

Unofficial Collections:  
Organic/Artifactual Documents and the  
(Re)Inscription of the Civic Archive  
in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*  
Samuel Pane

I. Finding Aid

As a reader preoccupied with the documentary tradition in Canadian letters, I have spent my fair share of time rooting around archival institutions across the country. My doctoral research into the documentary underpinnings of Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands* took me in search of palaeontological fieldnotes in such repositories as Montreal's McGill University Archives, Ottawa's National Archives, the University of Calgary's Special Collections, and Drumheller's Royal Tyrrell Museum Library. I followed Kroetsch's and Simon Schama's sage advice about going to ground in search of historical insight. I even went so far as to sign up for a dig in Dinosaur Provincial Park to get my hands into the vast outdoor archive of the badlands. Instead of pulling on white gloves to leaf through dusty files in a climate-controlled bunker, I put on work gloves in the blazing sun to scrape with pick and awl at the mineral matrix of hoodoos and buttes in search of the elusive frill of *pachyrhinosaur*. We never found it, but I learned a great deal about distinguishing fossil bone from pebbles of ironstone amid deceiving geology.

Most importantly, I learned to be flexible with my methodology. I learned to trust my instincts. Experience has taught me that no two archival inquiries are the same. Some may lead the investigator into familiar territory, and some may lead her further afield. Some lead deep into the pages of a primary text where rich discoveries can still be made. If the palaeontologist relies on proven techniques to discern an ancient narrative from the colour and texture and spacing of rock strata, the literary critic should not shy away from using the oldest tool in her kit: close reading. This approach is especially relevant in the case of

those works that Linda Hutcheon describes as “historiographic metafiction” —those novels that are self referential or auto-representational and preoccupied with the production of history (61). Because they challenge the very writing of historical narrative, they must employ novel strategies and alternative sources of documentation. My close reading of *In the Skin of A Lion* will demonstrate how Michael Ondaatje intuitively documents where, for a multiplicity of reasons, no textual archive exists. It is axiomatic by now to state that history tends to forget when it is convenient for interested parties. Fiction has recourse to remember the unconventional records of forgotten parties. Such records are plausible if not always extant. When it comes to excavating suppressed histories, Ondaatje is a veritable rock hound.

Certainly, I am not the first reader to poke around the buried foundations of *In the Skin of a Lion*. It goes without saying that Ondaatje’s novel is one of the most studied pieces of contemporary fiction in Canadian literary criticism. As such this paper will presuppose the reader’s familiarity with a well-known cast of characters, their relationships, and their plot entanglements so as to better focus on archival questions. The text’s use of conventional archival materials—paper documents—has already been the subject of much critical attention. This paper identifies and examines two groups of documents that have received far less attention: organic documents (extra-linguistic histories recorded on skin) and artifactual documents (archaeological traces of history embodied in physical artifacts). My reading of *In the Skin of a Lion* addresses Ondaatje’s postulation of voice for the silenced workers in Toronto’s history as well as his re-inscription of the civic archive with non-paper documentation.

## II. Document Inventory

Before I kick my proverbial shovel into the ground, I must survey the terrain and consider the observations collected by previous expeditions. Because work is continually in progress and new material is always coming to the surface, this survey provides a sampling rather than an exhaustive catalogue. Come along with me into the field. We will take our cue from Ondaatje: “Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human” (146).

Carol Beran argues that the thematic underpinnings of *In the Skin of a Lion* challenge the “notion of history as a record of events of world significance” (73). She maintains that the novel represents an assertion of “the importance of marginalized events and the relatively unknown people involved in them” (73).<sup>1</sup> *In the Skin of a Lion* attempts a variety of historical revisions directed towards the generation of a specific kind of recuperation: a positing of voice for stories of city dwellers forgotten or intentionally overlooked by “official histories” (Ondaatje 145). In an interview with Catherine Bush, Ondaatje affirms the primacy of this textual agenda:

I think reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer. Especially in this country, where one no longer trusts the media. . . . One of the things a novel can do is represent the unofficial story, give a personal, complicated version of things, as opposed to competing with the newspapers and giving an alternate but still simplified opinion, saying, ‘No, *this* is right.’ I think it has more to do with *whom* you write about. I think a novel can become, in this way, a more permanent and political reflection of your time. (Bush 247)

Ondaatje does not presume to provide authoritative versions of the lost histories of immigrant labourers, petty criminals, minor artists, and social revolutionaries. Rather, Ondaatje strives to expose the construct- edness of all “official histories” through the self-conscious postulation of alternative histories. Therefore just as the protagonist Patrick Lewis and the bridge-builder Nicholas Temelcoff do not stand as ready proxies for labour, Caravaggio and Giannetta do not stand as proxies for thieves, Clara Dickens is not a proxy for artists, and Cato and Alice Gull are not proxies for social activists. Ondaatje’s characters open overlooked possibilities rather than offer fixed interpretations.

Hutcheon observes that surviving histories consist of “the official history of written documents and of photographs of the men deemed central to the prevailing power. . . . [H]istory does not necessarily record the names of the (unofficial) women of the rich nor the anonymous workers” (94). We can read newspaper headlines about the millionaire theatre magnate Ambrose Small, and we can read Commissioner Harris’

name in Toronto's urban planning records but we cannot so easily rely on such literal interpretations for the rest of Ondaatje's characters. One major function of historiographic metafiction, then, is to dispel the myth of documentary objectivity. Indeed Susan Speary contends that in debunking the "pretence of objectivity implicit in official histories," *In the Skin of a Lion* questions the "ascendancy of historical time consciousness in itself" (49). Speary, along with critics such as Michael Greenstein, Raphaël Ingelbien, and Fotio Sarris, pays particular attention to the novel's opening epigraphs, one of which, taken from John Berger, promises: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (Ondaatje 2). Speary interprets Ondaatje's inclusion of the Berger quotation as a warning that the subsequent text will undermine the "notion of a linear and totalizing account of events" through a juxtaposition of personal stories, divergent temporal schemes, and story gaps punctuated with formal text breaks (Speary 50). The text, she argues, insistently points to the simultaneity of historical events and the "reductive nature of confining narrative to a storyline" (50–51).

Although a critical consensus seems to exist regarding the thematic mandate of Ondaatje's novel, explanations about how the text achieves (or how it attempts to achieve) a historical recuperation of forgotten/unrecorded histories of early twentieth-century Torontonians are less than uniform. Frank Davey argues that the text succeeds in its project of recuperation because it prefers, somewhat problematically, "art over history, economics and cultural contest" (156). Julie Beddoes pushes Davey's point further to suggest that "aesthetics—the staging of scenes—blot out politics" in the novel (210). Although she admits that "there are good political reasons for recording and publishing the experiences of working-class people, while still acknowledging the theoretical problems raised by their representation in language" (211), Beddoes suggests the text's aesthetic preoccupations ultimately outweigh the specificity of its historical recuperations. She writes: "the repeated privileging of the formal over the historical ultimately asserts that it does not matter whose experiences are represented" (211).

In fact, the subjects of Ondaatje's novel matter a great deal. Christian Bök identifies the omission of unofficial histories from official history

as the direct operation of a social ideology that prevents individuals from exercising power (120). Thus he reads the text's recuperation and problematizing of alternate histories of labour, obscure artists, and failed revolutionaries as a voicing out against official ideology. Bök forcefully states that Ondaatje's project is grounded on the understanding that "whoever controls discourse, controls official truth" (120). Sarris is even more specific about the mechanism of control. He inextricably links it to the sense of sight—that is, the ability to read paper accounts. As evidence, Sarris points to Patrick's reaction to an episode of temporary blindness experienced as a result of a violent encounter with Ambrose Small: "If you can't see you can't control anything" (Ondaatje 96). Sarris contends that written traces of story exemplified by Cato's letters hold the potential to light the literal and figurative darkness that engulfs the subterranean histories of the waterworks tunnellers. Indeed, Sarris suggests that *only* recuperated paper accounts such as letters and photographs can bring these obscured histories to the light of archival recognition (195). I believe that in the textual universe of *In the Skin of a Lion*, historical discourse is governed by the power of the archive. For Ondaatje's characters, then, whoever controls the archive controls the official truth of civic history.

Official histories comprise all manner of paper documents, both written and photographic. Traditional sources of documentary evidence in *In the Skin of a Lion* have received a substantial amount of critical study. Both Martha Butterfield and Speary note the recurrence of such materials in *In the Skin of a Lion*. Hutcheon and Dennis Duffy explore the implications of Patrick's archival searches in the Riverdale Library as a post-modern tactic for interrogating the constructedness of the documentary record (Hutcheon 99; Duffy, "Wrench" 130). Rod Schumacher discusses the textual mandate of Cato's letters (14), and Duffy provides insight regarding their non-fictional provenance ("Wrench" 129). Manina Jones' work on "documentary collage" can be productively used to read a refusal of authorial authority in the Ambrose Small news clippings and letters, Cato's letters, and Patrick's notes and unmailed letters to Clara (15). Sarris and Inglebien explore the potential influence of Carvaggiesque light on the novel's photographic documents (Sarris 183,

185; Inglebien 29). Duffy, Greenstein and Sarris make compelling analyses of authorial manipulation of intertextual photographs produced by such renowned photographers as Arthur Goss, Lewis Hine, and Jacob Riis (Duffy *passim*; Greenstein 127–28; Sarris 186–88).

### III. Archival Box 01: Organic Documents

Speary observes that *In the Skin of a Lion* follows a pattern established in Ondaatje's earlier works; he continues to "base his fictions on characters and records retrieved from the archives, and on stories which these findings have brought to light" (46). Speary notes that Ondaatje deploys a wide range of media in his writing, including "archival records, dramatic scripts for both radio and theatre, lyrics of popular songs, films, atlases, newspaper clippings, tall tales, blueprints and dreams" (46). She affirms that rather than privileging one medium over another, Ondaatje draws attention to the strengths, weaknesses, limitations, and possibilities of each (46). However, according to Speary, *In the Skin of a Lion* marks the first instance where Ondaatje does not include primary materials within the narrative. Instead, the presentation of these materials is mitigated either by characters or the narrator (Spearey 46). Simply put, the reader accesses these documents filtered through a layer of consciousness. Consequently, Ondaatje's sources, Speary contends, are not offered as documentary evidence that the reader might take at face value or, alternatively, interpret as suspect (46). Speary rightly suggests that mitigated documentary materials in the novel provoke the reader to consider the "circumstances of their production" and the "manner in which their producers and receivers make use of the medium in question" (47). Documentary evidence in the universe of the novel constitutes an exploration of the aesthetic and ideological operations of cultural production; it also represents an authorial model for reading *In the Skin of a Lion* (Speary 47).

Following Speary's reasoning, if Ondaatje's text critiques the hegemony of "official histories," the novel must address the criteria for archival inclusion. Hutcheon's contention that men of respectable social position are recorded by the archive at the expense of all other groups implies a set of minimum requirements that qualify a subject for archivization.

Inherent in this class-based mechanism of distinction is the presupposition of a high level of literacy and the ability to articulate oneself well in English. Voices that lack such skills are consequently silenced. Ondaatje's novel deconstructs the notion that documentary evidence is contingent on formal literacy. He forwards the possibility of an archival document inscribed on the very skin of the silenced groups overlooked by "official histories."

Butterfield notes the pattern of blood and scars present in the text (165). Indeed, to recuperate the lost histories of labour and the dispossessed, Ondaatje constructs an alternative archive replete with evocative bodies. While he is a worker on the Bloor Street Viaduct, Nicholas Temelcoff's body is described as a self-contained archive, "a vault of secrets and memories" (Ondaatje 47). When he rescues Alice Gull, then an anonymous nun, from certain death on the bridge, he attempts to bring her out of shock and gain some clue to her history. He notes the scar on the side of her nose and attempts to determine its (her) history by sharing his own catalogue of scars and injuries: "I got about twenty scars,' he said, 'all over me. One on my ear here.' . . . 'See? Also this under my chin, that also broke my jaw. A coiling wire did that. Nearly kill me, broke my jaw. Lots more. My knees'" (36–37).

Similarly, when Clara Dickens cleans the wounds inflicted on Patrick Lewis' body by Ambrose Small, she reads his scars like a document. As she shaves Patrick, the narrator remarks: "This was the way to know somebody's face" (98). Clara underscores her understanding of skin as document by invisibly inscribing another marking onto Patrick's forehead with her finger: "DICKENS 5" (98). With this gesture she adds another layer of history to Patrick's skin that simultaneously recalls an event from her own childhood. Her figurative inscription alludes to a literal inscription that she witnessed her father perform on his redbone hounds to ensure they would not be stolen during hunting season. She remembers how her father had the worst barber in town clip the nameless dogs and how he would finish the job himself, shaving the animals to the skin with a cow razor. In the final stage of the process, her father labelled each individual dog with tree paint: "DICKENS 1, DICKENS 2, DICKENS 3" (73). Clara recalls that he allowed her to paint the last

dog: "DICKENS 4" (73). She labels Patrick not because she wants to keep him but to ensure that he is not lost to "official histories" (98).

Patrick also understands how skin(s) can serve as documentary. Back on the surface, at the conclusion of a shift on the water plant intake tunnel, he always recognizes his fellow tunnellers by "a ragged hole in the back of their shirts" (107). This hole is a familiar identifying inscription that describes the quotidian history of tunnel excavation—a mark chronicling the tunnellers' ritual of nailing their shirts to the tunnel wall when the heat becomes unbearable (107). Over the course of the novel, Patrick develops an eye for reading this kind of documentary evidence. At the Thompson Grill, where he eats breakfast every morning, Patrick prefers to read the waitress' hands rather than a newspaper (108). He studies the oil burns on her wrists, "the permanent grimace in her eye from the smoke," a tattoo high on her arm through the torn seam of her dress (111–12).

However, in spite of his honed perception he does not immediately recognize Alice Gull during the waterworks theatrical performance. After so long an interval since their first meeting at the Paris Plains farmhouse, he cannot see that she is the same woman who shocked him by knocking on his door. During the performance, Patrick fixates on Alice's brightly coloured skin: "green shadowed eyes and a raccoon ring of yellow around them so they were like targets" (116). Later, in the darkness of backstage Patrick helps to remove the last traces of Alice's make-up. He wipes the "brown paint" and "vermilion frown-mark" from her face and "a quarter-inch of bright yellow around her sight" (121). Alice uses stage make-up to alter her history and assume the (fictional) histories of others. Reading her transformation fascinates Patrick. He comes to love the way Alice uses this technique; later he revels in the sight of Alice dressed as Ophelia with "her mad face half rubbed off" (152). Thus Alice, too, reveals a highly self-conscious awareness of the documentary capacities of skin.

Indeed, it is Alice who draws Patrick's attention to the scarring of the proletariat through stench, burns, arthritis, and rheumatism (124). When Patrick begins work as a pilot man at the Wicket and Craig's tannery, his body is immediately imprinted with the smell of leather. Alice



understands that this smell is preferable to the smell that never leaves the dyers' bodies (129). She knows the dyers' wives will never taste their husbands' bodies like she tastes Patrick's (132). Smell is not the only contaminant imprinted on the dyers' bodies. Patrick observes the spectacle of the dyers' daily dip into the courtyard dyeing pools:

And the men stepped out in colours up to their necks, pulling wet hides out after them so it appeared they had removed skin from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries. . . . This is how Patrick would remember them later. Their bodies standing there tired, only the heads white. (130)

He imagines making a painting of the men "dressed" in green and yellow who "had never read the *Mail and Empire* or *Saturday Night*" but concludes that any image he might produce would be a "false celebration" (130). Hutcheon claims that Patrick's painterly impulse represents an "attempt to distance" himself from the "world of work" which he has unwittingly entered (97). In fact, this vision represents an attempt at re-casting the notion of documentary evidence through the postulation of a visual document of the body omitted by the "official histories" of the civic archive. For Ondaatje, alternative archival materials are improvised, interdisciplinary, and intertextual by necessity.

Gordon Gamlin traces the intertextual overlaps Ondaatje generates between *In the Skin of a Lion* and the ancient Sumerian epic, *Gilgamesh*. In particular, Gamlin cites Alice's description of a theatrical performance in which a powerful matriarch, in a grand symbolic gesture, passes her coat of animal pelts to each of the minor characters so that they might assume "the skins of wild animals" and "take responsibility for the story" (Ondaatje 157). He suggests that the episode reminds readers of Gilgamesh's acquisition of the lion skin in the epic.<sup>2</sup> In the textual universe of *In the Skin of a Lion*, transfers of skin always precede telling (Gamlin 72). "As different characters take control of the story," Gamlin argues, "the animal skin becomes associated with the challenge to official history offered by individual oral tales" (72). Furthermore, he suggests, the dyed skin of the workers in the tannery scenes is emblematic

of the “gaining of a new cultural identity” and is simultaneously a revision of “romanticized official accounts of an early Canadian trade” (72).

Conversely, Davey reads the dyed skin of the workers as an evocation of loss. He suggests that the workers’ plunge into the dyeing pools represents the forfeit of their original skins—their original languages—amidst the disenfranchising context of an English-speaking country and city (146). Clearly, Patrick understands the insidious effects of industrialization. He quite literally feels it in his bones. Because of the lack of ventilation in the hide rooms, the open cloisters where sausage is made, and on the killing floor, coarse salt acts in much the same way as the acid of the dyeing vats. It works “invisibly” to leave workers with tuberculosis, arthritis, and rheumatism (Ondaatje 131). The narrator registers and records the injustice of historical silencing. When foremen rename Macedonians, Poles, and Lithuanians “Charlie Johnson, Nick Parker” (132), the text records their original ethnic names, along with those of Italians, Portuguese, and Finns. Even if “official histories” deigned to record the history of labour, the names found in those records would be wrong.

Ever fascinated by the documentary accuracy of skin, Patrick anticipates the spectacle of shedding. In a scene that recalls his prior examinations of Alice’s shedding of her stage make-up, Patrick watches the dyers’ sole moment of reprieve at the end of the working day. When the men step into the showers, the two- or three-minute burst of hot water temporarily cleanses their coloured skins. However, Patrick understands that the water facilitates only a partial shedding; it can do nothing to wash the smell from their bodies (132). Indeed these men take justifiable pains to cleanse their bodies; they ritualistically spend Saturday afternoons in the “whitewashed rooms” of the Oak Leaf Steam Baths (135). Patrick chronicles, as the workers themselves chronicle, personal history by brushing his scabs and considering scars on his shoulders (135). This is a physical reading that relies on tactile interpretation.

These extra-linguistic corporeal markings provide a common method of historical transmission, unencumbered by linguistic barriers. Men who have never exchanged words read the script of one another’s bodies and comprehend the shared nature of their histories. Although this

dermal documentation alludes to photographic documentation, it never achieves visual stasis. Bodies are separated when “whiteness” rises from the gridded floors obscuring “tattoos and hard muscles” (136). Organic documents are perishable; they ultimately fade into “unborn photographs” (136). Because the dermal record constantly changes, heals, and grows-over, alternative cataloguing systems must be employed in order to archive it. Ondaatje extrapolates stories from scar. Bodies engaged in harsh labour practices bear the mark of their *métier*, however subtly—legs are burned by acid and fine scars are sustained from a grazing wire. Ondaatje uses this idea to postulate a legitimate documentary record for the silenced dead.

Scars also haunt. When Alice is accidentally killed by a bomb that Patrick likely constructed, he concentrates on the signature scar inscribed on the side of her nose in order to retain her image (Hutcheon 103). However, the effort is futile: “He knows he doesn’t have long before he loses the exact memory of her face” (Ondaatje 163). Gradually, Patrick loses his holistic vision of Alice, but he will never lose the impression of that “fine line” (163). Patrick recalls that Alice herself had been acutely self-conscious of the scar; she “assumed it unbalanced her face” (163). Alice’s uneasiness over this mark is tied to her awareness that no stage make-up or donning of skins can efface the personal history recorded by scar. Her rejected past as a nun is also contained in this dermal document; the scar speaks of her former lack of luck and clumsiness as the “one with that small scar against her nose” who “was always falling into windows, against chairs” (33).

Patrick reads Alice’s “humanity” in the scar (152); he recalls how her scar and moles seemed more pronounced when they were not “disguised by the content of conversation” (133). Organic documents perform an archival function when language fails. When Patrick finds he can no longer conjure an image of Alice’s face through memory alone, he attempts a reconstruction *vis-à-vis* Hana’s face. At the Balkan Café, Patrick believes he sees Alice’s face superimposed over Hana’s “as if two glass negatives merged, then moved apart” (137). Like the “unborn photograph” of tannery workers in the Oak Leaf Steam Baths, Patrick’s archiving gaze gestures to the stability of a photographic document. However,

just as the cloud of steam re-emphasizes the instability of organic documents, the negative plates of Patrick's hallucinatory spell move apart to reveal that "it was not so much the features as the mannerisms of Alice that he witnessed in her daughter" (137). Perhaps it is also a reminder that Hana is not the daughter of his own blood but rather of Alice and Cato. Thus Patrick learns that organic documents are fragile. The information they transmit can be subtle, almost extra-sensory.

He makes a similar deduction as he recalls his departure from the Muskoka Hotel during his swim to the *Cherokee* steamship from Page Island. Suddenly, Patrick becomes aware that his face (and his life), like Alice's, will never be recognized by the "official histories" of the civic archive: "He sees his visage never emerging out of the shadows. Unhistorical" (172). Hutcheon argues that Patrick's realization contains a dual meaning. "Unhistorical," she suggests, denotes that which is "unrecorded" but also that which is "fictive" (101). Ondaatje's alternative archive of organic documents uses fiction to record, remember, and undermine the authority of the "official histories" that make up the civic archive.

Caravaggio undermines authority at the Kingston Penitentiary when he assumes a skin of blue paint to capitalize on the ambiguities of "*demarcation*" (Ondaatje 179; emphasis in original). Greenstein observes that Caravaggio effectively manages to hide amidst the blurred zones of blue between the sky and the tin roof of the prison (119). Paradoxically, while Caravaggio's assumed skin facilitates his escape, it also has the potential to assure his capture. He is keenly aware that he must remove his false skin before the sun rises (Ondaatje 180). With the help of a young boy in Trenton who brings him turpentine, Caravaggio manages to shed most of his skin. Unlike Patrick, who is awed by the removal of Alice's stage make-up, the young boy is horrified by the sight (documentary site) the shedding reveals (182). During his final wash-up in the bathroom of Reddick's Sash and Door, Caravaggio acknowledges the terrible scars—organic documents—that record his traumatic history (182). His recognition recalls Caravaggio's recurring nightmare of having his neck torn open by a "water creature" (185–86). Thus the scar simultaneously evokes the fictional history of the dream and the factual

history of the prison attack. Caravaggio's response makes no distinction between the two cases: "Everything is escaping. His left hand touches his neck and it is not there" (186).

Caravaggio's recognition of his scar is a tacit acknowledgement that organic documentation offers the only manner by which his unofficial history can re-inscribe the civic archive. His encounter with Anne, a poet, during his escape from prison underscores this realization. She confuses Caravaggio for an artist when she notes the streak of "aquamarine" on his neck (187). He can initially conceive of the paint colour only as "blue" (187) but later adopts Anne's terminology to prolong his deception and her misreading. Although Anne seems to accept his use of the artistic adjective, he realizes that it is a misnomer for the skin he adopted in order to escape from prison. Watching Anne author a poem about the lake, Caravaggio recognizes that, because of his social position, he will inevitably be omitted from the "official histories" of the civic archive: "He would never leave his name where his skill had been. He was one of those who have a fury or sadness of only being described by someone else. A tarrer of roads, a house-builder, a painter, a thief" (199). Ondaatje's narrator recognizes this inevitability and deploys fiction to archive the document of a prisoner's body.

Caravaggio's wife, Gianetta, also recognizes her husband's scar as an indicator of the violence he endured in prison. She responds to it with tenderness by feeling then kissing the documentary site (204). While Caravaggio welcomes the intimacy of sharing his traumatic history, Patrick does not. After Patrick torches the Muskoka Hotel, he retreats to the Garden of the Blind on Page Island where he meets a blind woman, Elizabeth, who has an acute understanding of the documentary capacity of fragrance, sound, and skin. She admits that to fully exploit any one of her remaining senses she must blot out the others. Thus, she must feel Patrick's face in order to *see* it. She finds the welt by his ear and advises him to use "perumel," a balm for assuaging burns (170). The welt constitutes documentary evidence of his act of arson in the Muskoka Hotel. Elizabeth senses a gasp "which is not shock or disgust" on Patrick's face as she removes her hand (170). Her recognition of the history behind the welt astounds him and confirms his intuitions about the docu-

mentary resonance of Alice's scar. Most obviously, the green colour of Elizabeth's eye recalls the lunar moths of his childhood—"papyrus textured" organic documents whose scientific names he later researches at the Riverdale Library (Ondaatje 9, 170).

Similarly, at the conclusion of the novel, Commissioner Rowland Harris<sup>3</sup> identifies Patrick as a former tunneller by the condition of his skin. When Patrick bursts into Harris' office armed with a blasting box after having wired the water treatment plant to explode, Harris recognizes him as one of those for whom "no record was kept" (236). Hutcheon calls Harris' admission of having excluded the tunnellers' unofficial histories from the civic archive "historically damning" (102). Confronted with the sight (documentary site) of Patrick's body, Harris has no choice but to acknowledge and to read Patrick's skin as an indisputable record: "Black thin cotton trousers and shirt, grease-black face—blood in the scrapes and scratches. The man's knuckles bleeding, one arm hanging loose at his side[,] . . . shirt ripped open at the back" (Ondaatje 234). Patrick's wounds evoke the gruesome and unrecorded deaths of so many tunnellers. Furthermore, his blackened face recalls Caravaggio's escape into "*demarcation*." Before Patrick dives into the intake pipe, he is made "invisible except by touch" by the grease that Giannetta applies to his skin. The gesture makes manifest Harris' complete success at omitting Patrick and his fellow tunnellers from the "official histories" (228). Gamlin suggests that "*demarcation*" in this adoption of false skin represents "an effacement of all distinctions in air or water, fire or earth, four elements for a dynamics of making and destroying" (119). Patrick's ripped shirt marks a documentary site of resistance to Harris' effacement of the tunnellers' histories. It recalls the signature hole of the tunnellers' shirts: an identifying mark pierced into the working skin of the body to document the history of quotidian labours.

#### IV. Archival Box 02: Artifactual Documents

In addition to the recurring images of blood and scars in *In the Skin of a Lion*, Butterfield notes that earrings also continually return to help "net the reader in a web of psychological reverberations and expectations" (165). Patrick returns to the image of Anne's missing earring on

two separate textual occasions (Ondaatje 89, 153). Giannetta pins her earring to Caravaggio's arm in sexual frenzy, and her false drawers are filled with all manner of jewellery stolen by her husband. Butterfield's observation identifies another group of non-paper documentary materials that Ondaatje employs to effect a re-inscription of the civic archive. Artifactual documents also give voice to those unofficial histories that do not meet the linguistic admission criteria of "official histories."

Ondaatje may have learned a thing or two about the resonance of artifactual documents from his friend and colleague Robert Kroetsch. The pair once took a trip down the Red Deer river in search of ancient artifacts in the form of fossils (Kroetsch, correspondence). Kroetsch defines the importance of artifacts to a prairie writer interested in the recuperation of histories through "imaginative speculation" (7):

I am aware that it is the great French historian Michel Foucault who has formalized our understanding of the appropriateness of the archaeological method. But the prairie writer understands that appropriateness in terms of the particulars of place: newspaper files, place names, shoe boxes full of old photographs, tall tales, diaries, journals, tipi rings, weather reports, business ledgers, voting records—even the wrong-headed histories written by eastern historians become, rather than narratives of the past, archaeological deposits. (7)

This methodology is not restricted to writers of the Canadian Prairie. Ondaatje's artifactual documents also function like Kroetschian tipi rings. These materials do not attest to any authoritative version of history; instead, they expose layers and challenge "aesthetic and ideological operations of cultural production" (Speary 47). Sarris observes that Ondaatje's novel is concerned "not just with history, but with the possibilities of different types of history and historiography, and the influence of an individual's relation to society" (184). He suggests that *In the Skin of a Lion* actively engages the reader in an "act of reading that closely resembles the activity of a historian putting together a narrative based on sketchy sources" (Sarris 190). The prospective narrative construction is made all the more tantalizing in virtue of its suspect veracity and reli-

ability. Ondaatje's artifacts make no claim to proffer the "right" version of what happened, but suggest multiple and simultaneous happenings (Bush 247).

Artifacts can be examined at varying degrees of granularity. Beran formulates a macro perspective of artifact. She suggests that the novel asks the reader to "look at the viaduct and water filtration plant that Harris built and understand that they were built by the unknown and uncelebrated workers" (78). By contrast, Duffy's extra-textual research espouses a micro-perspective of artifact. He excavates an artifactual document that was never meant to be preserved in Toronto's civic archives and recounts the apocryphal tale of a monkey wrench gone missing during the construction of the R.C. Harris Water Filtration Plant. According to Duffy, Toronto Public Works Department officials presume a labourer stole the tool but report that it was later recovered during sounding operations of the lake bottom. Duffy finds mention of the event in R.C. Harris' personal correspondence and is surprised to discover that the Public Works Commissioner affords this artifact enough significance that he keeps it in his office ("Wrench" 126–27). The rhetorical questions Duffy poses evoke the capacity of artifact documents to (re)inscribe the civic archive by postulating a voice for unofficial histories: "Was a workman fired for a theft that never occurred? Did somebody punch out a foreman for calling him a thief?" (126–27). Duffy makes no speculative conclusions but suggests the event "suits one of Ondaatje's declared aims, that of returning to history the actualities of the workers' experience, too often disregarded in quantitative assessments of a project" ("Wrench" 126).

These "actualities" appear in various artifactual manifestations throughout the text. Patrick's memory of his father, Hazen Lewis, is most clearly embodied in the artifact document of a blasting diagram. Patrick recalls having his outline traced by his father in green chalk on the plank walls of the drive-shed. When Patrick steps away from the outline, Hazen lays an intricate pattern of cordite and fuse in order to blast a hole in the section of plank where Patrick's head had been. The "boy remembers his father" as a man who can articulate himself only with dynamite (Ondaatje 15). Hazen is described as an "abashed man" (15), "sullen even in the company of his own son" (18), and "taciturn"



even in his “non-committal” square dance calling (19). He is “obsessed with not wasting things,” and “lies so still” that it is impossible “to know if he is awake or asleep” (14). His social position as a farm labourer and itinerate lumberjack in conjunction with his complete reticence guarantees his omission from the “official histories” of the civic archive. Only through his dynamiting does Hazen figuratively and literally leave a mark. His “track of half-inch holes in the granite all down the Depot Lake system and along the Moira River” are the only trace of his “modest and minimal” existence (18). Ondaatje recuperates Hazen’s voice through the inscription of his “woodpecker’s work” on the geology of the Bellrock surroundings (18).

Hazen does not directly teach his son his trade. What Patrick learns, he learns through observation, not from any “legend” or “base of theory” imparted to him by Hazen (18). However, when Patrick leaves the rough country of his childhood for the urban sprawl of Toronto, he carries with him an artifact that attests to his father’s silenced history. Although Patrick arrives at Union Station nearly penniless, he holds “a piece of feldspar in his pocket that his fingers had stumbled over during the train journey” (53). Only later when Patrick explains the circumstances of his father’s death to Clara and Alice is the reader clued into the full significance of the feldspar artifactual document:

He got killed setting charges in a feldspar mine. The company had tried to go too deep and the section above him collapsed. There wasn’t an explosion. The shelf just slid down with him into the cave and drowned him. He was buried in feldspar. I didn’t even know what it was. They use it in everything—china-ware, tiles, pottery, inlaid table tops, even in artificial teeth. I lost him there. (74)

The mining company, the reader is led to deduce, placed profit ahead of the safety of its workers. Significantly, Patrick does not carry any formal documentation describing the cause of his father’s death. It seems safe to conclude that in this instance, as in the case of the Bloor Street Viaduct and waterworks construction projects, “no record was kept” of such deaths (236). Indeed, the only documentation offered in support

of this account is a mineral artifact. Ondaatje thus postulates a voice for silenced labour by (re)inscribing the “official histories” of the civic archive with an artifactual document. Patrick makes a similar gesture of (re)inscription when he prepares to set a charge in the waterworks intake tunnel. He is examining the structure of the tunnel face and searching for possible fissures when he spots and excavates another artifactual document. Before Patrick ignites the fuse, he pockets “the pale history of a fossil, a cone shaped cephalopod” that recalls the subterranean toil of his father and the tunnellers (106–07). When Patrick finally confronts Harris, it is an artifactual document, a piece of stone, that compels him to demand reckoning for the effacement of his father’s death and the deaths of countless labourers in the intake tunnel: “There was silence. Patrick leaned forward and rubbed his cut fingers over the smoothness of Harris’ desk.—Feldspar he murmured. . . . You forgot us” (235).

Patrick’s recuperation of the artifactual documents of feldspar and fossil may be read as a collection of documentary talismans against the silencing power of the civic archive. Caravaggio receives just such a talisman after his escape from the Kingston Penitentiary. In Trenton, a young boy named Al gives Caravaggio an artifact as a memento of their meeting: “an old maple-syrup spile with the year 1882 on it” (182). Al writes his name on the piece of paper with which he wraps the spile. His only request of Caravaggio is that Caravaggio “Remember my name” (182). In effect, the boy asks Caravaggio to commit his unofficial history to the civic archive. Realizing the irony of his request, “[t]he kid grin[s], very happy.” Paper will not serve to memorialize the dispossessed (Ondaatje 182). Ondaatje is able to imbue this fictional boy with such precocity because, as Davey notes, Al represents the canonical Canadian poet Al Purdy (145). With this cameo appearance Ondaatje pays homage to his mentor. Through his poetry, Purdy invokes the vanished past; through fiction, Ondaatje literally places his friend in familiar territory. The allusion acknowledges Purdy’s explorations of the limits of paper records and cites his poetry as a precedent for a fictive (re)inscription of the civic archive with alternative documentation.<sup>4</sup>

The spile acts as a symbol for the radical practice of recuperating voices silenced by “official histories.” It is a tool used to extract con-

centrated material. Caravaggio also returns a version of Purdy's gift to his friend Patrick. Before Patrick dives into the intake pipe, Caravaggio gives him a "charm" (228). It is not the wooden spile given to him by Al but a "metal spile"—a re-casting of the original artifactual document. However, the new spile is different. It is made of metal that suggests that it is almost certainly an alloy. Thus, during its stages of production, it has been processed from ore, superheated and combined with other substances, and cast. Ondaatje's fictional recuperation of the voice of unofficial histories involves a similar elemental/alchemical transformation. Ondaatje fictionally re-casts the civic archive using a raw source—artifactual materials—not subject to the same limitations as paper.

Ondaatje makes bold strokes with this technique. He liberally re-casts the civic archive of public monuments, re-inscribing the stone lintel at Union Station with the name of the prairie town that provides the setting for Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House* (Ondaatje 209). Beyond the stark image of such an unlikely intervention upon so familiar a public document, Ondaatje seeks to fictionally "level and dissolve" the chronology of "official histories" (Greenstein 119). Duffy notes that Ross's novel was published three years after the time in which Ondaatje's scene is set, making the paradox more resonant ("Wrench" 135). As two fictional histories converge, the reader is left with the impression that the re-inscription of the civic archive may actually be possible. Ondaatje again uses an artifactual document to resist the silencing power of the civic archive. When Patrick reads the graven name "HORIZON," he hears Clara's voice telling him to "*look up*" (209; emphasis in original). Suddenly, chronology collapses and Patrick returns to the materiality of artifactual documents in order to explore his memory of Clara's departure: "*You know what stone that is? . . . It's Missouri Zumbro. Remember that. The floors are Tennessee marble*" (210; emphasis in original).

Patrick tries to reassemble the reasons for Clara's departure by randomly collecting artifactual documents. Patrick, like Ondaatje, combines fragments to give story a voice: "He walked into the empty rooms, gesturing towards the broken things he was trying to assemble, broken glass and crockery, things he had flung long ago, after Clara had gone. . . . Glass, a crossword puzzle . . . a story" (86). Patrick performs

a similar act for Alice before she dies when he gathers “mementos” and “handbills” after each of her performances to compile a record of his partner against contingency (152). For Ondaatje this collecting is also a foreshadowing device. After her death, Patrick attempts to preserve her last gesture by building a shrine out of “a bouquet of weeds,” “sumac and valley grasses that she picked under the viaduct,” and “leaves and berries” stuffed into an “old river bottle” (163). However, Patrick discovers that organic matter can serve only as a temporary artifactual document: “He escorts her last flowers through death and afterlife, after whatever spirit in them has evaporated out of their brownness” (163). His earlier explorations of Hana’s valise archive yield far more stable specimens. Patrick’s adopted daughter is also a born collector. Aside from several photographs, he discovers two highly resonant artifactual documents: a sumac bracelet and a rosary (139).

While the rosary stands as a marker for Alice’s abandoned history, the sumac bracelet gestures towards a history that is taken from her. The latter artifactual document evokes Alice’s and Cato’s trysts in the ravines and woods north of the city and their preferred lovemaking grounds along the lakeshore railway embankment, a location neither inside nor outside the city. Cato archives the site where he and Alice made love. He records their intricate “sexual archaeology” by burying “a bottle, a pencil, a handkerchief, a sock” (141). These artifactual documents are replete with the couple’s silenced history; they present another facet of Cato, not the image of a body frozen in the ice of a northern river but rather the living, dripping, half-naked body of a man watching a group of aroused bulls toss his socks back and forth (142). Patrick appreciates the tangibility of these artifactual documents. He seeks them even where they do not exist. Desperate to find any physical trace of his love affair with Clara, he transposes geographies and transforms his Toronto apartment into the Arlington Hotel in Paris, Ontario. Conspicuously, he does not turn on the lights when he crouches down to examine “the faint impression of her backbone on the white paint” (92). He knows that the sense of sight will not help him find such traces; he must read them intuitively, by touch.

Patrick uses techniques of fiction to invent artifactual documentation. After his encounter with Ambrose Small in Bellrock, he fixes his

gaze on the wallpaper pattern as if Clara had left her body there. He searches for Clara amidst the flowers, vines, English pheasants, and rips made by drunk loggers trying to make a quick exit (98). After Patrick and Clara make love, he wakes to find the sheets thick with blood—a tableau alluding to the Gentileschi painting of Judith and Holofernes (79). As soon as he regains consciousness, he immediately begins to search for documentary evidence to prove the occurrence of the event. He discovers an artifactual document inscribed on the wall with his own blood. This is another way to write history. However, no artifactual document makes as dramatic an impression as Clara's and Alice's "spirit drawing" of Patrick. To call it an unconventional document is an understatement. While Patrick sleeps, Clara and Alice conduct a *séance* of sorts that purports to record Patrick's very essence. It is a raw, tactile, and intuitive interpretation, nothing like the finished portraits that are typically found in official histories. Sarris observes that the finished drawing represents an attempt to "capture his [Patrick's] essence, the spirit revealed in appearance" (192). Sarris proposes that the novel operates in much the same manner. He argues that Ondaatje "tries to capture the essence of a historical subject whose vagueness forces him to draw upon all he knows and can guess about it" (192). Although Patrick later studies the "spirit drawing," he does not venture an interpretation. Clara recognizes its value as a piece of documentary material. She reassures him that "he has come off well. . . . [T]he soul is pliable." The image, in other words, will give him a voice (78).

### V. Archivist's Notes

When Patrick enters Commissioner Harris' office holding the blasting box, he levels an archival accusation: "You forgot us" (235). Patrick asks Commissioner Harris to "think about those who built the intake tunnels." He presses the question, "Do you know how many of us died in there?" (236). Patrick's suspicions about the construction of official histories are confirmed by Harris' response: "There was no record kept" (236). Hutcheon suggests that Patrick's medium of threat, dynamite, exposes a plot of literal and allegorical power (103). Her analysis focuses

on Patrick's brandishing of the blasting box—the object in which she locates the novel's chief symbol of power (Hutcheon 103). Yet, dynamite in the novel repeatedly fails to empower; Hazen and Alice are killed by accidental explosions, and Patrick is seriously injured by another. However, Commissioner Harris succeeds in exercising real power to prevent the destruction of the waterworks. Harris wields the archive. Patrick and the dispossessed workers, minor artists, and revolutionaries of the novel are stripped of power by virtue of their omission from the “official histories.”

Commissioner Harris demonstrates his (subconscious) control over the archive when he recounts a strange dream to Patrick. In the dream, Harris observes “real places” that “could have existed” (Ondaatje 237). Ondaatje cleverly summons John Lyle, the famous Toronto architect, to confirm that Harris' vision describes “projects for the city that had been rejected over the years” (237). Lyle would have known as much. According to Christopher Hume, Lyle took as his mission nothing less than the creation of a “Canadian architecture” (Hume). He rates Lyle as the architectural equivalent of a Group of Seven member (Hume). Clearly, this is a figure who, like Commissioner Harris, is remembered by official histories. Hutcheon suggests that Ondaatje grants Harris “the vision that is a *mise en abyme* of the entire novel's mixing of history and fiction and its focus on class politics” (103). From another perspective, Harris' dream constitutes an internal reflection of the role of archive in creating the city: “Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined” (Ondaatje 29). It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that given his position as Commissioner of Public Works, Harris may have come into contact with the archived blueprints of the design proposals at some prior time. Harris subsequently manipulates this paper-sourced information to persuade Patrick to abandon his plans to destroy the waterworks. The Commissioner's paper document-backed rhetoric finds immediate success. Harris observes that if Patrick “were writing this down[,] . . . his hand writing would be getting smaller and smaller” (239).

Although Harris' position entitles him to a certain degree of control over the archive, his power is still contingent on the approval of

those even higher in the administrative hierarchy of the city: “Those with power had nothing to show for themselves. They had paper. They didn’t carry a cent” (242). Patrick does not realize that Harris is “an amateur in their midst” because “he [Harris] had to sell himself every time” (242). Although Harris commands the power to make calculated omissions from the archive, he must justify them to Patrick. Those with real power are not accountable for their omissions: “They had paper” (242). Hutcheon’s response to Harris’ admission is broad. She suggests that Ondaatje also controls paper through his writing of the text and that he redirects this power to recuperate the voices of unofficial histories (103).

A more fixed interpretation lies within the universe of the text. Ondaatje’s use of non-paper documentary materials offers a textual strategy of resistance to the hegemony of “official histories.” Only through revised systems of documentation can Patrick, Clara, Anne, Caravaggio, and Temelcoff expect to gain any recognition of the specificities of their respective histories. Ondaatje does not presume to speak for all dispossessed labour of the period through the formulation of these characters. Instead, he attempts to posit a wide range of possible voices in order to critique entrenched notions of objective history and historical documentation. Organic and artifactual documents provide Ondaatje with useful tools to undermine the politics of archival accession. By employing these tools, Ondaatje targets the “aesthetic and ideological operations of cultural production” (Speary 47) and creates a space for the (re)inscription of the civic archive.

Shortly after completing *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje sat down with Barbara Turner at the Bloor Street Donut Shop mere blocks from the primary setting of his novel. One can imagine that he gestured in an easterly direction as he summed up his case for the voices silenced by the official archive. One can almost hear the whispers rising from the Don River below: “I can tell you exactly how many buckets of sand were used [in the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct], because this is Toronto history, but the people who actually built the goddamn bridge were unspoken of. They’re unhistorical!” (Turner 21).

## Notes

- 1 See Beddoes, Butterfield, Davey, Duffy, Speary, Gamlin, Greenstein, Sarris, and Schumacher for additional discussion of this point.
- 2 Gamlin's article traces all of the allusions Ondaatje's text makes to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, observing that the novel's title is derived from the opening epigram: "The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion" (*Gilgamesh* 96). Gamlin identifies a second major section in the *Gilgamesh* text from which Ondaatje borrows heavily:

At night when he came to the mountain passes Gilgamesh prayed: "In these mountain passes long ago I saw lions, I was afraid and I lifted my eyes to the moon; I prayed and my prayers went up to the gods, so now, O moon god Sin, protect me." When he had prayed he lay down to sleep, until he was woken from out of a dream. He saw the lions round him glorifying in life; then he took his axe in his hand, he drew his sword from his belt, and he fell upon them like an arrow from the string, and struck and destroyed and scattered them. (*Gilgamesh* 97)

Phrasing patterns borrowed from this excerpt appear elsewhere in *In the Skin of a Lion* such as this one: "If Patrick was a hero he could come down on Small like an arrow" (Ondaatje 83). Gamlin notes that Patrick's gift to Temelcoff is described as an "arrow into the past" (Ondaatje 149; Gamlin 76). He also observes that the comment Commissioner Harris utters while observing the sleeping Patrick, "He fell upon them like an arrow from a string" (Ondaatje 242), is a direct citation from the above passage (76).

- 3 A comparison between Kipling's version of a bridge boss, C.E. Findlayson, and Ondaatje's R.C. Harris is fruitful:

Findlayson, C.E., turned on his trolley and looked over the face of the country that he had changed for seven miles around. Looked back on the humming village of five thousand workmen; upstream and down, along the vista of spurs and sand; across the river to the far piers, lessening in the haze; overhead to the guard-towers and only he knew how strong those were—and with a sigh of contentment saw that his work was good. There stood his bridge before him in the sunlight, lacking only a few weeks' work on the girders of the three middle piers—his bridge, raw and ugly as original sin, but *pukka*—permanent to endure when all memory of the builder, yea, even of the splendid Findlayson truss, had perished. Practically, the thing was done.

Hitchcock, his assistant, cantered along the line on a little switch-tailed Kabuli pony who through long practice could have trotted securely over a trestle, and nodded to his chief. (Kipling 5; emphasis in orig.)

Harris and Pomphrey are near mirror images for Findlayson and Hitchcock.



The last thing Rowland Harris, Commissioner of Public Works, would do in the evenings during its construction was have himself driven to the edge of the viaduct, to sit for a while. At midnight the half-built bridge over the valley seemed deserted—just lanterns tracing its outlines. But there was always a night shift of thirty or forty men. After a while Harris removed himself from the car, lit a cigar, and walked onto the bridge. He loved this viaduct. It was his first child as head of Public Works, much of it planned before he took over but he had bullied it through. It was Harris who envisioned that it could carry not just cars but trains on a lower trestle. It could also transport water from the east-end plants to the centre of the city. Water was Harris' greatest passion. He wanted giant water mains travelling across the valley as part of the viaduct.

He slipped past the barrier and walked towards the working men. Few of them spoke English but they knew who he was. Sometimes he was accompanied by Pomphrey, an architect, the strange one from England who was later to design for Commissioner Harris one of the city's grandest buildings—the water filtration plant in the east end. (Ondaatje 29)

The provenance of Kipling's Findlayson can be further traced to a non-fictional source. I discovered a news clipping pasted to my copy of the 1898 edition of *Day's Work*, which further complicates Ondaatje's organic document allusion.

ORIGINAL OF KIPLING'S POEM

James R. Bell, of "Bridge Builder"  
Died in London – Victim of Cast  
Iron Rules of Civil Service,  
was Great Bridge  
**Builder.**

London, Aug. 18. – James R. Bell, the original of Kipling's "Bridge Builder," is dead at his home here.

Mr. Bell was a sad reminder of how the castiron [*sic*] rules of the Indian Civil service [*sic*] hamper the efficiency of some of its best members, for he was at the heyday of his powers when he was arbitrarily retired at the age of 55. He was in excellent health, in the midst of some of his best achievements and willing and anxious to go on with his work, when the orders came to cease his activities.

After his retirement Mr. Bell passed nearly every winter in India or China, where his services as a consulting engineer were welcomed. He came from a family of engineers, being the grandson of James Bremner, who floated the "Great Britain," when [*sic*] the largest steamer in the world when she stranded in Dundrum Bay on her third trip across the Atlantic. Mr. Bell built some of the greatest bridges in India. Some of these structures are great engineering feats, for the designs have to provide

for inundations and changes in the courses of the treacherous rivers they span. (Kipling, flyleaf annotation)

- 4 In his poem “In Search of Owen Roblin” (an expansion of earlier poems “Roblin’s Mills I” and “Roblin’s Mills II”), Al Purdy explores the limits of paper documentation. The poem’s speaker (ostensibly the poet himself) opens a family photograph album which he describes as a “cage of ancestors” (238). The speaker sets out to track the history of his family in relation to the history of the township in which they lived (established through the efforts of a mill owner named Owen Roblin). He begins the poem with the premise of grounding it in archival research:

Again searching the records  
travelling still farther back  
to the beginning where names first appear  
attached to land deeds where a village grew  
William Giles, Lot 72 in 1835  
Daniel Way, Lot 80 in 1810  
(and he was John Way’s father surely)  
Joseph Cronk, Lot 81 in 1803  
and that’s as far as the records go (862–870)

However, the speaker quickly discovers that his methodology is inadequate to the task at hand:

But names and dates say little  
lists of things are only aids to memory  
whatever is underneath a village  
and one-time pioneer settlement goes deeper  
rooted inside human character  
contemporary as well as ancient (918–923)

To cope with the gaps in the civic archive, the speaker of the poem resorts to the writer’s tool of fictive visualization:

Of course any writer can do this  
at least he *ought* to be able to  
his mind switching identities  
he enters bodies of long-vanished people (680–683; emphasis in orig.)

Thus through effort of composition (an archaeological movement), Purdy’s poetic speaker *visualizes* two characters whom the “official histories” *forgot*: Jib, the town drunk, and a lovesick schoolmaster:

I can visualize many of them  
and grappling hooks of the imagination  
backed by names and dates and records  
produce words and sounds to reproduce them  
Here are two people  
who never lived but surely existed

fictional people but also prototypes

.....

If they never lived dammit they should have

but I believe they did

nameless and unlisted in record books

beyond the constants of birth, death and marriage

I believe they lived (943–949, 955–959)

The only physical trace that remains of the chief subject of the poem is a photograph of Owen Roblin at 94. The documentary deficit of Roblin's history is focalized by this image:

And that's all I actually know of Roblin

my own wild speculations

and some elusive unverified facts

add it all up and what do you have?

not very damn much— (1175–1179)

At the poem's conclusion the speaker realizes that his search produced has yielded unexpected results:

In search of Owen Roblin

I discovered a whole era

that was really a backward extension of myself

built lines of communication across two centuries

recovered my own past my own people

a long misty chain stretched thru time

of which I am the last but not final link (1186–1192)

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