

NORTHERN FICTION — NORTHERN HOMAGE

J. C. RITCHIE¹

In the course of fieldwork on the Eagle River (N. Yukon) in the summer of 1976, my senses were assailed by a striking impact on the local environment. The Dempster Highway was being pushed across the Eagle Plain from the West, right up to the banks of the river, and the droning graders and bulldozers were filling the air with dust. Where the gravel road stopped at the West bank was a desolation of abandoned trailers, a litter of fuel drums, broken equipment and debris. All the rules of site clean-up go out the window when the government builds a highway in such hidden subarctic remoteness as the Eagle Plain, with a carefully buried but inconsequential impact assessment report and neither public awareness nor accountability.

In the summer of 1977 I flew across the site, *en route* to a field camp, and there it was — the Eagle had been bridged and the Dempster Highway was in place. In the frigid privacy of the winter a Canadian Armed Forces crew had snapped into place the final link in the route from Dawson to the Mackenzie Delta. All done without a whisper of environmental query, without a line in a national newspaper or broadcast — it might have been a bridge in Siberia!

Meantime . . . over the mountains 100 miles to the East the cacophony in the Mackenzie Valley had struck a new key of discord. The Berger best-seller had extended every Canadian's library of northern mythology by two volumes and the Federal Government had decided on an Alaska Highway-Yukon line, with yes, of course, the possibility of a spur gas line along the route of that same Dempster Highway if the Mackenzie Delta and offshore reserves ever increased substantially.

These are the contrasts and contradictions which are the stuff of Canadian northern environmental concerns and decisions. May I offer some purely personal comment?

The Berger report has been acclaimed and endorsed as a landmark in the evolution of desirable modes of evaluating the social and environmental effects of major development proposals (e.g. Gamble 1978). There are serious reservations to be suggested, however, firstly about the validity of at least the environmental part of the vast proceedings, deliberations and reporting, including, but going well beyond the Berger report itself. Bliss (1978) has expressed in print the deep dissatisfaction of many in the scientific community with the cavalier, deliberate distortion by the Commissioner in presenting and evaluating evidence on environmental problems in animal

ecology and earth science. But there are more basic flaws in the pipeline enquiry exercise, and perhaps they are expressions of a deviant trend in Western society as it confronts environmental problems.

Let me preface these cautionary comments with the ready acknowledgement that problems of ecological imbalance are real, sometimes global and potentially disastrous. But I believe, in the words of Steiner (1971) that many environmentalists and 'leaders of public opinion' are responding with a "millennarian naïveté and recoil from adult politics in the current passion for the environment".

During the past decade the formal assessment of environmental impact has become entrenched in many regulations and conditions attached to permits or leases for new resource developments. The state of the art, however, remains primitive (cf. Plewes and Whitney 1977). In the arctic in particular, assessment to date has been little more than informed guesswork. Assessment statements are usually prepared by one of the several consultant groups active in Canada; they follow an identical pattern in both format and the dreary repetition of clichés; they seldom go beyond a rambling narrative or an anecdotal catalogue of opinions. Ideally, such statements should be based on a set of tested, rigorously quantitative predictions. Base-line surveys of where and how many the animals are, short-term 'experiments' with noise simulators, and the inevitable plot experiments to measure revegetation are the best to date — none of much value in serious impact assessment.

The primary responsibility to develop impact assessment techniques is with the government, specifically Environment Canada. It is difficult to know what that gargantuan bureaucracy is up to at any moment in time, but so far the effort appears uncoordinated and insubstantial — a hodge-podge of in-house studies and a miscellany of short-term contracts to outside consultants and academics.

In addition to losing integrity by lapping up this scientific patronage from the federal agencies, the scientific community in Canada has proved inept in its efforts to contribute to the process of environmental protection in the north. It required 6 years to produce two disappointing catalogues of suggested reserves in boreal and arctic Canada (Beckel 1975; Nettleship & Smith 1975). They consist of superficial, uneven descriptions of about 200 sites with no attempt to propose management plans for those critical sites where conflict already exists or is pending. The first northern IBP Reserve was finally approved as a federally protected site on February 20th 1978.

However, the IBP-CT failure in the north illustrates an unfortunate Canadian reality, that nature conservation is in the hands either of amateurs or of academics, both tending to lapse into polemical outbursts tuned for the media rather than in designing and executing rigorous studies to establish the need for protection and to develop management plans to make it possible. What a tragedy that the labyrinth of jurisdictions in the north — Federal (at least 3 departments); Territorial; several provincial; and the possibility of Dene and Inuit Councils with constitutional authorities — preclude the establishment of a single agency modelled in its operational scope on the

U.K. Nature Conservancy Council and in its institutional status on Atomic Energy of Canada, staffed by professionals and competent in both research and management. As it is, we bumble along with endless bureaucratic rivalry, duplication, and perpetual organisational changes.

If environmental questions were all that is at issue, our politicians would have relatively little difficulty in deciding rationally on these questions. There are certainly difficult ecological problems, there remain large gaps in scientific knowledge, and certain species and local ecosystems are in such precarious ecological balance that northern development might be disastrous. Nonetheless, I suggest that the public became obsessed by and was misguided in that debate on the Mackenzie and other pipeline proposals; that public and corporate money was wasted flagrantly on excessive, repetitious often superficial studies of environment; and that public and government resources and energies were misdirected in the mounting of largely duplicate hearings and public enquiries. Let me venture out of my professional depth and offer a tentative analysis of what I view as a social malaise, inevitable though it might prove to be. Four influences seem to me to have been crucial.

Firstly, can anyone doubt the McLuhan thesis that one consequence of the electronic revolution is instant public awareness? But are we equally aware of the intrinsic dangers? I recall a simple example, with painful clarity. I was a member of an *ad hoc* Task Force, assembled hurriedly, and reporting to M. Chretien, then Minister of Northern Affairs. We stopped at Yellowknife for a plane change *en route* to the Mackenzie Delta to look at seismic and other oil industry activities. It was 1973; much excitable talk was rife about the pending 'rape of the north'; the CBC asked for an interview and two members of our group volunteered — one had never been in the north, the other was unfamiliar with either the tundra or the nature of seismic techniques. Both insisted that the tundra was being destroyed and that a moratorium on petroleum exploration should be declared immediately. CBC carried the message across the land that evening, into every receptive living room. The Task Force proceeded north. Those of us with some familiarity with the situation on the north slope of the Yukon and adjacent N.W.T. asked our colleagues, now of interview fame, to let us find these scenes of devastation. We flew over hundreds of miles of seismic line. We walked a few. Only one brought any confirmation of their excitable babblings. But the electronic media had spread the word, and any attempt at redress would be dubbed 'apologia for the industry'.

Similarly, while the instantaneous transmission of hearings, or the filming of visits to native settlements, or the magnificent footage of migrating herds of caribou served us well in conveying impressions and information, it also distorted and inflated the more dramatic notions, so that sober, considered judgement became impossible. Indeed the heavily pictorial format of the Berger report is ample testimony to the slowly changing idiom of our post-literate western society. The northern expert who offers a careful, balanced assessment of environmental impact is rarely asked to offer an opinion for the media — what he has to say is too cautiously couched in tentative terms to make 'news', far less to make an image on the screen.

Secondly, an accurate view of the north must penetrate the dense clouds of Canadian mythology. The northern environment has been described by one notable historian (Morton 1961) as one of the basic elements in the fabric of Canadianism. Others (Frye 1977) have seen in Canadian literature and art a formative, pervasive influence of the great, largely unseen north. He has stamped much of the poetry, art and literature with this 'stigma of environmental parochialism'. The boreal frontier is a salient feature in our collective view of ourselves. We have nurtured carefully a highly romantic view of the north and unfortunately it is substantially at variance with the facts. Glenn Gould put it well a few years ago: "The Idea of North is itself an excuse — an opportunity to examine that condition of solitude which is neither exclusive to the north nor the prerogative of those who go north but which does, perhaps, appear a bit more clearly to those who have made, if only in their imagination, the journey north".

If only in their imagination . . .

And so when the clarion call of 'rape of the north', of violation of the 'pristine ecosystems' by the captains of industry, rang out over the media in the late 60's, it struck a responsive chord. The public, already alerted to the general environmental alarm of the sixties, revolted; here was something simple to comprehend — especially simple to comprehend as almost no one had first-hand knowledge of it! How much simpler and more romantic to take up the environmental cudgels against industry in the far, remote, unvisited northland than, let us say, six miles North of Toronto where three years ago a gas pipeline was built through prime agricultural land, through semi-natural woodlands, and through one of the highest density recreational-urban complexes in Canada. But not a whimper from the environmentalists! Now environmental vigilance is needed in both places, but why this grotesquely unbalanced view? Why have so many environmentalist agitators 'dropped out' of problems that affect cities and their buffer zones? As Dansereau (1973) has pointed out recently, our cities are surrounded by great areas of semi-wilderness, "clearcut hillsides, sloppily dammed rivers, gaping gravel pits with pools of stagnant water, neither wild nor rural, nor industrial, nor urban, but just plain wasteland". This 'agony in stoney places' does not elicit strong protest. No, the protesters are off in the north, or at the seal hunt, in their imaginations if not in helicopters — the issues seem simpler there.

While on the one hand we can rejoice at the enhanced awareness by the public, by governments and by industry, of the many complex, often poorly understood but critical imbalances in ecosystems; while on the one hand we can celebrate the exponential increase in attention, formal and otherwise, to environmental issues — new university courses, action groups, probes and enquiries — on the other hand we view with misgiving and embarrassment the excursions by some colleagues in ecology into the realms of social philosophy, metaphysics and mysticism. Does the holistic rather than atomistic scientific view provide any special insight into these issues? I suggest that the public view of environmental issues is being distorted by many of our most outspoken ecologists, and that the political consequences

are at best of mixed value, at worst destructive. But let an experienced philosopher clear the ground. In his cool, fully documented analysis of the history of the environmental revolution — not from Rachel Carson's catalytic "Silent Spring" in the 1960's, but from the beginnings of western historical traditions — Passmore (1974) has shown how the bizarre excursions of Fraser-Darling, McHarg and Odum (H.), to take three notable examples, into the realms of philosophy and mysticism, are wholly unsound in their contextual perspective and absurdly naïve in their total lack of comprehension of the ways in which Western society proceeds.

These bizarre banalities would not be important if they did not reflect a common view — that ecologists somehow have a special view of the world which entitles them to pronounce oratorically and prophetically on all manner of questions. From this groundswell of environmental movements and protest has emerged the 'omniscientist'. He propounds laws, devastating in their ringing universality, but wholly ineffective as pointers to serious action in environmental problems. Commoner's "everything is connected to everything else", or "nature knows best" — marvellous fodder for the media; pathetic indicators of our 'post-culture' society.

Ecological problems, Passmore concludes, "can be solved only by the joint efforts of scientists, technologists, economists, statesmen and administrators, leavened by the time-tested method of thoughtful action".

But if we combine this simplistic, excitable conception of ecological problems with the Canadian mythology about the north, convey it by the electronic media — well, the results were before us a year ago like a great public entertainment, the Berger circus, complete with personality cults and a best-seller report.

But there is a fourth ingredient.

We read often that this is an age of disenchantment, perhaps; some would go so far as to say, showing the first intimations of the long slide to decadence of western society (Steiner 1971). There is a clear renunciation of history and tradition and a preoccupation with the isolated present. An offshoot, I believe, of this 'uncultured bondage to the present', is the notion that the traditional, democratic techniques of formulating public policy are inadequate and that public involvement must be fostered. Participatory democracy has become vogue. Hence the Berger enquiry.

While on the positive side it has provided a flood of new information and insights, and in particular the views of northern residents have been exposed fully for the first time. On the other side, these public hearings inevitably depress the discussion to the level of the lowest common denominator, in precisely the same way as the ancillary fact-finding requirements of hearings provide scientific boondoggles for the eager mediocrity of academics who have been, or should have been deprived of research funding from the government agencies.

This unrestrained participation and excessive exposure by the media ensures an unhealthy politicisation of the process. When linked with these other trends of environmental distortion and northern mythologies, the result is

potentially Machiavellian. Both the staff report of the Berger commission, and the commissioner's report, are highly political documents. Objective judgement is sacrificed in the interests of a particular political view, and regardless of how we may feel about the particular political complexion being espoused, this extension of the scope of the exercise goes well beyond the mandate given to the Commissioner. For example, the advocacy of the establishment of a super-bureaucracy to oversee all stages of the final design, construction and operation of the pipeline — paid for by industry — would be a step to so bureaucratise and hedge in the whole exercise that it would be close to nationalising the resource.

Setting aside these treacherous questions of politics, let me conclude by suggesting that the community of northern scientists (are not all Canadian scientists northern?) was caught in disarray by the onslaught of development proposals. The response, translated by the eager media, was scrambled and so confused that much of our credibility has evaporated — particularly in the north. This process has been part of a more general phenomenon — the loss of credibility and independence by the scientific community, particularly that segment concerned with environment. Further, we have allowed the integrity of science to be diminished by accepting the creeping patronage of the big federal departments.

The disarray of northern science is simply a clear example of a more general problem, that the community of scientists has been largely helpless in preventing domination and manipulation by political authority. Science in Canada is in decline because of undernourishment certainly, aggravated by narrow nationalistic hiring policies, but our capitulation to the insidious patronage of the federal agencies has ensured the loss of integrity of our branch of scholarship. The way back has been pointed out to us, first by Bronowski and echoed by our Nobel Laureate Gerhard Herzberg, that we must begin the process of the disestablishment of science.

REFERENCES

- BECKEL, D. (1975). International Biological Programme, Canadian Conservation Committee, Panel 10, Inventory of Reserves.
- BERGER, T. R. (1977). Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland: The Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry; 2 Volumes. Minister of Supply and Services.
- BLISS, L. C. (1978). Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland — an environmental critique. The Muskox, publ. 21, *in press*.
- DANSEREAU, P. (1973). Inscape and Landscape. CBC Learning Systems, Toronto.
- FRYE, N. (1977). Canadian Culture Today. Unpublished MS, pers. comm., paper delivered Feb. 1977 to Seminar on Canadian Culture, Washington, D.C.
- GAMBLE, D. J. (1978). The Berger Enquiry: an impact assessment process. *Science* 199:946-952.
- MORTON, W. L. (1961). The Canadian Identity. Univ. Toronto Press. 125p.
- NETTLESHIP, D. N. and SMITH, P. (1975). International Biological Programme, Canadian Conservation Committee, Panel 9, Inventory of Reserves.
- PASSMORE, J. (1974). Man's responsibility for nature — ecological problems and western traditions. Duckworth. 213p.
- PLEWES, M. and WHITNEY, J. B. R. (1977). Environmental Impact Assessment in Canada: Processes and Approaches. Inst. Environmental Studies, Univ. Toronto.
- STEINER, G. (1971). In Bluebeard's Castle — Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture. Faber and Faber. London, 112 p.