

On Navigation, Mythology, and Dirt

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Andrea's voice crackled over the I-COM radio: "It's too goddamn steep across this gully, I'm going to take a detour around the top of the ridge. I might have to miss a few samples". Our crew boss radioed back, assuring her that safety was more important than finishing the job. Five minutes later, I encountered Andrea as she climbed out from between two rock outcrops, approaching the top of the ridge and moving closer to where I was working. She saw me and we waved at one another. A moment later she was moving again, descending to a series of rock ledges upon the cliff face, trying to get back on track so that she could finish her day.

This drama was playing out in the front ranges of the Wernecke Mountains, located, according to my GPS, one hundred and forty eight kilometres from the nearest town. That town was Mayo, a community of a couple hundred people close to the geographic centre of the Yukon Territory. In the distance lying between Mayo and the Wernecke Mountains there are few markers of human habitation: several hunting lodges, one or two rough bush roads, and an abandoned mine. The area's remoteness was defined by the hour-long helicopter trip required to reach it. This journey took us over craggy mountain peaks, across alpine valleys, over boggy muskeg swamps, and up silty rivers until they dwindled at their source. One's imagination of what wilderness might look like could scarcely place them further than this landscape.



My work in this area involved collecting soil samples for mining companies looking to establish hard-rock operations. Hard-rock refers to extracting a precious metal directly off its vein, rather than looking for it in riverbeds and streams. Extracting gold from a river is called placer mining, which involves removing gold that has eroded off the source vein and was deposited by running water. Placer mining was the method used during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1896. This rush, the largest in world history, saw thousands of miners travel to Dawson City in the Yukon, desperately seeking their fortune. The event was definitive in the founding of the territory itself, and its echoes resound in the threads of mythology that stretch into the present day.

The desire for wealth and glory is as strong now as it was then. Alongside a crew of four others, I would travel to remote areas of the territory where the presence of precious metals, in the form of gold or silver, had been detected. Points were laid out across a geographical area in a computer, which were then fed into a GPS. The soil sampler would start at one point and work, in a straight line, towards another. Moving between the points was called "doing a line". This would normally be a distance of one point five kilometres, involving the production of between thirty-one and thirty-four soil samples, one every fifty metres. In this way, the land is subjected to geological understanding.

It should be noted that this process is not overly scientific. Although the act of soil sampling is rigidly systematic in its collection of data, many factors undermine its accuracy. In the end, the data may only be used to lure potential investors. Contrasting this notion of soil sampling being a pretentious, pseudo-scientific enterprise is the colloquial name for the job: dirtbagging. After all, what can be more real than putting dirt in a bag?

The areas placed under scrutiny by mining companies are called properties, and are given code names. One hundred and forty-eight kilometres outside of Mayo, the property that we were working on was named the DAL. The signature landform on the DAL was a craggy, steep mountain; many of the lines we worked ran up and over cliff faces. This was where Andrea had run into some trouble, as the terrain was dangerous and it seemed silly to risk one's neck over a few bags of dirt.

The continental divide, running along the spine of the Wernecke Mountains, splits the DAL property in half. On one side are the headwaters of the Wind River, which feeds into the Peel, which in turn feeds into the Mackenzie, winding its way up to the Arctic Ocean. On the other side of the divide is the Nadaleen River, which joins the Stewart, and then the Yukon, flowing past the Klondike

gold fields, through the state of Alaska, emptying into the Pacific. This area is divided not only between drainage basins, but also between the historical and contemporary within territories of the imagination. The writer Jack London mentions this region within his novel *The Call of the Wild*:

But no living man had looted this treasure house, and the dead were dead; wherefore John Thornton and Pete and Hans, with Buck and half a dozen other dogs, faced into the East on an un-known trail to achieve where men and dogs as good as themselves had failed. They sledged seventy miles up the Yukon, swung to the left into the Stewart River, passed the Mayo and the McQuestion, and held on until the Stewart itself became a streamlet, threading the upstanding peaks which marked the backbone of the continent.

There are borders drawn up between the past and the present. These borders separate not only ideas of now and then, but also individuals, cultures and worldviews. To cross the border in a meaningful way means to listen for not only the echoes of the past within the present, but also for the echoes of the present within the past. Time may be linear, but it is also cyclical: what is happening now is also happening one hundred and ten years ago, across the planes of history and mythology.

The Call of the Wild was written in 1903 but remains popular into the modern day, where its themes of survival and a return to nature continue to captivate readers. The public responds to the novel's idea of exploration, traversing an empty land which is unknown, uninhabited and unspoiled. The history of such a land is of ghosts; those who were there before, whether indigenous peoples or failed prospectors, are gone, leaving behind only trace and echo.

Within the collective consciousness of a population living in countries whose history is defined by acts of European-initiated exploration, there exists a reverence for the early explorer. This individual was regarded as a hero and a founder, as evidenced by the memorial statue dedicated to Captain James Cook in Victoria, Australia, and an equestrian monument of Francisco Pizarro in Lima, Peru. In most cases, this explorer was the first white man to view and walk upon the land, placing what was formerly wild and savage under his heel. Thus, the perspective is heavily problematic. Besides being racist and sexist, it advocates for the subjugation of the natural world. The writer Joy Nelson touches on these issues in her essay *Speaking the Unspeakable*:

It is no accident that the so-called Age of Enlightenment, which began in the 16th century, coincided with the onset of the slave trade, the plundering and decimation of indigenous peoples of the New World, and the centuries of witch burnings. A zeitgeist which posits light-male-mind-spirit on the side of God, and dark-female-body-matter on the side of the Devil, can easily perceive the “other” as not human, “mere animal” or “devil”.

Early definitions of wilderness within Western culture reinforce this duality. Within the works of William Shakespeare, a wilderness is a “confusing multitude or mass” [8]. This definition would imply wilderness as an area requiring order, and humanity as the element that organizes and makes sense of the mass. In Matthew 4: 1-11, Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. In the eyes of early Christianity, Satan inhabited these places uncultivated by humankind.

Shifting the gaze back to the DAL property and the Wernecke Mountains, it is worthwhile to discuss Robert Campbell, who was an explorer and Hudson’s Bay Company employee. In the mid 1800s, he was one of the first Europeans to pass through the region. He traveled through what was to become the Yukon Territory starting in 1840, pushing up from the sixtieth parallel to Francis Lake, which he named for the wife of Hudson’s Bay Company governor George Simpson. Eight years later, Campbell established a trading post called Fort Selkirk at the confluence of the Pelly and Yukon Rivers. In one of his many expeditions across the interior of the territory, Campbell stumbled across the Stewart River, which he named for a friend at the Hudson’s Bay Company.

It can be seen that Campbell, as an explorer, was entirely devoted to his position of employment at the HBC. Within Canada, many of the mapping projects of the colonial era were carried out by the Company. In fact, one could argue that the Hudson’s Bay Company was instrumental in the founding of the modern Canadian nation-state. Between 1670 and 1870, the HBC owned the drainage basin of Hudson’s Bay, called Rupert’s Land, under a royal charter from the British crown. During this time, the Company established many fur trading posts that went on to become settlements, as far apart as Fort Nelson and Fort Albany. It’s funny to think that what today is a department store in a shopping mall once called the better part of the Canadian landmass its property.

When looking to the HBC as some kind of founding father of Canadian national identity, it is important to realize that the company was, and still remains, an entity whose chief goal is the creation of profits. Its story is seen to be one of seeking capital gain through domination as the Company

financed acts of exploration in order to increase revenue. There was domination over the land in the form of colonial expansion, and domination over indigenous peoples in both infringements upon their traditional territories and through unjust trading practices.

The modern-day navigator takes inspiration from explorers like Robert Campbell, but generally ignores or rejects the imperialist direction of these individuals. This new explorer aims to stand alone against the wilderness, armed, perhaps, with outdoor equipment bearing the North Face or Patagonia logos. The goal of this individual in traveling through areas considered wilderness is primarily to appreciate the sublime beauty of the natural world, the spectacle of seemingly unspoiled forests, mountains and streams. However, these travels begin to bear resemblance to the conquests made by early explorers. I expect that any modern-day explorer would be overjoyed to spend time in the Wernecke Mountains, bestowing names upon previously unknown geographic features. In an essay fittingly entitled *Wilderness Travel*, the writer John U. Bayly describes the desires of this latter-day explorer:

To be the first to chart the uncharted wilderness is an experience every explorer yearns for. To take back maps, however crudely drawn, and tales of places hitherto unknown has sustained many an arctic and subarctic traveler who has found himself weatherbound or lost on a windswept shore.

This idea of “firstness” is an issue that Bayly returns to several paragraphs later:

When one is exploring, the rules seem to be that it doesn't count if aboriginal people have previously discovered and used the country.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Wernecke mountains, like much of the land in Canada considered unspoiled wilderness, were traveled through by indigenous peoples for thousands of years prior to Robert Campbell's expeditions. Both the historical and modern-day explorers ignore the previous histories impressed upon the land in favour of conquest and “firstness”.

Here can be found another border established between the historical and the contemporary: the modern-day explorer, although re-enacting history, is forced to admit that their role is

insignificant. The purpose of their travel is recreational, not commercial and imperial as was Robert Campbell's. The actions of the early explorer left a definitive mark upon both history and the land itself, as an area was subjected to the forces of colonization that some might call the founding of a nation. There is a gap then, between the past and the present, the significant and the insignificant, the imperial and the recreational. However, as I alluded to before, there are many ways that the past and present play into one another. Lines extend across the borders built between different time periods.

The soil sampler, or the dirt-bagger, is also known by a third name: the Exploration Field Technician. The title refers to mineral exploration, which has many of the characteristics of early exploration. Both practices rely on naming and data collection in order to subject the land to human use and consumption. In this manner, the land is abstracted into information, giving it direct use value. During early exploration, the data was primarily cartographic; an area was translated into a map that would then be used to develop settlements and trading posts. Mineral exploration also relies on cartography, but the main method of interpretation can be said to be geological. Soil samples collected on a property are processed in order to determine their mineral content, and the resulting data is sold to mining companies. Further down the road, a property may be developed, drilled, and mined.

On certain properties, there have been conflicts between the mining companies and First Nations bands over land title and ownership. These stories play out not only in the Yukon Territory, but across North America. In October of 2013, the Elsipogtog First Nation in New Brunswick began a series of protests against natural gas exploration being conducted in the area. On October 20th, an article on the protests was published in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper:

The protest against shale-gas exploration near the village of Rexton, N. B., took place as some aboriginal groups across the country are expressing frustration over being excluded from consultations, especially when it comes to resource development.

New Brunswick premier David Alward told The Globe and Mail his government is focused on responsible development of the province's natural resources and he's not backing away from shale-gas exploration. He met Friday with Elsipogtog Chief Arren Sock and said "it is important to continue dialogue" and to work to find the "path forward".

This “path forward” is somewhat unsettling, as it is being used in such close proximity to a discussion on resource exploration. In both the past and the present, the act of navigation is concerned with path-finding, moving forward through the land and seeking to understand it. The drive to understand, in early exploration, was tied to a desire for development, subjecting the land to human needs. This development came at the expense of the land’s ecology, or its original occupants. So was then, as is now: the industries of resource extraction continue to travel along tracks and trails opened up over the span of hundreds of years.

When Andrea moved along those steep cliff faces, attempting to return to her line and finish her day’s work, she was moving not only through the physical plane, but also through the strange terrain of time and history. Everything repeats itself; the broken spine of the wheel comes around again and again. Maybe it was for the best that Andrea missed more than ten samples that day. As my crew flew away from the DAL property and the Wernecke Mountains for the last time, I was left reflecting on how humanity places lines upon the natural world in order to categorize and understand. These lines may exist as methods of data collection, or they may be borders drawn up to produce order from chaos. They define the outwardly expanding form of civilization.

In my mind, those lonely mountain ranges stand unchanged, their steep cliff faces a physical barrier to the human subjection of the natural world. The remoteness of the area hinders road building and the encroachment of developers. Sometimes I am convinced that it is better not to understand, and I cannot help but smile when rocks become lodged in the wheels of progress.