls of divorcing lecturing from research (promoters of the Stuart Smith Report take note): she badly misreads a friend's work. Using that misreading, she sings again in chains like the sea the theme of the drowned poet in Canlit; simultaneously, she commands a startling ignorance of the subject of her first lecture.

"All that Robert Service rhetoric about the emptiness of the North, its vacancy," one hears for the umpteenth time, "is meaningless when viewed in Native light. For indigenous peoples the wilderness was not empty but full, and one thing it was full of was monsters" (66). Moreover, one hears it in the tone of a notion-dispenser "rummaging through the undergrowth" (89) rather than of a writer thoughtfully measuring the work of her peers, or of a well-read critic, let alone a scholar. This passage offers a glaring example of the lectures' incompetence: in it, wilderness and North are read as synonyms, all native peoples are to be understood as viewing the natural world identically, and all of them are to be seen as embracing the concept of wilderness, the literary roots of which are distinctly Judeo-Christian. (Meanwhile, emptiness does recur as a prominent theme in Native oral history, especially in terms of starvation.) That this vapid critical assessment serves as a prelude merely to plot summary about the Wendigo in various works and a quotation from "the indefatigable American rhymester Ogden Nash," renders it one of the most withering examples ever served up of Cancrit buffoonery. (No wonder, then, that even fellow thematic critic John Moss did his earnest best to distance himself from Atwood's crime [*The Canadian Forum* lxxv.851 (July/Aug. 1996): 42-3].)

"Linoleum Caves," the last lecture, hardly even mentions the North; an emphasis on *Bear*, *Swamp Angel*, *The Diviners*, Pauline Johnson's poem, "The Pilot of the Plains," and the writings of Moodie and Traill ensures as much. Nor does the malevolence of Canadian literature seem a very strong theme in the works chosen for discussion. Meanwhile, no writings by such northern travellers as Mina Hubbard, Clara Vyvyan, or Isobel Hutchinson are brought under consideration. The Canadian literary and other criticism that has patiently shown that other attributes than malevolence have been identified and celebrated in Canadian culture is mainly ignored. If, after all, the North is not to be a critical factor in the discussion, one wonders where would Atwood fit the open road of Bliss Carman's *Vagabondia*, the wilderness poems of Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell Scott, the poetry and painting associated with the Alpine Club of Canada, the figure of Emily Murphy's Janey Canuck in the West, the ideas behind the development

of cottage country (the setting of *Surfacing*), the National Parks system, the fresh-air movement inaugurated in Ontario by John Kelso for the sake of late nineteenth-century urban dwellers. To put it another way, a thoughtful critic might have considered how lectures written a quarter-century after *Survival* could have regarded the themes emphasized in the earlier text. But in these pages one finds the same old themes, the identification of various forms of insanity contracted from too much time in the bush, for example. Death and madness now appear as the progressive and abiding insanities of Atwood's criticism.

A parcel of books, pots of strong coffee, and several hurried hours—these clues, albeit inferred, lead to the conclusion that, if she was not quite plotting her murders on the train into Oxford station, Atwood paid her victims scant attention all the same. Assuming that *Survival* offered second-rate criticism, the greater gobs of plot summary render this third-rate, and, all in all, both a regrettable but also a reprehensible response to an invitation to speak of one's national literature at a foreign institution. Reprehensible because the lectures convey a strong impression that Canadian literature has accorded the North only a superficial consideration, a smirking one at that. Whereas our intellectual culture is much wider than our national borders, and our imaginative culture is aspiring to fill them (it is still the case that the North for most writers has been an imagined rather than a lived geography), Atwood has managed to present the literary expression of those cultures as much smaller. It is a crime to offer this indecency to a body of work. Let it earnestly be hoped that, with the guileless publication of yet another book of bad criticism, Atwood might now be convinced by the advice of someone whose opinion she values to leave literary criticism to those rather more dedicated and able. In the meantime, all applications for parole should be denied this critical menace.

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