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Book Reviews

Daniel Coleman. *Yardwork: A Biography of an Urban Place*. Wolsak and Wynn, 2017. Pp. 271. CAD $20.

Biography as a genre is in the throes of change, altering its focus from those times and experiences that shape a human animal to increasingly fluid encapsulations of place, history, and contextual anatomy. Michel Foucault writes, in "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," that "[t]he space in which we live, from which we are drawn out of ourselves, just where the erosion of our lives, our time and our history takes place . . . is in itself heterogeneous[,] . . . a set of relationships that define positions which cannot be equated or in any way superimposed" (331). In that light, Daniel Coleman's microscopic tilling of his "pretty average backyard in a pleasant but everyday neighbourhood" (237) in Hamilton, Ontario combines poetry and meditation, observation and dispatch. Through a carefully measured inhabitation of that contemporary cloister's spirit and soil, history and settlement, flora and fauna (both wild and cultivated), Coleman transcends the limitations of biography. *Yardwork* succeeds in exploring intimacy and geography, bringing them together in a reflection on belonging.

Coleman's meticulous translation of his "yard" is a model of investigative discovery. Akin to naturalist Trevor Herriot's *River in a Dry Land: A Prairie Passage* (2000), about Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Basin, *Yardwork* engages with the complex stratigraphy of both generational and genetic shapings of one small piece of earth. As Edward Soja argues, the "trialectices of spatiality-historicality-sociality" (71) all interact in a patch of grass, a broken pine, planted flower beds, and the immutable traces of water. Such interactions inhabit this biography of an urban place.

An integral sentence in *Yardwork* reads, "This ground contains more complexity than our abbreviated histories tend to admit" (75). From that springboard Coleman unearths the traces of all those who have gone before, first the Indigenous peoples whose home it was and is. Following them, he examines homesteading, settlement, purchase and barter and growth in an urban area much maligned as Canada's charmless industrial armpit, that "soot-stained gritty city that grips the southwestern shoreline of Lake Ontario" (10). Ironically, it is Hamilton's industrial reputation makes Coleman's yard-biography more poignant than if it were a beauty spot. His evocation of all that lurks beneath the surface of asphalt and tar becomes a threnody of possibility, one that moves from the very dirt to birds, trees, and air.

Coleman's care in recounting the origin stories of the Six Nations is enthralling and exemplary, and he moves from that deepest layer to geology, territory, archeology, and history in a careful exhumation of transfer, appropriation, and ownership. Different chapters examine hydro-life, the trees that are both native and imported, and the deer and other urban animals that quietly find their way, even in a city. Each element proposes its own layer, adding to the complex compost of what may be a small spot in the larger landscape but echoes as a meeting place, "a node in a global network" (199).

In this Anthropocene epoch, human rampage and rapacity is intent on controlling, herding, and manipulating landscape, the natural world itself ancillary to human desire and ambition. Most effective in this work of ecocritique, personal discovery, and cultural research are the questions that Coleman arouses. Do any of us bother to learn about the ground we live on? Do we, even at a time when we are exhaustingly aware of the human degradation of our environment, truly understand the extent to which we insist on fitting the environment to suit ourselves, reading it, as we do, through our limited human apprehension?

But *Yardwork* is no solemn lament on urban desolation. It is leavened by flashes of rueful humour: the racoon bandit night raiders who roll up Coleman's Kentucky grass, the white pine in his yard that is used as a flophouse by nocturnal animals, the futility of trying to channel water. Coleman is aware of his tendentious position, the irresistible desire to anthropomorphize, and he mocks his own search for signs as "too cheesy, too wannabe native, too symbolic" (193). He understands his role as provisional occupant and voyeur, binocular man to the indifferent world around him.

Most striking is his discussion of the human belief in "management" (123). We immobilize the land by paving it over, the increasing coverage of asphalt and surface altering water and weather both. We fence animals out and ourselves in. We fail to recalibrate our relationships with birds and weeds and the wild, willfully disregarding how humans are in nature and are part of nature.

Coleman's poignant metaphor—that trees survive by giving way, by breaking and bending—drives his exploration, which succeeds most effectively by breaking and bending his own presumptions, many of which are proven wrong or are tangled and complicated in unexpected ways. Acknowledging, as it does, the diasporic breaking up of Indigenous groups, the insistence of the living earth, and the need for mindfulness, this place-biography breaks ground but also heals that breaking. *Yardwork* succeeds as a quietly dazzling exploration, most brilliant in its anatomy of how the inner and outer life of intimacy combines with the natural world's reverberations. This meditation on space and place is thus more than biography; it becomes uniquely hierogrammatic.

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