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“Tricky Flin”: A Text/Game in Northern Manitoba

Abstract: This article examines how the mining city of Flin Flon, in northern Manitoba, was named after a character in a satirical science fiction novel titled *The Sunless City*. I describe how the novel was found in the wilderness and retell several versions of the story of how the ore body was discovered in 1915, which led to the founding of the community. As well, I discuss the controversy surrounding who really discovered the ore body. Turning to the novel, I provide some biographical information about its author, J. E. Preston Muddock, and examine several of the book's themes. Then I describe how the character of Flintabbatey Flonatin, the hero of *The Sunless City*, has been altered over the decades, in which the character has been changed from a Victorian era comic figure to a northern trickster-like figure. Briefly, I discuss what purpose this quirky story must have for the community.

In 1912 an Act of the Canadian Parliament increased the size of Manitoba by adding 178,100 square miles onto its northern region. This meant that Manitoba now had a huge area of northern rock, forest, and marshland to call its own. However, it didn't take very long for the idea to take hold that “new Manitoba was mineral country” (Hedman et al., 1). In turn, it didn't take very long for prospectors to begin making their way into this new region: “Filled with expectation and hope, they came to the mineral country which promised rich returns, as in past years the northland had provided plentifully to the trapper and fur trader” (Hedman et al., 1–2). And yet, as we know from those famous lines by Robert Service, “There are strange things done in the midnight sun/ By the men who moil for gold...” (Service, 16). And one of the stranger, or at least quirkier, stories of moiling for minerals in northern Manitoba, is the story of how the mining city of Flin Flon received its unusually alliterative name.

The story of how Flin Flon was named is probably best described as folklore or local legend. Like any local legend, there are several versions of the story, and a few of them have made it into print. One version runs as follows: Tom Creighton and several other prospectors were travelling through the boreal wilderness in 1914, when they happened to find an abandoned book by the Churchill River. The book was a paperback novel titled *The Sunless City*, first published in 1905, and written by a British author, J.E. Preston Muddock (Hedman, et al., 4; Sproxton, "Novels that Named a City," 137; Sproxton, *Phantom Lake*, 37). *The Sunless City* is the story of a grocery store proprietor with a penchant for science and exploration, Josiah Flintabbatey Flonatin (or Flin Flon, for short), who designs a fish-shaped submarine in order to explore Lake Avernus, a supposedly hellish, bottomless lake in the Rocky Mountains. After a harrowing trip through various underground rivers and caverns, he discovers a subterranean society where the people are monkey-like, with long, expressive tails; women have all the political power while men are merely their puppets; and gold is so common it's considered a base metal. Flin Flon's adventures in this underground world of "Esneston" ("Nonsense" backwards) follows the pattern of many Victorian-era novels in this vein, in which the society he witnesses in the centre of the earth is a kind of satirical mirror of the UK and the USA at the turn of the century. (For example, the women in Esneston, far from being demure "angels in the house" are sexually aggressive to the extent that "[n]o young male with any pretension to looks is safe from the designs of the girls" [Muddock, 159].) Eventually, Flin Flon escapes from the underground world with the help of his love interest, Princess "Yobmot" ("Tomboy" backwards), travelling on foot through a series of tunnels until he finds his way back to the earth's surface, re-emerging in California, about twenty miles from San Francisco.

The prospectors shared the book between them, but, according to the legend, none ever finished the novel: "Unfortunately, the concluding pages of the novel had been torn out and the prospectors hunkered down for the winter without knowing what happened to Flin." (Sproxton, *Phantom Lake*, 37). However, the prospectors didn't forget the story that they had read. And so, in the summer of 1915, when "they hit upon a rich showing of ore in a hollow near a small lake ... Tom Creighton supposedly remarked, 'That must be the hole where old Flin Flon came up and shook his gold dust laden whiskers, so what do you say if we call the discovery Flin Flon.'" (Sproxton, *Phantom Lake*, 37). In turn, that lake became known as Lake Flin Flon, which would later be emptied to make way for open-pit mining in 1928 and has now become a tailings pond (Sproxton, *Phantom*

Lake, 30). But the Flin Flon name would persist, ultimately attaching itself to the small mining city located north of the fifty-fourth parallel on the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border¹.

Another version of the story features Tom Creighton falling through the ice near the shore of a lake. When he built a fire to dry himself off and warm himself up, the fire melted the snow around the rocks. Something in the rocks glittered in the firelight, which turned out to be gold (Sproxton, *Phantom Lake*, 38). Yet another version of the story involves Tom Creighton discovering the ore while hunting a moose (Mochoruk, 217). But perhaps the most important difference between various versions of the story is the question who actually found the ore body that would later become the Flin Flon mine. Although Tom Creighton often receives the credit for the discovery, a hunter, trapper, and prospector named David Collins may have been the discoverer, as he may have guided Creighton and the other prospectors to the future mine site (Hedman, et al., 11; Mochoruk, 217). The historian Jim Mochoruk, in *Formidable Heritage: Manitoba's North and the Cost of Development, 1870–1930*, refers to this last version as “less romantic and probably more accurate” (217).

In *Phantom Lake: North of 54*, a memoir of growing up in Flin Flon, the poet Birk Sproxton remembered that there had once been a cairn set up as a historical marker on Highway 10, leading to Flin Flon, its plaque asserting that David Collins had been the discoverer of the Flin Flon mine. But upon revisiting his home town years later and looking for it, he found only a patch of grass overgrown with weeds. The cairn was gone (*Phantom Lake*, 39). One reason why Collins may have been edited out of so many versions of the story: he was Native. Creighton, on the other hand, filled the role of the white hero hacking his way through the northern wilderness. He has been described as a “man’s man,” who even in his old age remained “vigorous and adventuresome” (Hedman, et al., 22). Tellingly, the Flin Flon Historical Society admits that he was “the subject of many tall stories” (Hedman, et al., 22).

In turn, the discord between the various versions of the founding of Flin Flon may suggest something deeper than a “family squabble” (which is how Sproxton characterizes it in *Phantom Lake* [36]). Instead, it is indicative of that wider pattern of revision and erasure in many northern Canadian narratives, so that the Native voice and presence has been marginalized in order to make way for the stock-hero character who is invariably white. It should be noted, however, that Creighton did not make a fortune from the discovery. None of the prospectors became rich from the Flin Flon site: “The prospect was too large and much too complex for the discoverers

to manipulate, consequently they accepted the price offered to them and went on to other endeavours" (Hedman, et al., 24). The town next to Flin Flon, on the Saskatchewan side of the border, was named Creighton; this honour seems to be the only lasting reward Creighton received.

Then, of course, there is the discovery of the book which gave the site its peculiar name. Regardless of who found the ore body, regardless of who named the site, the name could have only come from *The Sunless City*, that undoubtedly weather-beaten, dog-eared book, supposedly found in the middle of the wilderness. That the lonely prospectors found a novel about a city of gold and women seems almost miraculous, so it's no wonder that they thought of the Flin Flon name as a kind of talisman, thus using it as the name of the future mine. In turn, we can easily imagine the prospectors as a kind of impromptu backwoods book club, sitting around the campfire at night, smoking, fending off mosquitoes, talking about *The Sunless City*. And we can ask ourselves, did they read it as an adventure story? A comedy? What did they make of its satirical jabs at the Victorian-era morality?² On the other hand, we could also ask what J. E. Preston Muddock thought of all this. However, it seems quite likely that Muddock never discovered that his creation had found new fame in the wilds of northern Canada. In fact, this episode would likely have been but a footnote in Muddock's life, a life which has all the ingredients of a sprawling Victorian novel.

J. E. Preston Muddock was born in England in 1843, and spent a considerable amount of time, especially in his earlier years, travelling. His father was employed by the East India Company, and Muddock lived in India as a teenager. Muddock made his way across the globe, visiting Australia, the United States, and Europe (Hands, 39; "J E P Muddock and Family"). By the late nineteenth century his travels eventually brought him to Canada, where he claimed he had "a delightful time, particularly in the Rockies." ("J E P Muddock and Family") He married several times, had eight children, and eventually took up residence in Dundee, Scotland. Here he wrote fiction with great success via the pseudonym Dick Donovan – clearly Muddock had a penchant for alliterative monikers – which was also the name of his star detective in a series of novels and short stories that rivaled Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes in popularity. Not unlike Flin Flon, the Donovan name would also escape the confines of the printed page: the hard-boiled tag "dicks" for detectives is supposedly traceable to Dick Donovan (Hands, 39). To add a touch of pathos to the story, Muddock died practically penniless, at 91 years of age, in 1934, with only 74 pounds left from the fortune he had made in his lifetime (Hands, 39; "J

E P Muddock and Family"). Had Muddock known about his character's re-birth, he might have been surprised by what became of his Flintabbatey Flonatin in a northern context.

In Muddock's novel, Flintabbatey Flonatin, Esq. is a buffoonish adventurer, a kind of ultra-Victorian, and thus is an instrument for satirizing the concerns of the era. Bald and bespectacled ("But then all intellectual men *are* bald," Muddock reminds us [4], and "clever men always do wear spectacles" [5]), Flin Flon does not enjoy conventional good looks:

When Nature constructed him she must have suddenly run short of materials, because she commenced a head that would have done credit to a giant in stature as well as intellect. But getting as far as the neck the old dame found apparently she had made a mistake, so finished him off hurriedly. From the neck downwards he was strangely disproportioned and very scanty (Muddock, 4).

Despite these shortcomings, "Flin was a great favourite with the softer sex" (10). And it is the "softer sex" that is Muddock's primary concern. By depicting the underground world of Esnesnon as a feminist dictatorship in which women rule "with an iron hand" (159), Muddock satirizes many of the fears surrounding the fin-de-siecle "Woman Question." As Flin Flon becomes familiar with the matriarchal customs of this new world, which include a "Society for the Protection of Men" as well as an Amazonian military, he is repeatedly distressed and disgusted. Muddock depicts this with broad slapstick humour; for example: a treasonous male is talked to death by two hundred women (263) or the female soldiers prefer to pull their enemy's hair rather than fire guns (266). Flin Flon leads a revolt against the women's tyranny, but it is doomed to fail and he runs for his life, fleeing back to the upper world. Yet, in the midst of this, Muddock gives his character enough leeway to become a romantic hero: Flin Flon falls in love with the Princess Yobmot and tries to take her with him when he flees Esnesnon (conveniently she dies on the journey to the upper world).

Muddock likely imagined that his readership would be seated in a comfortable drawing room in an urban setting, rather than sitting around a campfire surrounded by the dense boreal forest in which Creighton and his crew travelled. In turn, the hero of *The Sunless City* took on a new meaning in this new environment, a meaning which was undoubtedly a significant departure from what J. E. Preston Muddock had in mind. No longer a comedic buffoon, Flin Flon's character has been reinterpreted—

even rewritten—in this new northern context, so that he has become a kind of mercurial or protean trickster-figure.

The story of the discovery of both the book and the mine suggests a wonderfully quirky synchronicity. Even more curious, in the section of the novel that was supposedly missing, presumably ripped out—the last few pages after Flin Flon reemerges in the upper world—the first people that Flin Flon meets are, believe it or not, prospectors, digging for gold in the mountains. Just when the pages go missing, the required characters nevertheless show up all the same. In a sense, Creighton and company step into the novel, and Flintabbety Flonatin steps out. The Flin Flon-born poet, Birk Sproxton, in both his memoir and his poetry, has done much work to mythologize this instant, when Flin Flon steps out of *The Sunless City* and begins the community-building process³. According to Sproxton, Muddock's character is a kind of spirit—a kind of trickster figure—who steps into the world, radically transforming it. In his 1985 book of poetry *Headframe*, Sproxton (re)inscribes the town's genesis. No doubt playing on "In the beginning was the Word," Sproxton writes: "Flin was there before the town was" (90).

Maybe a long gestation means a long life – stories which are enduring (endearing) are a long time in the making, passing from mouth to mouth, on the tip of a tongue, the verge of speech. Flin knew this and refused to stay in his novel (the one he was born in). He slipped slowly out out of the book, stepped with one foot and then the other into the context (con games) of the great Manitoba mining adventure (90)

Sproxton's choice of words in the final line is instructive, reminding us that "the great Manitoba mining adventure" is a text, is a game, and that the text and game are prefixed by "con." This adventure obviously can't be taken at face value, as it requires interpretation (like any text), a spirit of playfulness (like any game), as well as the awareness that it may be a "con," the work of a trickster.

At the very least, Flin Flon's reappearance in northern Manitoba is "a kind of metonymic trick" (Sproxton, "Novels that Named a City," 138). According to Sproxton, it is a metonymic trick by which Flin Flon slips out of the novel he was born in to become the name of a place without a name. No place (ou-topia) becomes the good place (eu-topia). Flin Flon travels from mind-site to mine-site; Flin goes from noun to ground and town, all the while en route to fame and fortune, to re-noun (Sproxton, "Novels

that Named a City," 138). As Sproxton would later write in his memoir, *Phantom Lake*:

Clearly, Flin is a tricky fellow. You might suspect a character who has escaped from a novel and spread himself over the rocks of the Canadian Shield to play jokes on people. After all, his appearance ... suggests Flin found a method of frequent self-reproduction. First, he was a fictional character, then he became a lake, then a hole in the ground, then a mine, then a camp, then a town, and now a city ... (30).

Flintabbatey Flonatin has learned to "remake himself" (Sproxton, *Phantom Lake*, 149) in this northern context.

But Flin Flon "remaking himself" is more than just Sproxton waxing poetic. In a very real sense, the character—or his name, at least—has travelled from "mind-site to mine-site," and a lake, a mine, and a city have all been re-noun-ed/ re-noun-ed. The name seems synonymous with transformation, with a changing landscape, and with good fortune. The character of Flin Flon has altered over the years, as well. Not surprisingly the character has become a mascot for the city. Images of the character are ubiquitous throughout the community. The monuments that the city has erected in honour of their fictional namesake suggest a reinterpretation or rewriting of *The Sunless City*. One such image is a large statue next to the city's museum, based on a sketch of the character by the American cartoonist Al Capp (famous for his "Li'l Abner" strip)⁴. Birk Sproxton describes the statue in his memoir:

Capp's Flin Flon wears the paraphernalia of a prospector—a knapsack on his back, a pick in one hand, his other hand raised to shield his eyes as he peers over the rocky world around him. He wears spectacles. He wears a grin. A prospector inspecting the world through spectacles—obviously he is a man of vision, gleefully forward looking to the future (*Phantom Lake*, 28).

Flin Flon has been quietly refashioned from an explorer (who might more likely carry a sextant or compass) to a prospector (who would only naturally have a pick in hand). Interestingly, throughout the city, the mascot has been re-nicknamed "Flinty," a rockier-sounding name, more fitting for a mining town, and yet Muddock never once refers to his character as "Flinty." The novel's character has been revised by the community to fit the local needs of that community. No longer the buffoonish character

from a Victorian-era satire, Flin Flon, now known as Flinty, has become a roly-poly hero in a specifically northern context.

As any good story is “enduring (endearing),” the Flin Flon story has inspired other works. As is evident by now, the story provided plenty of grist for Birk Sproxtton’s mill. And among his Flin Flon writings, there is the essay, “Novels that Named a City: Fictional Pretexts of Flin Flon,” in which he cites two novels that provided the community with “a story before it was a city” (137). The first, of course, is *the Sunless City*; the other is Douglas Durkin’s *The Lobstick Trail: A Romance of Northern Canada*. This novel, published in 1921, is set mainly in The Pas, Manitoba (a small town approximately 130 kilometres south of the city of Flin Flon), and was written when the Flin Flon community was still in its nascent stages. *The Lobstick Trail* is a boyish adventure story of heroes and villains, complete with dog sled races and canoe battles. Its plot revolves around the race to develop mining claims near the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border, and one claim is called “Mic Mac,” which suggests “Flin Flon.” However, *The Sunless City* legend plays no part in the novel. (If Durkin knew the story of the book, did he think it too far-fetched for inclusion in his “romance”?) Another work is Meg Luxton’s *More Than A Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women’s Work in the Home*. This sociological study from 1980 examines the lives of Flin Flon women, including the generation that helped build the town when it was little more than a collection of tents, shacks, and muddy streets around the mine. This may seem to have little relationship to Muddock’s novel, unless you consider that one of the main concerns in *The Sunless City* is the role of women in turn-of-the-century society.

Then there is Robert Sedlak’s farce, *The Horn of a Lamb*, published in 2004. The novel is so packed with bizarre characters and bizarre incidents that it defies summary, but in a nutshell the story revolves around the various misadventures of Fred Pickle, once a rising star with the Brandon Wheat Kings, whose promising future in hockey was cut short due to a head injury. Notably, it features a scene with Tom Creighton, the prospector, who has gone on to become the proprietor of an antique shop on Flin Flon’s main street called “Antiques Beyond Your Wildest Dream.” Creighton claims that all the antiques in the shop floated up from the bottom of a nearby lake. Among those antiques is the famous copy of *The Sunless City* found on the trail (94, 102). In Sedlak’s depiction of Creighton, the old prospector has become an elderly man with a giant beard, wiping what looks like gold dust from his apron (101), looking not unlike Flintabbatey Flonatin when he emerged from Esnesnon. In an extreme turn of events, the copy of *The Sunless City* becomes a clue in a terrorist plot involving the

Flin Flon Five, a gang of 1960s radicals. At the end of Sedlak's novel, *The Sunless City* is buried, put "back where it belongs" (371), according to Fred Pickle. No doubt Sedlak intends for us to imagine that the old trickster is lying there, waiting to be (re)discovered in the not-too distant future, when Flintabbatey Flonatin will step out of his novel and remake himself once more.

It is, in the end, probably worth asking, What does the Flin Flon story mean? Turning once again to Birk Sproxton, we find that the answer may be simple: "Flin Flon, old rascal, gives a story to tell" (*Phantom Lake*, 199). The meaning of the story is that it provides a story. And in telling this story by word of mouth, through literature, by monuments and murals, the community of Flin Flon defines and celebrates itself. Each telling and subsequent (re)interpretation of this story provides a curious and quirky narrative, which in turn proclaims the community's unique origin. An origin inextricably tied to an unexpected and unlikely—almost alchemical—discovery deep in the bush, back in that near mythic (yet rascally) time when men went moiling for gold in the "context (con games) of the great Manitoba mining adventure" (Sproxton, *Headframe*, 90). And through updates and rewrites by the likes of Capp, Sproxton, and Sedlak, the text/game continues to this day.

Notes

1. The Flin Flon name might have endured simply through neglect. In the town's early days, the Canadian National Railway contacted the community to verify the name of its station, reminding the town that if the CNR didn't hear otherwise, the Flin Flon nickname would become the real name. The message was either never received or was simply ignored—or perhaps everyone did indeed like the name—because no one from the town responded. In turn, Flin Flon became official (Hedman et al., xiii).
2. One of Muddock's main satirical targets in *The Sunless City* is the science fiction sub-genre known as "the Extraordinary Voyage," made famous by Jules Verne. Combining the most ridiculous elements of Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1865) and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), Muddock pokes fun at the French author, who was a phenomenal success in the late nineteenth century. For example, Flin Flon, a parody of Verne's Captain Nemo, travels in a fish-shaped submarine, comically reminiscent of Nemo's submarine, the Nautilus. Verne's characters are often above base desires like greed or lust, and so is Flin Flon—or so he thinks—until he discovers the valleys of plentiful gold in Esnesnon and begins filling his pockets in a frenzy. There are also echoes of other extraordinary journeys in *The Sunless City*, including Haggard's *She*, DeMille's *A Strange Manuscript*

Found In A Copper Cylinder, Well's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, to the extent that Muddock is parodying the *topoi* of the extraordinary journey. (And as is probably obvious, Muddock's novel borrows a few satirical tricks from Butler's *Erewhon*.)

3. Birk Sproxton, who passed away in 2007, is certainly the unofficial poet laureate of Flin Flon and the rocky, rolling region that lies between Amisk Lake, Phantom Lake, and Athapap Lake. Recognizing that he had a literary gold mine in his hometown, he kept returning to his old stomping grounds in his books of poetry (*Headframe*., and its sequel, *Headframe:2*), his memoir (*Phantom Lake: North of 54*, which provided me with invaluable insight into the community and its history when I moved there in 2006), and in a novel titled *The Red-Headed Woman with the Black Black Heart*, about the Flin Flon miners' strike of 1934.
4. Al Capp's sketch has been reproduced many times by the city, especially for the cover of its tourism brochure "Flin Flon—City Named for Inner Space Explorer!!" The brochure mentions that Capp heard about the town and made the sketch, but it's not quite clear *how* he heard about the Flin Flon story. It seems unlikely that Capp had come across Muddock's novel on his own, because by mid-century *The Sunless City* was out of print and very rare. In *Phantom Lake*, Sproxton explains that he managed to find and read a copy of it in 1968: "This copy was one of only four that antiquarian booksellers had been able to locate in a worldwide search" (32). The copy that he read was kept at the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting office in Flin Flon. A kind of sacred text, the book was safely held "behind the chain-link fence and the guardhouse" (33). Now a printer in Manitoba has republished the book and it is readily available, at least in Flin Flon.

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