

“Set Forth as Plainly May Appear”: *The Verse Journal of Henry Kelsey*

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THE VERSE JOURNAL of Henry Kelsey (c. 1667-1774)¹ is the earliest first-hand account in poetry of a part of what has become Canada. In the spring of 1691, probably on “a bend in the Saskatchewan River about twelve miles below [what is now] The Pas, Manitoba” (*DCB* II 309), Kelsey, then a young servant of the Hudson’s Bay Company, planted a “Cross” at a place that he had earlier christened “deerings point” after Sir Edward Dering, the deputy governor of the HBC. Kelsey later used this event to conclude his brief verse journal about his “Journey” in 1690-91 from York Factory on Hudson Bay to the Canadian plains:

At deerings point after the frost
I set up their a Certain Cross
In token of my being there
Cut out on it the date of year
And Likewise for me to veryfie the same
added to it my master sir Edward deerings name
So having not more to trouble you with all I am
Sir your most obedient and faithfull Servant at Command

HENRY KELSEY
(83-90)²

In these lines, and in the verse journal or epistle that they conclude, can be discerned the beginning of the complex relations among words, things, subjects, landscapes, and audiences whose permutations and combinations constitute the poetry of Canada. Usually dismissed as mere doggerel — most recently in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (see Marsh, 935) — Kelsey’s poem is a work of some poetic skill which amply repays close attention to its rhetorical and

formalistic features, as well as to its subject-matter and ideological assumptions.

In a critical climate freshened by deconstruction, feminism, post-structuralism, and the new historicism, Kelsey's "Certain Cross" at "deerings point" can hardly be seen other than as a monumental condenser of significances, determined and otherwise. A material and blatantly patriarchal emblem of Christianity inscribed with a date and name that speak of the Eurocentric and residually feudal commercial enterprise in which he was engaged, Kelsey's "Cross," even before it was reinscribed in his verse journal, achieves both documentary and allegorical dimensions. At once in and above the soil of Canada, it is not quite part of yet not completely apart from the terrain that it was intended to claim. A palimpsest of indigenuous materials and imported words — a Christian and commercial marker constructed of a local wood and overwritten with imperialistic information — it is nevertheless a great deal closer spatially, temporally, and ontologically to the Canadian terrain than Kelsey's verse journal or, indeed, Kelsey himself when he composed his retrospective poem, perhaps at York Factory or, more likely, in England sometime later. To the very extent that Kelsey's "Cross" and its inscriptions come close to being *on* and *of* Canada, they thus emphasize the inevitable gaps between all poems and writers and the places and things that they attempt to describe. But, in so doing, they also prompt consideration of the factors that might diminish such gaps, not *per se*, but by encouraging the sense of an authentic relationship between poetic language and the external world: the writer's familiarity with the things and places that he describes, for example, and his use of techniques that will enable a reader to constitute an impression of those things and places. Perhaps needless to say, the reader's own familiarity with the reality described by the poet can be of considerable, even crucial, assistance in the achievement and recognition of moments when the gaps between words and things, poems and places, appear to have been authentically bridged. As common sense would suggest, a poet's commitment to this country as home, his targeting of a local audience, and his competence in using mimetic techniques to represent the constituents of a distinctively Canadian environment and perspective are the sorts of things that, when they finally

come together, allow us to speak with confidence of a uniquely Canadian poetry.

I

Almost exactly a century before a convergence of these factors occurs in Thomas Cary's *Abram's Plains* (1789), a "descriptive" (1) poem³ written for a Lower Canadian audience by a man who had made the Colony his home, Kelsey visited the Prairie and wrote what he called his "small Relation . . . Concerning . . . [the] Indians and their Country" (20, 22) for the benefit primarily of his Hudson's Bay Company superiors, though with an eye also, very likely, on posterity. What did Kelsey write, and what do the compositional circumstances and discoverable purposes of his "small Relation" have to tell us about the beginnings of poetry in English on Canada? A little later, an answer will be proposed for the question of why Kelsey chose to write his journal of 1690-91 in the form of a poem,⁴ but in the meantime, and as a way into the beginning of his "small Relation," a still more fundamental matter needs to be addressed: *how* did Kelsey inscribe his verse journal? With what and on what was it written? No doubt, these questions will seem to some readers trivial, pointless, and irrelevant. Perhaps they can be made to appear less so by means of a quick glance forward in time to Adam Kidd's *The Huron Chief* (1830), a poem written, according to its Preface, "on the inner rind of birch bark, during [Kidd's] travels through the immense forests" (3) of Canada — that is, on a material and in a place that speak loudly of the poet's and the poem's authentic relation to the Huron Indians and their country. Although they belong to the realm of bibliographical fact rather than Romantic posturing, the material aspects of *Abram's Plains* — its publication at Quebec by a Loyalist printer on "Fine . . . Paper" manufactured in England (see xl-lxiii, and xl-vii-xlviii n.69) — are also significant, for they accord well with the poem's patriotic tone and its use of forms and techniques imported from England (the topographical poem, the decasyllabic couplet, the Here/There direction of the picturesque aesthetic, and so on [see xiii f., and xxxiv f.]) to celebrate the Lower Canadian landscape and to caution the English-speaking

élite of the Colony. What, then, do the material aspects of Kelsey's verse journal do to embody or reinforce its meaning?

According to Joseph Robson's version of the oral history "handed down by the servants in the Bay" (25 [Appendix]) in his *Account of Six Years Residence in Hudson's Bay*, Kelsey's first communication from the Canadian Prairie in 1690 was with writing materials that would have made Kidd green with envy: "a piece of birch-rind folded up, and written upon with charcoal" (72n.). It was in response to this aboriginal communication, says Robson, that in the summer of 1691 the Governor of York Factory sent Kelsey "paper[,] pens and ink to make observations" (9) — sent him, in other words, a medium and a message that entailed the production of an essentially Eurocentric document: a trader's account for the Hudson's Bay Company officers in Canada and England of the commercial aspects of the country under exploration. Whatever the truth of Robson's *Account*, the generic description just given certainly fits Kelsey's prose "Journal" of July-September 1691, a document mentioned subsequently in a parliamentary report of 1749 when "two (slightly different) versions of . . . [it] were presented to a committee of the House of Commons as evidence of the HBC's active interest in exploration" (*DCB* II 309). Nor were these the only versions of Kelsey's prose journal of 1691, for a third copy — evidently the only one still extant — follows his verse journal in the so-called *Kelsey Papers* where, along with various other items dating from 1689 to 1722, it was either transcribed ("pen[ne]d" [21]) by Kelsey himself or someone else⁵ onto the blank pages of a commonplace-book apparently given to him by a friend: "Henry Kelsey his Book being the Gift of James Hubbud in the year of our Lord 1693."⁶ The contrast in form and tense alone between Kelsey's prose and verse journals⁷ indicates that, though the former was conceivably written originally during his travels in Canada, the latter was probably "pen[ne]d" — perhaps elaborated from prose notes — at a later date, possibly when Kelsey was in England in 1693-94 (*DCB* II 310). This is conjecture, of course, but it has the virtue of emphasizing the material, temporal, and spatial gaps between the "Indians and . . . Country" encountered by Kelsey in 1690 (when, if Robson is to be believed, he "had neither pen, ink, nor paper"

[25 (Appendix)] and the verse journal that has come down to us in "his Book . . . of . . . 1693."

Nor apparently was Kelsey unaware of the gaps that yawned around him as he wrote his verse journal — the gap, on the one hand, between himself as writer-narrator and "*those* Indians and *their* Country" (the demonstrative and possessive adjectives now become spatially telling) that he wished to represent and, on the other, between his own experiences in Canada and those of his armchair audience, whether narrowly construed as his Hudson's Bay Company superiors or more broadly conceived as a tribunal of these and other contemporary and later readers. As the journal gets underway, Kelsey conveys his awareness, first of his audience's ignorance and inevitable incredulity, and then of his own inability — the inability of the written word — to convey experience in an entirety that would be convincing:

Now Reader Read for I am well assur'd
 Thou dost not know the hardships I endur'd
 In this same desert where Ever that I have been
 Nor wilt thou me believe without that thou had seen
 The Emynent Dangers that did often me attend
 But still I lived in hopes that once it would amend
 And makes me free from hunger and from Cold
 Likewise many other things which I cannot here unfold

(1-8)

Unable either to achieve complete inclusiveness (which would be nothing less, of course, than the real presence of his experiences in the poem), or to count on the next best thing, a "Reader" with shared or similar experiences, Kelsey has no choice but to deal with absences and impossibilities — to write in a "Book" about what he knows to be a closed book, a "secrett" possibly more permanently beyond disclosure and comprehension than the "ill news" that, it transpires, was kept temporarily from him by the Indians (58) towards the end of 1690.

Seemingly sensing, then, that the greatest danger he faced as a writer was from the disbelief of his "Reader," Kelsey attempts in the ensuing lines of his verse journal to generate the sympathy that might just forestall incredulity and, indeed, create an imaginative empathy akin to shared experience:

For many times I have often been opprest
 With fears and Cares that I could not take my rest
 Because I was alone and no friend could find
 And once that in my travels I was left behind
 Which struck fear and terror into me
 But still I was resolved this same Country for to see
 Although through many dangers I did pass
 Hoped still to undergo them, at the Last

(9-16)

A post-Romantic reader is likely to be reminded by these lines of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, both in his tale of being left "Alone, alone, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea" (56) and in his subsequent and desperate yearning to be part of a community from which he knows his experiences must exclude him. (Interestingly enough, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is based in part on one of the most horrendous accounts by an explorer of experiences in Canada, a work that pre-dates Kelsey's verse journal by more than half a century and would almost certainly have been known to him: *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captain Thomas James* [1633].⁸) More germane than Coleridge's poem to the passage just quoted from Kelsey is Othello's description of his courtship in Act I, Scene iii of Shakespeare's play: his account of how Desdemona came to love him "for the dangers [he] had pass'd" and he her "that she did pity them" (1064). Among the places and events mentioned by both Othello and Kelsey, it may be noted, are "desert(s)" and "hair-breadth escapes." Such resemblances (like those with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") may be merely intertextual, and, of course, Othello's speech itself derives, in part, from a travel account (Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Beautiful Empyre of Guiana* . . . [1596]). Descriptions of hardships endured in remote regions are commonplace both in the writings of travellers and in the literature that these writings inspired (see Adams, *passim*, and esp. 148-60). Yet the possibility should not be discounted that Kelsey partly modelled the opening portion of his verse journal on Othello's speech to his Venetian "masters" (19) in the hope of appropriating something of its quality as an affective narrative, a "travel's history" from "boyish days" (1064) that succeeds so eminently

well in generating feelings of empathy, belief, and trust in its audience.

Just why Kelsey needed to generate these responses in his Hudson's Bay Company superiors is unclear, but it is evident that, without them, he regarded his occupation as gone:

Now Considering that it was my dismal fate
 for to repent I thought it now to late
 Trusting still unto my masters Consideration
 Hoping they will Except of this my small Relation
 Which here I have pend and still will Justifie
 Concerning of those Indians and their Country
 If this wont do farewell to all as I may say
 And for my living i'll seek some other way

(17-24)

Apprehending exclusion from probably the only community that mattered to him (he was first "apprenticed to the HBC . . . [in] 1684" [*DCB* II 308]), and unable to corroborate his case through "those Indians" whose "Country" he was, in 1690, the first Englishman to see, Kelsey is almost as alone in his attempt to make credible his effectively unique experiences in Canada as he was when he had "no friend" and was "left behind" on his travels. As much as the obvious tendency of any writer or speaker to describe personal experiences in the first person, Kelsey's consciousness of the singularity of his experience and resulting situation may account for the insistent, almost obsessive, repetition of "I," "me," and "my" in the opening section of his verse journal. (Only two lines of the first twenty-four are without at least one of these words and three lines have two of them, making twenty-five "I s," "me s," "mys" in all.) While these repetitions, together with the almost confessional sincerity of the passage, do succeed in making Kelsey a "Consider[able]" and creditable I (and eye), they are also successful in emphasizing his aloneness and singularity to the degree that these qualities can be thematized or allegorized as manifestations of an isolated and proto-Romantic individualism of the hinterland. Something of this possibility, which is certainly in accordance with the so-called "Kelsey Tradition" or "Kelsey myth,"⁹ was perhaps evident with the entry of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" into the discussion a few moments ago. But the much

more important and summary point that must be made about Kelsey's emphasis on himself in the opening section of his verse journal is that this emphasis is in a classical sense ethical or moral: an appeal on the basis of character that seems entirely appropriate, if not inevitable, in the circumstances. After all, and as Aristotle indicates in his discussions of ethical proof in the *Rhetoric*, "moral character . . . constitutes the most effective" (17) means of proof, particularly "if we have no evidence as to the fact itself" (159). Not without reason, therefore, did Kelsey characterize himself as long-suffering, plain-speaking, modest, obedient, dependent, and pious: he well knew that his "Relation" was only as reliable as the relater.

II

It is to his "Journey" with "those Indians" from Hudson Bay to the Canadian plains in 1690 that Kelsey turns in the body of his verse journal:

In sixteen hundred and ninety'th year
 I set forth as plainly may appear
 Through Gods assistance for to understand
 The natives language and to see their land
 And for my masters interest I did soon
 Sett from the house the twealth of June
 (25-30)

As a statement that could refer not only to the style of Kelsey's narrative (its primary referent) but also to the rough simplicity and physical location of his expedition, the second line of this passage — "I set forth as plainly may appear" — suggests a correspondence between Kelsey's plain, ostensibly denotative style and the mode and destination of his "Journey" — the "plains and ridges in the Country throughout" (79) the Canadian midwest. It may be no more than fortuitous that Kelsey's relatively plain and linear narrative holds a mirror up to the setting and nature of his expedition (and, in so doing, echoes forward to numerous attempts by later Canadian poets to find the fitting form for their hinterland journeys and terrains). But it is surely not fortuitous that Kelsey chose to write "plainly" — that is, frankly, referen-

tially, economically, without much embellishment (more of which later) — about an “individual experience” and “new things” (Trimpi 41) which, to be at all credible and creditable, had to be rendered with evident sincerity and truthfulness. As Wesley Trimpi has observed, the plain style, the classical *genus humile*, was “developed in the interest of the most efficient presentation of content as opposed to the cultivation of expression for its own sake” (42); its “primary purpose,” whether in the hands of Demetrius, Francis Bacon, Ben Jonson, or Kelsey, is “to tell the truth” (107). James M. Whillans could almost be testifying to the ethical dimension of the plain style when he writes of Kelsey’s verse journal: “Outstanding in the human story is the stark courage with which Kelsey faced the ever-present dangers and difficulties on the long prairie trail in his search for peace among the tribes. The story is all the more effective because it is unadorned and modestly told” (18).

In his remark in *Ben Jonson’s Poems: A Study in the Plain Style* that the “epistolary . . . is the plainest of the plain styles” (60),¹⁰ Trimpi provides the basis for an understanding of Kelsey’s decision to cast his verse journal in the form of a letter (“Now Reader Read . . . I am / Sir your most obedient and faithfull Servant at Command / HENRY KELSEY”) and, moreover, a clue to its probable model in this regard: Jonson’s verse epistles in *The Forrest* and *Under-wood* (both of which were included in the *Works* of 1640-41), specifically his “Epistle to Master John Selden.” Of almost exactly the same length as Kelsey’s verse journal (eighty-six versus the explorer’s ninety lines), Jonson’s epistle is written in the relatively loose and unadorned decasyllabic couplets that he valued over more elaborate stanzaic forms such as the sonnet, which are less “flexible and . . . adaptable to [a poet’s] subject matter” (Trimpi 106). Since muse machinery is an embellishment that is foreign to the spirit of the plain style (and notably absent also in Kelsey’s verse journal), the “Epistle to . . . Selden” begins abruptly and idiomatically, with, as it happens, a description of its own stylistic premises that may have been all that Kelsey required to establish the tone and procedure of his own verse letter:

I know to whom I write: Here, I am sure,
 Though I am short, I cannot be obscure:
 Lesse shall I for the Art or dressing care,

Truth, and the Graces best, when naked are.

Your Booke, my *Selden*, I have read. . . . (144)¹¹

"Your Booke, my *Selden* . . .," "Henry Kelsey his Book . . .": the resemblance is slight and probably coincidental, but can the same be said of Jonson's later "So that my Reader is assur'd, I now / Meane what I speake . . ." and Kelsey's "Now Reader Read for I am well assur'd . . ."? And is there also an echo of Jonson's closing "Farewell" to Selden in Kelsey's contemplated "farewell" to his "living" at the end of the opening section of his verse epistle? The evidence of indebtedness is scarcely conclusive, but it gains circumstantially with the recognition that the Selden of Jonson's epistle is a character who might well have struck an answering chord in Kelsey: a sedentary and humanistic scholar who is nevertheless an explorer, a man who has "all Countries seene. . . Times, manners, customes! Innovations spide! / Sought out the Fountaines, Sources, Creekes, paths, wayes. . ."

No doubt Jonson, the plain style, and other literary models (see Warkentin) were almost as remote from Kelsey's mind as the Canadian plains themselves when he left York Factory on 12 June 1690. If he took any "Book" with him at that time, it would have been the Bible, a text which, as Whillans observes, finds "more than an echo" (35)¹² in Kelsey's verse journal. But on "the twelfth of June" in "sixteen hundred and ninety'th year" when Kelsey set off "up the River . . . with heavy heart," leaving behind him "all English part / To live amongst the Natives of this place / . . . for one two years space" (31-34), he took with him, as these very quotations indicate, another Eurocentric and transporian means of ordering personal and communal life: the Gregorian calendar. As well as providing the framework for his measurements of linear time (later he will write of taking "possession on the tenth Instant July" [40] of the "Country" near "deerings point," of bringing the "Natives" of the area "to a peace" in "September" [52], and, as already seen, of cutting out on his "Certain Cross . . . the date of year" [84, 86]), the calendar furnished Kelsey with a crude, chronological structure for the central and concluding sections of his narrative — a temporal container, as it were, that measures, shapes, and surrounds the contents of these portions of his verse journal. Nor does the calendar constitute

the only quantifying and delimiting element in Kelsey's work. Factually, the content of the later sections of the journal is largely restricted by and to the commercial interests of the Hudson's Bay Company; hence their emphasis, for example, on distances, portages, and tradeables ("six hundred miles southwest . . . thirty three Carriages five lakes in all . . . beavour in abundance but no Otter" [44, 46, 78] and so on). Formalistically, the content is restricted by factors that, when expressed in the literary terminology of Kelsey's own day, do not seem very remote from these other quantifying and delimiting elements: the "measure" and "numbers" of the decasyllabic couplet. "Through its very appearance of artificiality," as I. A. Richards famously remarks, "metre produces . . . a 'frame' effect" (145), an effect that, in Kelsey's case, isolates and excludes, shapes and surrounds, the contents of his verse journal just as certainly as do his chronological structure and commercial emphases.

What all this amounts to is that, however "plainly" displayed Kelsey may have wanted them to be, the "Indians and the . . . Country" that he saw in 1690-91 are far from "naked" in his verse journal but, rather, are dressed in the assumptions that he inevitably brought to his seeing and writing as a European, as a servant of the Hudson's Bay Company, and as a man with an urge to "Justifie" himself in verse. These various temporal-spatial, commercial-Imperialist, and formal-rhetorical assumptions constitute a set of interrelated containers or frames, schemes or grids, that occasionally impose themselves in layers on both the "Indians" and the "Country" in the verse journal. For example, immediately before describing his carefully placed and dated "Cross," Kelsey, perhaps clumsily, but nevertheless in a clear and significant deviation from the tenets of the plain style, employs a loose variation of chiasmus (*chiasma*: cross-shaped): "Their Enemies many whom they cannot rout / But now of late they hunt their Enemies / And with our English guns do make them flie" (80-82). As well as being subjected to a hypotactic scheme that calls at least as much attention to itself (and to Kelsey's cleverness) as to its content, the Indians are here inscribed, not in their own name, but as the "Enemies" of the so-called "home Indians" (58), a group already assimilated by trade and nomenclature to the "English part" (32)

of the "Country": the Hudson's Bay Company post at York Factory.

The most striking instance of Kelsey's layered assimilation and appropriation of the "Indians and their Country" first for commercial and then for poetic purposes occurs when he describes his dispossession of the "Natives" of "*their* land" (emphasis added) in a manner that once again violates the plain style, this time with a rhetoric of magnification that confers unmistakable significance on the event and kudos on its perpetrator:

The Inland Country of Good report hath been
 By Indians but by English yet not seen
 Therefore I on my Journey did not stay
 But making all the hast I could upon our way
 Gott on the borders of the Stone Indian Country
 I took possession on the tenth Instant July
 And for my masters I speaking for them all
 This neck of land I deerings point did call

(35-42)

In these lines, as throughout Kelsey's verse journal (though not in his prose account of 1691-92), the "natives language" is silenced, and both the "Indians" themselves (the "'Assinae poets' [Assinipwutug] of the Hudson's Bay Company's officers . . . [of the] time" [Kenney 47n.]) and "their Country" are commercially and poetically Englished, the latter as the resonantly memorable "Inland Country of Good Report,"¹³ as the "Stone Indian Country," and as "deerings point." It would probably be an exaggeration to say that only after "Wa-pas-kwa-yaw" (Whillans 55-56) has become known and iambically scannable as "deerings point" can it enter a regular decasyllabic couplet. Nevertheless, "This neck of land I deerings point did call" is notable not only for the poeticizing flourish of its decayed verb (a device also evident earlier in the passage) but also for its unusual regularity and smoothness, qualities that set it off from its surroundings as a point of special importance both commercially and poetically.

Two other aspects of this important passage are worthy of note and brief discussion. The first is the possible debt of the passage to the "General Prologue" of *The Canterbury Tales* in its description of the beginning of Kelsey's "Journey" (it is tempting to say

commercial pilgrimage) to the "Cross" at "deerings point." "Now let us ride, and herkneth what I saye," says Chaucer's Knight; "And with that word we riden on oure waye . . ." (25). "Therefore I on my Journey did not stay," run the equivalent lines in Kelsey, "But making all the hast upon our way / Gott on the borders of the stone Indian Country." The other point worth making is that, particularly in contrast to the rhythmically awkward line just quoted, the one that precedes it — "But máking ál the hást I cóuld upón our wáy" — shows Kelsey at or near his modest best in the plain style, competently using an extra iambic foot, a hint of trochaic variation ("máking"), and — as once again later in the poem ("And over it in three days time we past" [74]) — a series of monosyllabic words to convey something of the feel of a long journey quickly and happily concluded. In a charitable moment, even Pope might have approved of Kelsey's simple and sprightly alexandrine, which is all the more remarkable in the context of Canadian poetry for having been written well before the *Essay on Criticism*, the poem that, in its very warnings against the egregious display of poetic technique (the "needless Alexandrine . . . / That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along" [155]), furnished poets such as Cary with examples of the devices that could be used to mimic the shapes and sounds of their environment.

Although Kelsey carried with him on his inland "Journey" the means of judging his position in time he did not, since he was on a business trip rather than an exploration as such, have with him the technology for ascertaining his position in space. With no sextant or compass, he was thrown back on his own "Judgement" (43) for estimations of the distances that he travelled and the locations of significant points in the terrain. In effect, instead of calculating his position as if in a Ptolemaic universe from "fixed" points in the heavens, he did so in a more typically post-Renaissance (Copernican) and imperialistic manner that is at once self- and other-centred. That Kelsey thus has two centres, one "there" and "English" (York Factory)¹⁴ and the other moving in and through the here and now, may help to explain his somewhat confusing use of locative adverbs and pronouns ("hence," "From," "that place," "this place") in his placement of "deerings point":

Distance from hence by Judgement at the lest
 From the house six hundred miles southwest
 Through Rivers which run strong with falls
 thirty three Carriages five lakes in all
 The ground begins for to be dry with wood
 Poplo and birch with ash thats very good
 For the Natives of that place which knows
 No use of Better than their wooden Bows
 According to the use and custom of this place
 In September I brought those Natives to a peace
 (43-52)

Whatever confusion there is here does not extend to Kelsey's consistent emphasis on the commercially important aspects of his journey and the "deerings point" area: the length and difficulty of the trade route, the availability of various and useful woods, and the presence of possible trading partners. To judge what he is by what he sees, Kelsey is *homo mercantile*: a man whose vision cannot but relate the periphery to the centre, the here to there and — at the scene of the writing of his verse journal — the there to here. Yet this is the beginning of an interest in the local, the indigenous, the aboriginal, the vernacular in English poetry about Canada, and it makes Kelsey not merely a kindred spirit of mercantilists like Thomas Cary, but a distant ancestor of more recent writers such as Robert Service, A. J. M. Smith, and Robert Kroetsch who have on occasion used local colour as a commodity in literary markets beyond its region of origin.

The "peace" to which Kelsey brought the Indians in September 1690 turned out to be very short-lived. "I had no sooner from those Natives turnd my back" (52), he says, than

Some of the home Indians came upon their track
 And for old grudges and their minds to fill
 Came up with them Six tents of which they kill'd
 This ill news kept secrett was from me
 Nor none of those home Indians did I see
 Untill that they their murder all had done
 And the Chief acter was he thats called the Sun
 (53-60)

Mercantile as Kelsey's interest in the "use and custom" (50) of the "Natives" unquestionably was, and despite the translation and

opprobrium to which he here subjects “the Sun,”¹⁵ there is nevertheless in this passage an urge to treat at least the “home Indians” as complex rather than simple characters — people who are motivated by revenge (“old grudges”) and boredom (“their minds to fill”),¹⁶ who have a hierarchy and, in one instance, a name. Kelsey’s “home Indians” are not the admirable individuals with “narratable life histories” (Said 229) that are found, for example, in *The Huron Chief*, but neither are they the brutal and anonymous “savage[s]” (Goldsmith 8-13)¹⁷ of such poems as J. Mackay’s *Quebec Hill* (1797), Oliver Goldsmith’s *Rising Village* (1825), and Joseph Howe’s *Acadia* (1874). Violent, deceitful, and secretive they may be, but as actual and potential trading partners they are important enough to be a major presence in Kelsey’s verse journal and, indeed, the subject of a lengthy “Account of . . . [their] beliefs and Superstitions” at the conclusion of his prose journal of 1691-92 (see *KP* pp. 19-24).

A hint of Kelsey’s interest in the “beliefs and Superstitions” of the plains Indians appears at the end of the next portion of his verse journal, an account of the *flora* and *fauna* in the “deerings point” area and the terrain to the west:

So far I have spoken concerning of the spoil
 And now well give account of that same Country soile
 Which hither part is very thick of wood
 Affords small nutts with little cherries very good
 Thus it continues till you leave the woods behind
 And then you have beast of severall Kind
 The one is a black a Buffillo great
 Another is an outgrown Bear which is good meat
 His skin to gett I have used all the ways I can
 He is mans food and he makes food of man
 His hide they would not me it preserve
 But said it was a god and they should Starve

(61-72)

Once again the issue of naming becomes important as Kelsey struggles to convey what he has seen using a language in which there are either no nouns to describe a particular item (trees that “Afford . . . small nutts with little cherries very good”: perhaps chokeberries [see Whillans 36]) or merely general nouns that require adjectival modification if the “beast[s]” of this “Country”

are to be differentiated from similar creatures in other places. Thus the North-American bison is described as a "Buffillo" (a word used elsewhere by Kelsey with reference to the musk-ox¹⁸) that is "black" and "great" and the grizzly bear is "outgrown" to differentiate it from the smaller brown bears with which Kelsey himself and perhaps some of his readers would have been familiar. (Not until 1801 in Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages* was the English name for Kelsey's ferocious but edible "outgrown Bear" fixed in print as "the grisley" [160]. Robson uses the term "grizzled bears" [72n.], and, of course, items in the Canadian environment and imagination as diverse as the chickadee [see Traill 223, 229-30] and the ogopogo¹⁹ have occasioned similar difficulties of nomenclature until well into the present century.) That the demands and restrictions of the decasyllabic couplet added to Kelsey's descriptive difficulties is evident from the divergence between his accounts of the grizzly and bison in his verse and prose journals, the latter being looser and more accommodating than the former, and thus a more hospitable vehicle for his comparisons and differentiations: "this plain affords Nothing but short Round sticky grass and Buffillo and a great sort of a Bear which is Bigger than any white Bear and is Neither White nor Black But silver hair'd like our English Rabbit the Buffillo Likewise is not like those to the Northward their Horns growing like an English Ox but Black and short . . ." (*KP* pp. 12-13).²⁰ What once would have been called the transparency of these descriptions — that is, their success in generating mental images of the creatures to which they refer — contrasts strongly with the textuality of their verse counterparts, especially such rhetorically polished, even witty, lines like "The one is a black a Buffillo great" and "He is mans food and he makes food of man," the first an example of adjectives straddling²¹ a noun for poetic effect and the second the most striking instance in the poem of chiasmus. These and other²² violations of the plain style in the verse journal are perhaps inevitable given Kelsey's apparent urge, not merely to give a factual account of the contents of "The Inland Country" for the benefit of his Hudson's Bay Company "masters," but also to write eloquently and memorably about a pathfinding expedition that he well knew — and here, surely, is his reason for placing his verse journal at the begin-

ning of his "Book" — constituted his major claim to enduring fame. Or, as James F. Kenney speculates, "[p]erhaps [Kelsey's Book] was begun, when he was a young man, as a historical record of his achievements, with a preface in what he conceived to be the heroic manner . . ." (39n.).

Before returning his narrative to "deerings point" and completing his commercial pilgrimage by setting up his "Certain Cross" Kelsey describes what may be the "Great Salt Plain" (qtd. in Davies 310) of Saskatchewan in a way that typifies several of the major concerns of his verse journal and, moreover, provides an instance of the fitness of the plain style to the prairie terrain:

This plain affords nothing but Beast and grass
 And over it in three days time we past
 getting unto the woods on the other side
 It being about forty six miles wide
 This wood is poplo ridges with small ponds of water
 there is beavour in abundance but no Otter
 with plains and ridges in the Country throughout
 (73-79)

It is not difficult to see here what can be seen in more recent poetry and painting from the Prairie provinces: a minimalist, and, in spots ("Beast . . . grass") nearly abstract, style that corresponds especially well to the western plains. As aesthetically and prelusively interesting as it may be, however, the sparseness of Kelsey's style is primarily commercial in origin. Although, in his prose journal of 1691, he describes a "grass [that] hath an Ear like our English Oats" (and, hence, might be edible and cultivable [*KP* p. 5, and see MacLaren 379-82]), in 1690 he apparently saw "nothing" of equivalent commercial potential until he reached the "Touchwood Hills country" (qtd. in Davies 310), where he found useful poplar trees and valuable beaver, but "no Otter." This economic emphasis is carried through to the conclusion of the verse journal in two passages that have already been examined in detail: Kelsey's description of Indians transformed into powerful trading partners by means of "English guns" (80-82) and his account of his proclamation of the Commercial and Christian presence of the Hudson's Bay Company in the region with his "Certain Cross" at "deerings point" (83-88).

“[T]hrough Gods assistance to discover and bring to a Commerce” (*KP* pp. 5 and 25): this was the impulse behind Kelsey’s “Journey” to the “Inland Country” in 1690-91, and it brought with it and into his verse journal both an economic epistemology (the only items really *worth* seeing and recording are those connected with trade) and a mercantilist morality (“English guns” in exchange for manpower and raw materials). Kelsey was a peace-maker because peace was good for business. He was a namer and a marker because in the pursuit of the Golden Fleece, be it “Bear” or “Beavour” or “Otter,” market places had to be established and the competition (in his case the *Compagnie de Nouvelle France*) discouraged. As the very existence of his verse journal indicates, Kelsey conceived of himself as a minor hero of the commercial world in which he operated — a humble Argonaut whose dangerous exploits and archetypically circular journey on the periphery of European civilization deserved to be chronicled and celebrated (a twofold aim with contingent tensions) in an appropriately modest yet “signalizing” (Robson 41) poetic form. It would, of course, be absurd to call Kelsey the first Canadian poet or to claim that his verse journal, which was not widely known until its publication in the second decade of the present century, has exercised anything but a slight and recent influence on Canadian writing and culture.²³ But Kelsey was the first to attempt to describe in verse a first-hand experience of part of what was to become Canada, and anyone with an interest in the early poetry of this country cannot help but be intrigued by both the matter and the manner of the “small Relation” in verse that he placed at the front of the “Book” given to him by “John Hubbud in the year of our Lord 1693.”

NOTES

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, information on Kelsey’s life is taken from Davies’s entry on him in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (*DCB*).

- 2 All quotations from Kelsey's verse and prose journals are taken from *The Kelsey Papers*, hereafter cited in the text as *KP*. Line numbers are given for quotations from the verse journal, and page numbers (preceded by p. or pp.) for quotations from the Introduction and prose journals. Kelsey's contractions have been silently expanded in the quotations and his ampersands replaced by and.
- 3 See also my Introduction to Mackay xiii-xvii for a discussion of the "descriptive" strain in early Canadian poetry.
- 4 A question effectively asked by Davies: "No explanation has been offered why [Kelsey] wrote in this way," that is, in "crude verse" (309).
- 5 For a discussion of these two possibilities, see Kenney 39 n.5. Kenney concludes "that the only part of Kelsey's book written by his hand is the Indian entry on page 58, but that the whole was written for him and, in varying degrees under his supervision." This conclusion is perhaps supported by the correction of "their" to "there" in l. 85 of the verse journal (see the photographic reproduction of the relevant page on *KP* p. [iii]), for these homophonic words, though clearly different when written, can be easily confused when heard (as during dictation). Needless to say, much could be made of the fact that the word "their," which Kelsey frequently applies to the Indians, appears under erasure in his verse journal: in the account of the raising of the Cross, "there" is "their[s]" until it is inscribed; the slippage into "their" at this point suggests the possibility of Kelsey's "being" having been in the possession of the Indians, or perhaps a guilty awareness that the exploitable "there" was once "their" land.
- 6 See Kenney 40n. for some speculations regarding the identity of James Hubbud.
- 7 The prose journals seem to describe events in the immediate past ("Today we paddled . . ." [*KP* p. 5]), while the verse journal suggests a greater temporal gap between the narrator's present and the "Journey" that he describes ("In sixteen hundred and ninety'th year / I set forth . . ." [25-26]).
- 8 See my Introduction to Mackay xxix and xlv n.71 for some details of the debts of Coleridge and Mackay to James. *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage* contains, in its first edition, a short poem which may have had a bearing in Kelsey's decision to include verse in his own journal. Written in decasyllabic couplets, James's "ragged and tearing Rimes" make reference to "dangers" passed at sea in September 1631 in the bay that bears his name but it is primarily a "meditation" on spiritual matters, a poem written *in* rather than *on* a part of what became Canada. It can be found in the original, in Kenyon, and in Adams, ed. 160.
- 9 See Doughty and Martin's Introduction, *KP* pp. xi-xvi. The principal source of the "Kelsey Tradition," which constitutes perhaps the first instance of a hinterland myth in writing about Canada, is Robson; see especially 72n., where Kelsey is characterized on the basis of oral tradition as a rebellious youth with an affinity for the Indians who went native and earned the name "Miss-top-ashish, or Little Giant," by killing "two grizzled bears" (shades of Paul Bunyan, Daniel Boone, and others).
- 10 Trimpi's book is used with an awareness of Stein's highly critical review of it. For all his arguments with Trimpi, Stein allows that "To say that Jonson is one of the masters of the plain style is not likely to provoke significant disagreement" (313).
- 11 Other Jonson poems possibly echoed by Kelsey include "The Dreame" ("I

must the true Relation make . . ." [137] and "To the Reader" ("Reader, looke / . . . on . . . his Booke" [371]). The latter poem was prefixed to the 1623 Folio of Shakespeare (the *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*, the source, perhaps, of Kelsey's knowledge of *Othello*), together with "To the Memory of my Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare: and What he Hath Left Us," a eulogy in the form of a verse epistle that relies heavily in its opening lines on the ethical, and may have influenced Kelsey in this respect (see 372-74).

- 12 Whillans's observation continues: "Kelsey's recital has an Apostolic ring and is more than an echo of St. Paul in 2 Cor. II: 'In Journeyings often'; 'In perils of waters'; 'In perils of the heathen'; 'In perils in the wilderness'; 'In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides these things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily.'"
- 13 This phrase is here quoted, not from *The Kelsey Papers* (where it reads "The Inland Country of Good report"), but from *First in the West*, where Whillans comments: "Henry Kelsey . . . gave the prairies their first and finest name — The Inland Country of Good Report. And he used capital letters to emphasize it. The name has a strong Elizabethan flavour, reminiscent of the golden age of gallantry and adventure in far-off lands and seas. It suggests the Pilgrims Progress more than beaver pelts and profits" (142). Not only does the word "report" lack a capital letter in the original, but it may also lie (the syntax and wording are ambiguous) outside the periphrases that the added capital suggests: "The Inland Country of Good report hath been / By Indians . . .". Whillans is correct, however, in hearing an allegorical, Bunyanesque note in Kelsey's highly poetic line.
- 14 For a discussion of Hudson's Bay Company posts as "central places" in a trading framework, see Ray and Freeman 248-49.
- 15 The word "acter" may carry a histrionic connotation that is pejorative, actors, and the stage generally, being regarded by many in the late seventeenth century (particularly in non-conformist circles) as repositories of insincerity (*hypokrisis*: acting, feigning).
- 16 The yoking of two quite different purposes in this line is almost zeugmatic and certainly poeticizing.
- 17 On one occasion, however, Kelsey's matter-of-factness recalls Mark Twain's Huck Finn in its seeming callousness: "to day our hunters kill'd 9 partridges one Indian dyed fetcht wood home . . ." (*KP* p. 60).
- 18 See *KP* pp. 28-29 (Kelsey's verse journal of 1689).
- 19 According to the entry in *A Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*, the name ogopogo was taken from a British music-hall song and applied first to the mythical monster of Okanagan Lake, B.C., in 1912. See my Introduction to Mackay xiv-xvii for discussion of another writer's attempts to name creatures in the Canadian environment.
- 20 It is worth noticing the "like . . . but" structure of comparison and differentiation in this quotation.
- 21 I allude here to Ezra Pound's "straddled adjectives" (49).
- 22 Inversion is one of Kelsey's principal poeticizing effects and can be found throughout his verse journal, for example, in the opening lines: "Nor wilt thou me believe . . ." (4); ". . . did often me attend . . ." (5); ". . . no friend could find . . ." (11); and so on. Also prominent in the verse journal are poeticizing epithets, for example (again, merely from the opening

lines): "Eminent Dangers" (5), "dismal fate" (17), and "heavy heart" (31). And Kelsey also makes frequent use of poeticizing ellipsis: "... the hardships [which] I endured" (2); "... for one [or] two years space..." (34); "By Indians [but] by English yet not seen..." (36), and so on. Perhaps more interesting in literary-historical terms is Kelsey's poeticizing use of archaism in such anachronistic infinitive constructions as "... this same Country for to see..." (14), "... for to report..." (18), and "... for to understand..." (27). These constructions are reminiscent of Spenser, who also uses them for their archaic and poeticizing flavour. In Kelsey, they may derive from Chaucer. Some other, less frequent, deviations from the "prose word order" (Trimpi 204) of a strict plain style are mentioned and discussed above.

²³ A portion of Kelsey's verse journal is included in Mitchell (4-5) under the title "By English Yet Not Seen." The verse journal is also reprinted in Whyte (77-78), where it forms the pretext for Whyte's poem.

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