



The Measure of a River

How is it that the Battle River can carry
the fragments of lived experience that have come to
constitute this place for me?

ESSAY BY ROGER EPP ∞ PAINTINGS BY MURRAY ALLEN

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth. . . . He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look upon it from as many angles as he can, to wonder upon it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.

—N. SCOTT MOMADAY

WESTERN CANADA IS CARVED BY RIVERS whose headwaters lie in mountain glaciers, whose reputations have been made by the furs borne on them, the cities built beside them, the electricity generated from them, or the distant ports reachable by them. The Battle River can claim none of this. Flowing from a small lake in the west-central Alberta parkland, and eventually into an oversized valley, whose broad floor it can only occupy respectably with looping oxbows, the river relies on whatever rain trickles down a thousand creeks to sustain itself after spring run-off. It figures in no great exploration narratives. While Anthony Henday in 1754 is thought to have been the first European to set eyes on the river and to travel west along its valley, he did so on foot. Having professed in his journals that “I cannot describe...the pleasant country I am now in,” he gave such little account of its features that his turn-of-the-century editor judged his route to have been far to the south.

The Battle likewise has no significant commercial history. A Blackfoot map sketched for fur traders appears to give it the discouraging name “snake.” The first wave of ranch and homestead settlement east of the railroad station at Wetaskiwin did follow the river, on which, unfathomably, in the most literal sense, lumber and dry goods were floated downstream and passengers could travel on a 30-foot steamboat. But those first settlement villages—Duhamel, Heather Brae, Ferry Point—were soon bypassed in the railroad boom. They are now historical-site cairns. Indeed, the Battle runs through few towns before it joins the North Saskatchewan some 650 twisting kilometres from its source, surely the slowest feeder river in the great basin that drains into Hudson’s Bay. Any canoeist knows as much, having struggled even once with its serpentine form, its beaver dams, and its shallows, to meet what turn out to be wildly optimistic projections of arrival time.

In other words, the Battle is insignificant by measures that judge a river by where it is going and by its power and sweep in getting there. Its appeal is not linear at all. Like the Jordan, it is a river defined by what it separates and what it joins, by what life it draws to itself and what life it releases.

TO LOOK UPON THE BATTLE RIVER from the angle of the water itself, from a canoe, is to imagine that you are the first to come this way, having found a secret passage through a familiar place.

It is to stop paddling while a deer swims across the river in front of your bow and emerges, thin and muscular, to climb the opposite bank.

It is to learn the lie in hardened dichotomies like wild and domesticated: watching coyotes weave through a herd of cattle grazing in the flats; or tracing the eastward spread of maples from the abandoned farm around which evidently they were first planted.

It is to understand why the Cree word for river, *sipi*, is an animate noun.

It is to collect a Chauceresque pilgrimage of ducks, shorebirds, even a hawk. It is to be entertained—distracted?—by orange-tufted grebes skittering left-right-left across your path as if on the two-dimensional track of a carnival shooting gallery.

It is to accept the leadership of a heron, perhaps several, waiting stick-like around every bend, unfolding angular, prehistoric wings to keep a comfortable distance and lift mockingly over the narrows of an oxbow that will take twenty minutes to paddle. It is to glimpse a heron rookery in the tops of the tallest aspens.

It is to wonder at nature’s diversity: pockets of spruce, cactus-studded badlands and, on the sun-facing side, grass thin as threadbare cloth through which pale brown knees shine.

It is to skim the bacterial progeny of cattle manure.

To look upon the Battle River from the angle of the water itself, from a canoe, is unforgettably to join forces with my son the summer I turned 40, when he was 13, for a trip that began with an owl’s smooth christening and surprisingly easy talk about important things—careers, religion, the school year just ahead—all of it silenced by the slow realization that this would take more time and concentrated paddling than we had planned. It is to steer around deadfall, to find the gap in a beaver dam, to duck fence-line, to judge the depth of a stony patch, to form a habit of watchful steering so disciplined it continues into sleep that night.



Battle River Country, 1998, 15" x 22", watercolour, from an exhibition at the Candler Gallery, Camrose, May 1999.

WALKING AWAY FROM THE RIVER, we catch a doe in the open with a fawn that cannot be more than a week old. The fawn struggles to stand on new legs, then collapses, as if injured. We are within 200 feet. I have a firm grip on the dog, who, for once, doesn't notice a thing. But the doe has seen us. She implores the fawn to follow to the safety of hillside brush. She makes a two-step start, turns back, starts, turns back, each time with greater urgency, until the fawn is coaxed forward for a short advance. The doe resumes her pleading. It takes several tense minutes for doe and fawn to complete their arc around us and disappear.

Somewhere in this encounter is a lesson about grace, and danger, and how little stands between them. Or there is grace itself, a gift, which looks like danger from the other side.

KAHKEWAK—DRIED MEAT HILL—is one of those subtle surprises that confound conventional notions of prairie. Approached from the north, a dirt road overhung with trees rises unassumingly before opening to a panorama of sky, fields, and a long lake bending to the west and south, where the river is pinched and then widens across the valley. This view alone holds your attention for a long time, like a complex painting in which, even looking away, you see something new and are drawn back. But the hilltop beckoning beyond a fence surpasses it with a clean curve of horizon in every direction.

This hill is where I have come to understand physically

where is here, to face the sun, to revel in the wildness of a coyote den, and to impress mountain-bound British Columbians with the elongated shadows of sunset.

This hill is where I have come with university classes; for it is easier and more powerful to talk about treaty-making with an eyeful of land. For the same reason, local people commemorated the Treaty 6 centennial in 1976 with a re-enactment on this hill, to which they invited representatives of the Cree communities around Hobbema, not far upstream on the Battle—people who are connected by the same treaty-making story, but who are, in the way the river also separates, worlds apart in everyday life.

This hill was a crucial site in the buffalo economy. It was used for drying meat to be mixed with local berries for pemmican. It was a strategic lookout, too, part of a chain of high points along which signals could be relayed. Cree migration into Blackfoot territory and conflict over buffalo and access to Fort Edmonton made a border region out of a long stretch of the Battle—east to the Neutral Hills—and gave the river its name. Not far from here, the black-robed Father Lacombe made his famous foray into a cloud of bullets to plead for peace during a Cree attack on Blackfoot lodges.

In the sea change of settlement, Cree names for hill and river passed awkwardly into English. The first settlers who picnicked at the hill recall bleached buffalo bones knee-deep around the base—cleaned up, no doubt, by scav-

engers selling to American fertilizer factories. By 1903, the hill was the site of a dance hall, which was dismantled a dozen years later for lumber to build a barn. It has served since as pasture and gravel pit. A fresh sign posted last spring on a fenceline stretched tight spelled out its present status: THIS GRAVEL PIT IS THE PROPERTY OF THE ALBERTA GOVERNMENT. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

This hill is where I came with my father at the end of a drive through the country, when Parkinson's and arthritis had slowed his step and curved his spine. I guided him through the fence the way he must once have showed me—step down on one strand, pull up on the one above, slide a hand on his unsteady back to protect him from barbs. We climbed past the buffalo beans and the dragonflies thick and blue as cornflowers on the hillside. Why? Not just to show him an eyeful of land, but to let him see for himself what I'd become, who I was, how I was at home.

To invest oneself anywhere in the world is to live with the possibility it will be lost.

FOR TWO WEEKS IN OCTOBER the harvested fields between the southern rim of Camrose and the river are a staging area for migrating Canada geese. The evening skies are noisy with geese swirling in formation, "Vs" unfurling like large ribbons, maybe 20 swirls or more visible at a time, landing, foraging, taking off, building strength. And then one evening, unpredictably, just as their presence had become a familiar part of the landscape, they are gone; the novelty of silence does not register at first.

The geese are gone, and we are left to face the winter.

IN THE LONG INTERVAL BETWEEN HARVEST and spring thaw, which is to say at least six months of the year, the field that is just one block west and across the ring-road from our house is walkable. This pleases our dog, though she is less fussy about the coarse, high cut of canola scratching at her underside than she is about wheat stubble. Packed snow is best of all. She came from a farm near the river: part golden retriever, part terrier, lesser parts unknown. In the field she is unfailingly alert, running ragged, nose down, following a track, expecting something.

The field rewards human attentiveness, too, to light, colour, and the grade of the land, though on one side stand the commercial markers of everyplace: a mall, a McDonald's and, soon, Wal-Mart. On the other is the distinct, blue-haze line of hills across the river. To look towards the river is to accept that discovery comes slowly. About colour, for example. About how fleeting are the greens. About how quickly in fall they are purified into blues and yellows. Those primary colours dominate even in mid-summer in the play of canola flowers on a pale sky. Left to themselves in September, they brighten each

other, so that a slough is never so blue and the aspen leaves around it are almost afire. In winter, angled sunlight makes waves of blue shadow on a snow-covered field and turns protruding yellow stubble soft as mohair. In winter, too, pink smudges the southern horizon in mid-afternoon, and a mirage turns the hills south beyond the river and north, along the Miquelon Lakes escarpment, into speckled arborite counter-tops rounded up against a kitchen wall.

"It is only in the place that one belongs to, intimate and familiar, long watched over," writes Wendell Berry, "that the details rise up out of the whole and become visible."

Indifferent to, or contemptuous of, or afraid to commit ourselves to, our physical and social surroundings, always hopeful of something better, hooked on change, a lot of us have never stayed in one place long enough to learn it, or have learned it only to leave it. —WALLACE STEGNER

ONE OF THE ENDURING ATTRACTIONS of our suburban bungalow is the line of tall old aspens behind our lot, curiously preserved from development. The trees have grown in around a Grand Trunk Pacific rail bed cutting diagonally across the township grid to what was, in 1910, a wooden trestle bridge across the Battle River valley—the largest in the British Empire, perhaps the world.

You can see that tree line from the air. Or you can walk it. Not that the walking is easy. There is no gravel trail like the so-called "linear parks" being built on recently abandoned rail beds. There is no path at all. The trees are the only guide, which means threading between them, ducking electric fences where landowners have annexed this strip of pasture, or, where the trees flare out, doubling back after following the wrong side through an overnight deer-bed into a slough. At the rim of the valley, where the tree line disappears, bushwacking through gullies is the only option.

A friend and I took more than four hours to arrive at the valley bottom, near the spot in the river where bridge pilings are still visible: 10 across, 80 feet wide, at the base. The bridge was built in a spendthrift era using four million board-feet of foot-square B.C. timbers, hauled from the train in Camrose by exhausted farm horses, and set on pilings driven deep into the ground. The bridge was almost 4,000 feet long, with a wide bend at the north end that unnerved passengers when the once-a-day train between Edmonton and Mirror leaned into it. The bridge was a famed engineering marvel, though vulnerable to fire (a local man walked it after each train to check for sparks) and, above all, to the GTP's precarious financial position. It was a costly redundancy when the company was folded into Canadian National; it was dismantled in 1924 and the timbers sold off.

The small slice of valley where the bridge crossed repre-

sents a rich confluence of cultures and a reminder of the provisionality of all of them—indeed, of all human work. Within half a century, it was witness to the construction and dismantling of a bridge and, before it, a clapboard town; to cattle ranching's brief heyday; and to what local histories describe as the last Cree sun dance in which "torture was used"—this in about 1892, on the north rim, where officers of the North-West Mounted Police arrived from Fort Saskatchewan to break it up.

Before that, this slice of valley was witness to a flourishing Métis settlement, surveyed in river lots. Part of the Red River diaspora of the 1870s, Métis families bridged old and new prairie economies. They were the area's first cultivators and merchants. But they were also buffalo hunters and ox-cart freighters. Hunters returned to this settlement with meat from the last big hunt on the central Alberta plains, and freighters returned each fall from Fort Garry in noisy caravans, staggered in order to minimize ruts, loaded with supplies to be exchanged for furs. In the aftermath of the 1885 rebellion at Batoche and the displacement of freighters by the railway, however, the population dwindled. Métis surnames like Laboucane, Salois, and Dumont have no local presence except in the cemetery of the church built in the early 1880s. Cart tracks can still be found in the valley. And the land is still divided into the long, narrow lots on either side of the river.

One October afternoon I came to the flats with two busloads of Grade 3 students to find the bridge pilings. The idea was to study local history in a place where it could be visualized. Our group was joined by the grandmother of one of the students, who had married into an old ranch family in that part of the valley. She told how children a generation before her had climbed and walked atop the trestle bridge. Then she took us to the bench halfway up the north slope on which a Belgian engineer-entrepreneur had built a ranch house complete with imported marble for the fireplace. She passed around a picture of the house, in which she had lived until it burned in the early 1950s.

The children fidgeted through the storytelling, hers and mine, and seemed unimpressed by the bridge pilings. They were impatient to play in the hills.

One wide-eyed girl later declared this was her first trip out of Camrose to the country.

The world is full of places. Why is it that I am here?

—WENDELL BERRY

ALMOST A DECADE AGO, our family returned to the Saskatchewan River watershed in which I have lived most of my life, though this time to a small city, a small university, and a tributary I did not know. I carried a Ph.D. from a top-notch Ontario university, and with it the unspoken disappointment of professors who expected

I would land something better, even in a tough job market. One of them mused that everyone should spend a couple of years in the hinterlands before returning to the centre. Still here after five years, my forays into the countryside had become more deliberate. They could easily be interpreted as an admission of defeat, a coming-to-terms with the narrowing of prospects, a small-town boy's defiance of the metropolitan snobbishness of his academic guild, or perhaps a mid-life release of restless ambition for the safer waters of belonging. There is enough truth in each of these explanations to call them to mind. Since childhood I have known the unsatisfied pulls of ambition and belonging; and if I seem to tilt now towards the latter, I do so recognizing them not as rivals—a choice of standing out or fitting in—but as different expressions of the same human aspiration to be remembered, to be saved from obscurity at death.

A place can exert its own influence, but the times are against it. In the global village, linked by computers and mobile capital, we are told that place is inconsequential. Locality is condemned with faint praise to a pedestal from which it cannot disrupt the consumption of name-brand culture. Why indeed?

From the intellectual hinterland of western Montana, Albert Borgmann writes that, against the technology-driven, "glamorously unreal," "virtual," and hyperactive frenzy of a society in which we are made sullen, disposable, less mindful and less connected to our place in the world, we must recover a "world of eloquent things"—whether wilderness or human artistry or communal celebrations—that "may speak to us in their own right."

Eloquent things; real, humbling things. A heron rookery. A fawn in an open field. The commanding presence of a hill. The departure of geese. The remains of a trestle bridge. A pink smudge above the horizon. The ancient singing and drumming of a pow-wow. The feel of the bones in Cree hand-games. The familiar banter around a softball diamond at Edberg, with its spectacularly distracting view from the first-base coaching box. Harvest season. The hospitality of farm people on both sides of the river from Gwynne to Paradise Valley. This world of eloquent things is not easily or instantly won. Borgmann writes that it requires us to "[settle] down in the land that has come to be ours, to give up the restless search for a hyper-real elsewhere, and to come to terms with nature and tradition in a patient and vigorous way."

Why is it that I am here? Where is here? What does it mean to dwell here, in the sense that the German philosopher Martin Heidegger meant when, in one of his less obscure lectures, he peeled back layers of language to an ancient understanding of preserving and staying-with at the core of that word? What attentiveness does dwelling entail? What inherited obligations? What does it mean, in particular, to be a fourth-generation settler on Treaty 6

land, one who feels obliged to mediate respectfully between the settler and Cree worlds that in this place are separated—and joined—by a river? What needs preserving and staying-with?

How is it that a river can collect and carry along the disjointed fragments of lived experience, solitary and communal, that have come to constitute this place for me?

What is it to know a river?

ON WHAT TURNED OUT TO BE the last warm day of September, sign or no sign, I returned with a class to the commanding presence of Dried Meat Hill. My expectations, as always, were high. We sat cross-legged in a circle at the top above a patchwork world of primary colours: blues, yellows, the red leaves of berry bushes. Harvest was in full swing in every direction. Again, I told the story of the signing of Treaty 6 at Fort Pitt on the North Saskatchewan, though it was easy to imagine the lodges erected at the base of this hill that day. At one point I looked up to see, in the clump of trees just beyond our circle, a large bird against a dead branch, its shape at first indistinct, then clearly that of a giant pileated woodpecker, almost two feet tall; until I could confirm it later, I was unsure that a woodpecker could be that size.

But that was not all that happened on the hill that morning. A middle-aged aboriginal student, a woman,

who had sat apart from the circle, facing east, came back down with tears in her eyes and gratitude in her voice. Somehow, she said, the anger she had carried a long time was gone. Days later, she ventured that “the grandfathers were there on the hill” whispering words of consolation.

The possibility of a world of eloquent things capable of speaking does not seem at all far-fetched along the Battle River. Meandering as it does at the geographic margins of human utility and consumption, in a prosperous, increasingly urban Alberta, it sustains such real counter-possibilities for those who approach with patience and vigour, senses alert, expecting to be surprised.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT: *A good rag sheet is a challenge. A painting is a tactical problem: a field for a battle between an artist and his medium. The initial exciting rushes may take an hour or so. Then I move on, each stroke of the brush determined by what is already there—designing, composing and inventing the painting as I go. From time to time, for several weeks or even months, I add a stroke or two, always striving for that elusive coherent image.*

Edmonton artist Murray Allen was raised in Banff and worked for many years as a landscape architect with Edmonton Parks and Recreation.



Fall Coming Along the Battle River, 1999, 22" x 30", watercolour, from an exhibition at the Candler Gallery, Camrose, May 1999.