

MEREDITH QUARTERMAIN / On First Looking into *Burning Water*

Burning Water, when I first read it in the early '80s, amazed me with its wit and imagination. That you could weave out of historical fact a story that was both true and fantastically not true at the same time, a swashbuckling tall tale where facts jousting with the heady aura of story-making, a story that discussed fact and fiction making themselves, was full of news for a beginning writer. That this could happen in Canadian fiction was especially exciting. Margaret Atwood and Robertson Davies maintained a sort of droll irony in their narrations, but Bowering took the ironic to a whole new level, trumpeting from the roof tops the tallness of his tale, and blatantly interrupting any sense of movie-style realist illusion with asides on his own voyage of discovery as the author of the very text I was reading. And to top it off, here was a book about my very own landscape, a book surrounding me with the lived reality of the men whose names marked my city streets and the channels, islands, harbours, and headlands of my section of North America's coast. Nothing like it had been written in Canadian letters and its Governor General's award was well deserved.

Of course some people didn't share my and the Governor General's enthusiasm. In a 1981 *Globe and Mail* review entitled "Perplexing Pattern in Canada's World of Literary Awards," William French questioned the Governor General's choice, since he found *Burning Water* "a far-fetched recreation of Captain George Vancouver's explorations of the west coast" which he had "yet to see...enthusiastically reviewed," a fact he found totally understandable. In a 1980 *Books in Canada* review, entitled "A bum rap for poor George Vancouver," Chris Scott wrote,

This is a truly ugly book, ugly in spirit as in appearance (computypeset, in a golden and brown wrapper like a chocolate bar, a blotchy imprint giving off a foul chemical odour), a book possessing no authentic voice, no authentic sense of time or place, a book adrift in the author's fancy (yes, he uses that word), wallowing in post-colonial guilt. "Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor," avers George Bowering in

his prologue to *Burning Water*. With that dead sailor, George Bowering is just another deadbeat academic scribbler. (n.p.)

Some readers continue stubbornly in their literalism even when the text clearly signals that literalism is an inappropriate reading style. Scott goes to great lengths, for instance, to excoriate the dialogue in *Burning Water* as ridiculously anachronistic, as if its jarring plays weren't the whole point of the narrative. He was particularly upset by the book's ironic jokes, as though Bowering had offended some absolute duty of a fiction writer to be earnest and serious especially where History with a capital H is concerned, always assuming that there is only one History (the white male settler version). But this of course is precisely what Bowering calls into question.

Scott's outrage about the book's lack of the Authentic was echoed by that of W. Kaye Lamb, Dominion archivist emeritus and past president of the Royal Society of Canada, who called *Burning Water* a "fictional biography" filled with "pointless and needless errors," that takes "scant account of historical facts and good taste" (one guesses he was upset about the gay love affair between George Vancouver and Juan Francisco Quadra) (Quartermain 87). It is curious how something that unabashedly calls itself fiction is nevertheless expected by many to display the qualities of non-fiction, and even curiouser how these "non-fictions" that we cling to are pretty much imagined inventions. Abstract ideas, which, like the Northwest Passage, are quite illusory.

In a *Canadian Literature* review, "Fast-Forward Man," Janet Giltrow found the precise grammatical term—"pronominal confusion"—to describe Bowering's conflation of the three Georges: George Bowering, George Vancouver, and King George III in the word "He." Whenever a chapter or paragraph begins with "He," the reader is not certain which of the three the narrative will focus on. "When the antecedent...turns out to be Bowering rather than Vancouver, the reader is disappointed...and the delays in advancing the story are exasperating," Giltrow complains. "Voyage narrative," she asserts, "is documentary and compellingly linear." "The structural commotion of flashbacks and fast-forward leaps," she argues, makes "the narrative spasmodic just where the logic of travel demands that the story be advanced."

In the view of such readers, History and Voyage Narrative are fixed and stable entities for all time. Yet what are such entities but figments of our imagination (the

very central issue of the novel itself)? What if the voyage you are documenting is the taking apart of cultural narratives that privilege such supposedly stable entities? It is interesting how it is instability that offends these readers the most: instability of pronoun reference, instability of linearity, instability of time in anachronistic dialogue, instability of “historical fact.” All of which are precisely what *Burning Water* most crucially and interestingly sets out to investigate:

So we Georges all felt the same sun, yes. We all live in the same world's sea. We cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you. But in order to include you, I feel that I cannot spend these pages saying *I* to a second person. Therefore let us say *he*, and stand together looking at them. We are making a story, after all, as we always have been, standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction. (*Burning Water* prologue)

Reading *Burning Water* again in 2014, I still find it full of news. The whole notion of stretching the narrative *I* into a roomy polysemic locus I find exhilarating. In one fell swoop, Bowering reinvented Authentic Voice. Writers like Gail Scott (*Heroine; Obituary*) and Larissa Lai (*Salt Fish Girl*) have extended the notion of multi-voiced narrative into a fully postmodern intersubjectivity.

I found it intriguing to notice how factually accurate Bowering's account is. It follows pretty closely George Vancouver's four-volume record *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World 1791-1795*. Vancouver did indeed dine with Quadra, a lavish host, almost every night, and he did name Vancouver Island “Quadra and Vancouver's Island.” Details like the overuse of ammunition in the ceremonial salutes are recorded in Vancouver's journal, as is a clash with First Nations' defender canoes led by older women, as is his fight with Menzies who refused to surrender his journal.

What haunts me after this second reading, too, is the way the novel gets at the loneliness of a captain like Vancouver, who, while mourning the father he'd lost with Cook's murder, had few opportunities on his four-year odyssey for guidance from anyone who might take Cook's place, and who must, nevertheless, as imperial representative, impose his facts not only on the more than 100 men under his command but on a terrain impossible to imagine in terms of the rolling hills, copses, and hedgerows of his flat English countryside. Vancouver was a driven man, driven to transform the zigzagging coast and its hundreds of islands into a

map of depth-soundings so accurate that 200 years later mariners still rely on it. It almost cost him his sanity, and did cost him his life. His health destroyed, he died at the age of 40, three years after his ships limped back to England. The truth of this tall tale lies in the emotional fact of this loneliness.

As well, the novel uses tall-tale humour to deflate settler smugness, so blind to the atrocities committed during European colonization, many of which continue today. *Burning Water's* characters depict a range of attitudes to unknown First Nations' cultures, from Menzies' scientific curiosity about language to Puget's hostility, pig-headedness, and ignorance to Vancouver's diplomacy. A chorus of First Nations' characters commenting on the antics of the Europeans reveals how ridiculous colonists and their attitudes look from a position outside the "reality" they take for granted. The search for "Indians," Bowering wittily reminds us, was just as misguided as the search for the Northwest Passage.

On the other hand, the representation of First Nations characters leaves me uncomfortable where the novel skates very close to simply repeating damaging stereotypes. The problem has been clearly articulated by Tsimshian/Haida critic Marcia Crosby:

The stereotypical Indian woman in Bowering's *Burning Water* has "greasy" hair and a "hot brown stare"; she lives in a building that the white male character is happy to leave "to escape that odour"; she is "savage" and "smells like a dolphin" and "work[s] for fun as she slop[s] up and down on his roger," while he sits, "settle[d] back on a rock." The reader who is informed about postmodernism might greet such passages with comfortable recognition and knowing approval of what might be described as a critique of the "master narrative." For the uninformed reader who does not understand the theoretical intention behind Bowering's work, there is the comforting recognition of the drunken, dirty, promiscuous, yet "natural" Indian. For the First Nations reader, there is the uncomfortable recognition of the dominant culture once again engaged in a conversation with itself, using First Nations people to measure itself, to define who it is or is not. (281)

Bowering's attempt to acknowledge historical atrocity and continued unequal power relations indeed participates in a conversation about the dominant culture. He does not paint a pretty picture, and he leaves me wondering how aware he was of how this depiction of a First Nations woman might strike First Nations women

readers. On the other hand, it may be well nigh impossible for Euro-Canadian settlers and their descendants to critically represent or parody such power relations without being agents of the dominant culture having a conversation about itself. It is an ongoing conversation which the dominant culture needs to continue thoughtfully and respectfully through the active participation of as many voices as possible.

The effect of love in human relations is one of the big issues that *Burning Water* admirably addresses—the possibility of love between men (in groups or as individuals), for instance, with Menzies’ openness and curiosity as opposed to Puget’s preference for conquering and suppressing savages. The novel shows how very different are the “knowledge” and “facts” produced by these different attitudes, a thread that is echoed in the contrast between Quadra and Vancouver’s love affair and the sodomy of a First Nations’ man committed by one of Puget’s crew. In a culture that reviles sodomy and forbids love between men, only violence and bestiality appear. Moreover, love (between men or between men and women) takes very different forms depending on the cultural attitudes and power relations of the parties involved.

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