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Ottertail and the Great Sickness

A synthetic myth by Selwyn Dewdney

On every continent of the globe except Antarctica, from the caves of western Europe to the rock shelters of Australia, on Siberian cliffs and South African boulders, and throughout the rockier regions of the Americas there are thousands of Aboriginal rock sights. Canada is no exception.



Rock faces on the West Coast display the sophisticated symbols of Kwakiutl and Haida. On glaciated shelves of slate in Nova Scotia the Micmac have engraved numerous glyphs. Unidentified plains people have carved or painted their "writings" on the sandstone walls of Albertan and Saskatchewan coulees; and where bedrock was lacking men have pecked strange markings on boulders, found or placed on prairie hilltops.

Scattered through the Cordilleran Interior and across the wide expanse of the Canadian Shield Woodlands are the two most numerous accumulations of rock art. Those between the Rockies and the Coast still await a systematic recorder. My own work has centred on the rock art of the Shield country, resulting after eleven years' field work in records of a majority of the estimated 300 sites in the region.

So far only a dozen glyph sites have been found, all on the southern periphery of the Shield. All the others are painted on vertical faces of Precambrian formations invariably beside the water, either from canoes or from ledges accessible to the water. Most are concentrated in the homelands of the Algonkian-speaking Cree and Jjibway, nomadic hunters and fishermen. All are rendered in red ochre with the simplest of paintings of human and animal figures vary from inept to skilful. Styles range from naturalistic to highly abstract. Subject matter consists of the widest variety, from mere tally marks to dream figures of supernatural beings: horned fish, underwater cats, or thunderbirds with human features. In a few instances a gun or a horse indicates European influence, but the evidence suggests that the practice of making rock paintings died out early in the contact period.

All through my search, from Great Slave Lake to the St. Maurice River in Quebec, I have interviewed the older people, seeking information about the beliefs and practices associated with these rock paintings. Few professed any direct knowledge; but many offered ethnological "sherds" which I could combine with what I dug up in the literature to

project the kind of experience that might have prompted the paintings.

I must emphasize that the story which follows is **pure invention**. But the style is close to that common to all my informants and interpreters regardless of their command of English. The content, too, is derived from what I have learned from them and found in the literature. And while the basic premise—that most of the rock paintings were made to augment the power of the shaman's dream fast—is theoretical, it is supported by a substantial body of evidence. Of the latter I will quote only that offered by a single informant, a Lake of the Woods Ojibway familiar with the setting of the story—Picture Rock Island in Whitefish Bay.

"Whatever you see on the paintings, that's what they seen in their dreams."

The Myth

This happened a long time ago. My uncle told me this story. He got it from his grandfather when he was a kid.

There was this old man called Ottertail. He dreamed when he was a boy about the Big Otter—that's the manitou that brought the Grand Medicine Lodge to the ojibway people. This old man was a doctor who could perform miracles. He had his dreaming place up on a high rock in Whitefish Bay. Nobody knows how he used to get up there—I guess that was one of his miracles. The old doctors used to have these different places where they had their dreams. When I was a kid there was a big tree back in the bush where this other doctor had his nest that he dreamed in.

So this old man Ottertail used to go up on this high rock. That's on Picture Rock Island where the pictures are. There's supposed to be a place up there wide enough for a man to sleep up there. That's where the old man would go to drum and sing the songs that gave him his power. Every time there was a big storm the lightning would hit that rock. That's why the people was scared of it. When they passed that place they would

paddle along the other side of the channel. You could see the pictures from that far off, but just the red colour—you couldn't make out the pictures. I hear there's lots of pictures up there. But my uncle only knows about this one. That's a picture of a thunderbird.

So it was a long time ago. Some of the people smelled this bad smell in the air. So they knew Pa'akuk was around—that's a human-like living skeleton that flies through the air about ten times faster than a jet plane. When you smell that and hear a sound like someone is hurt bad up there that's Pa'akuk and you know there's going to be a terrible sickness.

So pretty soon all the people was dying. The doctors tried to cure them with their sucking bones but they couldn't suck that sickness out. So they came to Ottertail because they knew he could perform miracles.

"You should help us."
"All right. But it won't be easy. Maybe I'll die."

So the old man Ottertail who could perform miracles he went up on that high rock where he had his dreams. He was away a long time. Nobody knew what happened to him. But my uncle's grandfather told my uncle what happened.

According to my uncle this old man built a sweat lodge up there on that rock. That's made out of young birch poles and birchbark. Every day he'd pour water on the hot stones inside that lodge and he'd sweat for three or four hours. Then he'd sleep. He didn't eat anything but he drank lots of water. I guess he hauled that up in a bark pail from the lake.

So he sweated for four days. Then he let the fire go out, and he didn't haul up any more water. He didn't take any food up there. You don't get them powerful dreams unless you don't eat for a long time.

Every day he sang his most powerful songs. They were the ones he had dreamed in previous times. And he had some others he had brought

(continued on page two)

Synthetic myth . . .

(continued from page one)

from a powerful doctor down in Sabaskong Bay. So he fasted and drummed and sang those songs. But he didn't get no powerful dream. I guess old Pa'akuk was too strong for him.

Pretty soon he was so weak he couldn't drum no more. He could see that the leaves were nearly all gone from the trees. When the leaves are all gone you don't have those powerful dreams and you can die.

The old man knew that. But he had to take that risk because all his people was dying. Of course you don't wear no clothes when you're fasting, and the nights get pretty cold in the fall time.

"The Bog Otter can't help me. I'm going to die."

So he got osme dry leaves and moss and wood punk and took out his firestones. That's before they had any matches — it was a long time ago. He used all his strength to make a little fire. Then his strength was all gone. He didn't have no more left to light his pipe and blow smoke to the four winds before he died.

"I will put tobacco on the fire and my manitou will help me."

Pretty soon the smoke began to blow north. Then the wind changed and blew the smoke south. After that a little wind came up from the west and blew the smoke east. So the old man't manitou blew the smoke for him four different ways. Pretty soon there didn't seem to be no more smoke. But Ottetail knew his manitou was blowing the smoke down into the earth.

"When the smoke goes up again—that's when I'll die."

So the smoke began to go up. Pretty soon it lifted off the fire — there was only a little bit left.

"Now I can die. My manitou blew the smoke for me."

So the smoke started to go up. All the time it got bigger and blacker. Pretty soon it stopped going up. The old man looked at it and it was turning into a snake. He seen this big black snake coming right at him. He knew what it was. He knew he was supposed to swallow that snake.

"Before I die I'm going to swallow you."

He was a long time swallowing that snake but he finally got it down. Pretty soon he felt himself rising up right off the ground. Pretty soon he was up in the sky. There was thunder all around. He looked at his arms and they had turned into wings like an eagle. He was flying higher and higher. Pretty soon he was up higher than the clouds.

So he came to this thunderbird's house. There was about twenty of them there, all eating horned snakes they had taken out of the water in a fog. An old woman thunderbird was cooking some snake soup.

"Here, drink some of this snake soup."

So he drank the soup and he began to feel better.

All the thunderbirds were looking down at the island where the old man had his dreaming place. Their eyes flashed lightning and when it hit they laughed. That was the thunder. The old man could hear the rocks split when they got hit.

"Who is that old man lying down there on that rock?"

"That's my body. I swallowed the black smoke-snake and now I'm dead."

"You didn't die. You will go back to your body. You were turned into a thunderbird like us so you wouldn't have to die. That's why you could drink the snake soup. When you go back you will still be a thunderbird. But you will keep your human form."

So Ottetail went back to his human form. When he woke up he was strong like a young man. So he looked at the rock and there was a thunderbird painted with the sacred red onaman paint.

When he got back to his people all the ones that hadn't died were getting better. He couldn't bring the dead ones back to life but all the rest were saved. There was snow on the ground and all the leaves were gone from the trees. The people were healthy again. Ottetail had saved them when he swallowed the smoke-snake. Nobody smelled or heard that terrible Pa'akuk no more.

But after that old Ottetail found a new place to dream and drum and have his sweat bath. That's a little island in Sabaskong Bay. There a thunderbird's nest on that island made of stones too big for a man to lift. That's where the old man went for his dreams. I guess the thunderbirds built it for him.

That nest is still there. I can show you the place. But nobody likes to go there. They're scared of them thunderbirds. ●

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Mr. Dewdney is a well published Canadian anthropologist, presently holding the post of a Research Associate at the Royal Ontario Museum.



A One Man Crusade for the Canadian Indian Artist

Recently returned from a three month teaching position with the Eastern Canadian Indians, West Coast artist, Mr. Robert Aller, has been giving a series of slide lectures to various organizations on his experiences with the Algonquin children at Golden Lake. Mr. Aller's own Indian Mask paintings were exhibited for the first time here, at the University of Victoria last year and were the subject of an MM feature issue.

Mr. Aller was engaged by the Ontario Department of Indian affairs to see what could be done about reviving native art among the Indians of Northern Ontario. Golden Lake was chosen as an experimental starting point. Some forty children were involved in a month-long informal art course, producing some 1,000 watercolour pictures, two hundred of which were later retained for public exhibitions.

In addition to this, included in the display, were a number of sculptures, chiefly plaster of paris casts of sand and clay moulds. The results, as demonstrated by the pictures shown here, were executed by children between the ages of two and seven. Even Mr. Aller admitted that he was more than surprised. He said that they were "much happier artists than those on the West Coast or the Prairies," where he had taught Indian Children before. "There is not a mournful painting there, and they mixed

more brilliant colours than the children at Port Alberni, B.C. or Dauphin, Alberta. He added that he blamed the sadness of the Indian children in the West to the fact that they are away from their homes and parents, boarding in schools 10 months of the year.

Both members of the Department of Indian Affairs and the National Art Gallery in Ottawa, which has requested his collection of Indian Child paintings for their permanent collection, were amazed at the success of the experiment; especially as many of the better young artists had never seen a real painting before.

When asked about his teaching techniques Mr. Aller replied that he does not teach it. "I believe that you cannot teach art, to Indian children at least; it is inherent in them, it is inherent in their customs, their culture, their way of life. Given the opportunity and the freedom it will express itself naturally. My method is only one of encouragement. One never says no, or "that is not the way it is done," but rather by making suggestions or demonstrating the children will pick up the method and apply it to their own pick in their own way.

The Indian child is by nature happy and artistic, though perhaps a little shy, but these are the prime materials for anybody to work with when encouragin youngsters to paint. No one had to attend classes, some brought younger

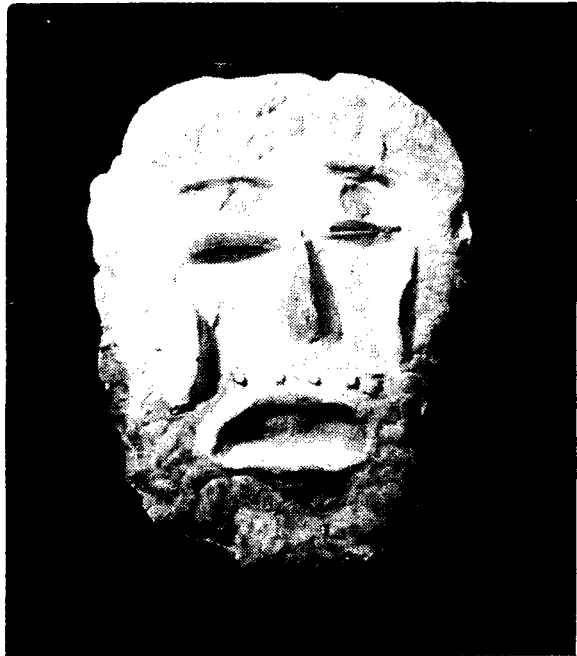


brothers and sisters to baby-sit while they painted; they were always free to break off when they liked or to go for a swim. The atmosphere was always relaxed and there was never any pressure of any kind. The children painted on the floor and of course the younger ones who couldn't reach across the paper got really involved by crawling onto it to fill in the areas they couldn't reach. One small girl only two years old spent hours on end painting in this manner. When I exhibited some of her paintings people wouldn't believe her age, let alone the technique.

"This type of involvement, in various forms is essential. One very young child used to taste the colours before she applied them. I suppose any normal kindergarten teacher would have immediately thrown a fit. Poster paints are not harmful, and although I wouldn't recommend this sort of thing, there didn't seem to be any justifiable reason to stop her. Some of her paintings were also exhibited.

"Of course to start them off some kind of essential inspiration is usually necessary, and always very helpful. This I managed by starting off the day or the session with a film or some slides. For the most part we painted indoors, and as the paintings were produced we covered the walls of the room with them. The result of course was a very stimulating environment.

"I also took them on a tour of the National Gallery at Ottawa. This proved rather a unique experience. They were fascinated by the stylized landscapes of Lorne Harris. They didn't even bother looking at the others in the Group of Seven, and the old master's works they took for granted as part of the wallpaper."



The examples shown here not being in colour is a definite drawback to a full appreciation of the work of these youngsters. In comparison to the art of most white children their art is not linear nor does it suffer from a somewhat economical use of colour. Mr. Aller noted that they work by filling in areas with colour. "They showed no fear concerning experimenting with colour; their colours are rarely pure; but what is more surprising was their intuitive colour sense," he said.

This is most evident by the paintings themselves which show an extraordinary use of complimentary and associated colour combinations. While west coast Indian children tend toward more sombre colours, these paintings are bright, intense, and very sharp. The sculptures are interesting both in their strangeness of texture and in a somewhat realistic use of expression.

Mr. Aller has been asked to return next summer to Golden Lake, but will probably be commuting between there and the Iroquois Nations at the head of the Lakes. Despite his obvious successes in the East he suggested that it would be much better for the Indians to eventually get one of their own people or at least somebody from the East to do this type of work. This would be more convenient he said, and also better for the Indians themselves.

Mr. Aller, as his activities in this field show, is very concerned with the state of Indian Art in Canada today. "With the eventual assimilation of the Indian into white society," he said, "native Indian art has a limited active life." The most we can hope to do is to get as much out of this generation as we can. This, he added, is not being done. "Only two often Indian learn art today in white schools by insensitive white teachers which our insensitive system of education produces. Their own natural and full-bodied, and expressive style is suppressed by the generally sterile one of the white children." Our whole social system suppresses the Indian and with the eventual death of this culture will also come the end of a very distinctive and original kind of art." ●

page review

ACCIDENT: A Tale of Man Growing Old

a review of the film, *Accident*, by Barbara Trotier

"*Accident*" denotes a newer, starker technique in film-making; it is joined in this context, perhaps, by such forerunners as "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "The Servant," all of which tend to introduce to the movie-goer an isolated, often vicious segment of human experience, instead of one of those sickly, star-spangled fairy stories that used to catapult us into our Saturday night beds feeling that maybe we had missed out somewhere after all. "*Accident*" isn't a pleasure: it's a sort of screwy, quasi-intellectual grind that demands an unusual measure of abject concentration that, frankly, I am not willing to muster, on a quiet, hopefully frivolous Saturday evening. But the fact that Harold Pinter wrote the screenplay will probably encourage some people to see it out of interest; if that's the case, make a point of going — he produces the goods. "*Accident*" is slathered in allusions, most of them erotic, one of the most nerve-trying being the constant whine of airborne jets, that overlays the story and particularly the dialogue with a somewhat tedious, glaring tension. When emerging from the theatre, I could hear every dog whistle for miles.

Set in the verdant, intellectual hive of Oxford town, the story, as advertised, involves a love triangle, but, I think a lot more. Essentially, it is

a tale of men growing old. Dirk Bogarde is growing old. So is his friend Charley, who, it turns out, isn't such a great friend after all. The youth are represented by two of Bogarde's pupils, a couple of lush, rather accomplished, rather pampered aristocrats. Bogarde sets out to prove he can still swing, and, ultimately, he can't. The pupil, Anna, is his passion, also Charley's passion; technically, she belongs to the young William, but one of the most notable aspects of the film is that Anna doesn't stick to technicalities. The remaining characters figure chiefly as background; Bogarde's wife, a faithful, cynical, very pregnant rock-of-ages, his children, his dour, sick associates of the university. So the story is played out, ending in a car accident that delivers death to William, escape to Anna — as cool, as beautiful, and as bitchy as at the beginning — and continuing frustration to Bogarde, who returns, empty-handed, to his familiar and scholarly duties, an unwilling, defenceless fool. His wife takes him back without condemnation; it is difficult to predict whether or not a character such as Bogarde played will "break out" again, but it is safe to say that he would keep things under cover until the last minute. Then, who knows? He might yet get his middle-aged kicks. ●



Belated JUNCTION 21, Academic but Worthy

The long awaited appearance of JUNCTION 21, when it finally made its debut, a little less than a month and a half late, came somewhat as an anticlimax. Despite its failings, however, (and it has many), it is a pleasure to find once again a publication in the *Centurion*, Tryste tradition making the campus scene.

Generally, the content seems to verify the etymology of the name, but the fact that all but one article, the short story, are the works of faculty members suggests perhaps that the A.M.S. is subsidizing a forum for academic exercises. (Anyone remember the "publish or perish" clause?)

The economy of subject matter is to a large degree compensated for by quality and though "Round and Round the Mulberry Square" smacks of McLuhanistic name dropping, and the review of "Adaptive Radiation of the Nose" tends to get hung up in esoteric technical verbosity, they are well worth reading as interesting exercises in style and form, coupled with the insight which only authors extremely familiar with their respective fields could produce. Littleton's death knell of the hippie era proves an interesting and extensively researched essay which the Gore photography not only illuminates but gives immediacy to the story through local and contemporary scenery.

Humour seems to be at a premium throughout the entire publication, and if the poetry of Skelton was omitted, wit would be entirely lack-

ing. Indeed, these eight poems comprise the most delightful reading of *Junction*; — light, witty and 'gaie,' they add that needed pique to what could otherwise be a rather 'academic' compilation.

The quality of the subject matter is, unfortunately, to a large degree degraded by the layout, about which the editors exhibit a considerable lack of knowledge. The selection of photographic illustration rather than graphic (the one Metcalfe graphic is poorly reproduced) was disappointing, not that the photography was bad, but rather that it was used a little too heavily. We all must suffer through ads, but indeed—these seemed to clutter the pages, consume and overpower the text and illustration, as well as exhibit a most astounding and distracting agglomeration of type faces. Indeed, many of them were simply just bad taste. A few more illustrations and a few less gaudy ads would improve considerably the overall graphic texture.

Perhaps the loudest criticism was that people expected just a little more in sixteen pages than a selection of five articles, to be sure — interdisciplinary in scope — but rather compact in bulk.

These criticisms, though, are minor when seen in the context of the literary situation on campus which on the part of the students seems to indicate a general creative poverty. Now established, JUNCTION 21 shows the promise of being this year's "worthy" publication. ● MM.

two poems by sandi hutchison

I

so say
 we have a room
 not square
 not even womb
 like but gently
 planed or
 painted
 and because of our
 insistence on the
 presence of the
 room
 we drain it of
 the only true
 dimension
 that says less
 than any room
 it might
 contain.



II

as so often
 with arbutus
 moving to the print,
 the trunk
 jealously
 feels and bares its
 orange skin—
 a smooth returning
 in the swell of
 flute and pipe
 a former green
 dark oaten flocks
 the antic hunt
 for nymph fruits
 in the soft dewed grasses.

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 MAG box in The Martlet office in the SUB.
 MM's office is located in Office 12, J Hut.

LETTERS

The Editor,
Sir:

For the benefit of the benighted few who think that contributors to your pages write their own headlines, I should like to dissociate myself from your description of *Bonnie and Clyde* last week as "A Ritual in Bloodletting Obscenity."

Apart from grammatical considerations (couldn't you at least have headed my review "Obscenity in a Bloodletting Ritual" or "Bloodletting in an Obscene Ritual"?), I think that I have a legitimate grievance on semantic grounds.

My comment that "B.C.'s censors, apparently, recognize only one form of obscenity" was not intended to imply that the film is obscene and hence condemnable.

I had hoped that in context the meaning would be clear. Censors rally to the barricades at the first complaint that too much flesh is quivering across the screen, but they often ignore any watch-and-warders who object to a lip-licking display of violence.

Some episodes in *Bonnie and Clyde* are obscene, just as wholesale slaughter anywhere is obscene. The film is ritualistic in parts, as a cartoon strip is ritualistic. These elements are used with others to make a point — that man, unlikely Mickey Mouse, is mortal.

The "point" is hardly worth making in a simple statement. It is worthy manifesting, though, in a work of art. *Bonnie and Clyde* shows how far the cinematic art can reach.

David Dunsmuir,
Graduate Studies.

The Editor,
Sir:

Re: On Anon, "Scientific Responsibility." While I found this article to be fairly fair and felt that the writer's idea about the responsibility of the Humanists controlling the scientists was a good point, I still feel that this scientist was dodging the question of personal responsibility. It brought to mind some lines from a song by Tom Lehrer:

"Once the rockets are up
 Who cares where they come down.
 That's not my department
 Says Wernher von Braun."

Dave Hooper,
Arts I.

Dear "O. Ren,"

Our "student concert" of November 15th comprised students of Music 152 (Instrumental Ensemble), for the most part playing their second and third instruments. Thus, this concert — intended as a family affair for the Music Division — was in no way representative of the best efforts of our music students.

My wisdom, which you questioned, lay in encouraging these people to perform together and before their colleagues. Had we intended this to be a Campus Event worthy of your attention, we should have used Education/Arts Auditorium 144 and presented a different programme on different media. True, we advertised the occasion in the Music Division and admitted a few outsiders. This we shall refrain from doing in future.

I assume you wish to remain anonymous, however, and am sorry about this since anonymous *ex cathedra* criticism is becoming increasingly rare today.

Dr. G. M. Hendrie,
Chairman,
Division of Music,
School of Fine Arts.