

Gary Geddes / KITENMAX, THE RUSSIAN GANG, AND THE ENEMIES OF FICTION

Reverend McClure shot up the Russian Gang while they were trying to rob the bank at Hazelton. He was tending his flock in the Anglican church just after 10 a.m. on the seventh of April, 1914, a moment when European diplomacy was at its lowest ebb and archdukes and bank robbers had been better off home in bed. Half of McClure's parishioners ought to have been there, too, given the pious tilt of heads and the organ-base of snores that served as a mortal back-up to the Reverend's timeless message. The allusion here to Europe is not entirely gratuitous, even in postmodernist fiction of this sort, though no one in this pioneer settlement in British Columbia was giving it the slightest thought; indeed, the Reverend would hardly have credited them with thought at all. Still, as a battle of sorts was brewing on both fronts, I may be forgiven for appearing to introduce what is known in the trade as an historical aside: an aside is not necessarily an affront.

I hope the minister's name does not put you on the wrong track. Donald Redman McClure was not an Indian. That's one of the hazards of working with materials of the documentary sort: the cargo of inherited detail often shifts, rendering the vessel of fiction unstable at best. There were no mixed blood cells warring for ascendancy in the blue veins that stood out on McClure's freckled and hairy wrists. The minister's racial heritage was as pure as the mongrel origins of the Scots might allow; only his religious principles appear to have been watered down to accommodate that special brand of pragmatism called the Church of England, that allows catholicism and adultery on the same ticket.

I'm telling you what happens to get it out of the way. I know you're that kind of rare breed of reader who's too sophisticated to be concerned with mere plot. You'd be more like Ortega y Gasset's Reader B. Reader A is a species of slob or cretin who pokes around in literature just to get his kicks; he can't wait to see how things turn out. He probably drools a lot too and reaches for the popcorn at the end of every paragraph. Reader B's another kettle of fish altogether, the refined type who sips at a piece of writing, swirling the syllables and consonants in his glass like a gourmet, savouring every nuance but swallowing nothing. No chugalugs for him.

While the congregation laboured under the weight of "Rock of Ages," their Sisyphean endeavours were punctuated by the thud of an explosion from somewhere up the street. McClure might have ignored the faint interruption entirely had not the concussion set the tiny glasses of wine rattling on the communion tray. Through the hole in the east window he saw two puffs of smoke issue from the entrance of the small log structure that housed the Union Bank, rendering momentarily headless the seven horses tied up there. I have no idea what apocalyptic thoughts this series of images sent galloping through the Reverend's mind. I suspect his thoughts might be tidily summed up in the phrase: "Shit, the church funds!"

If you've noticed how this story keeps lapsing into sloppy colloquialism and flirting with local colour, blame Graham Cox, proprietor of the Galena Club next door, who provided both the original stained-glass window and the atmosphere of moral turbulence which led to its demise. McClure would never have seen the smoke, the horses, and the bank had Cox's rowdy patron not shot out the window in a fit of spiritual ecstasy. The Reverend rationalized not fixing it along the lines of the Pleasure-Pane principle: i.e., the removal of the pane gives me pleasure by

- 1) thwarting the gift of this unholy American billiard shark,
- 2) guaranteeing a certain discomfort to my slack parishioners,
- and 3) affording me a command of the street leading into town.

If I did not know that plot, character, and setting are the enemies of fiction, I'd be inclined at this point to give you a description of the town. That kind of thing is best handled, if at all, by the visual media. After all, who needs ten pages of local colour when he can get it all at a glance by flipping channels to *Guns smoke* or *The Rifleman*? Not me. Besides, Hazelton was a fairly ordinary town in 1914; it still is. You know the type—main street, hotel, barber shop, general store, false fronts, and so on. In this case, the general store

was called Sargent's and advertised itself as THE FAVORITE SHOPPING PLACE, thereby specializing not only in aggravating American spelling, but also in MINER'S PROSPECTOR'S AND SETTLER'S SUPPLIES, not to mention GROCERIES AND FELT GOODS. According to Arthur Polson, a local resident who had attended both the church service in question and the subsequent baptism by gunfire, clothing was not the only goods to be felt in Sargent's store.

Hazelton was ordinary, but it was no slouch of a town. All the big words, including LOVE, DISASTER, and FORTUNE, passed through the settlement, in the form of long and short taps on the Yukon Telegraph Line. A fair share of poets and other wierdos also passed through the town in the coaches of the Canadian National Railway, blunt-nosing its way downriver to the Pacific Ocean 177 miles westward at Prince Rupert. And the most rudimentary research, if that were our task here, would indicate that Hazelton stands at the junction of the Skeena and Bulkley Rivers at the foot of the ominous Roche de Boule, from which the native spirits were alleged to have made their ascent through a hole or trap-door in the sky into heaven. Of course, I place no significance on such trivia. The reader of fictions is not some prospector waiting for supplies of information in Manson, Vital, Tom's Creek, and a hundred other diggings. You and I, Reader B, have better fish to fry.

The characteristic restraint I have exercised pertaining to matters of plot and setting must be extended to the unwitting antagonists in this frontier opera. About the Russian Gang, who were taking up their own collection before the altar of Mammon, almost nothing is known. Did they wander by chance onto the shifting sands of this melodrama? After all, they could have knocked off bigger banks in better places. Or were they fugitives from American justice, who thought they could find easy pickings and fewer dangers north of the 49th parallel? If so, they were mistaken on both counts. Perhaps, like all Russians, they were simply Romantics, searching for the last true frontier, that area of border-blur where a man can test himself against the unknown. In that case, they were not far wrong in their choice of Hazelton, which sits dead-centre in the province; what lies beyond it is either unexplored or uninhabited—some would say, unimagined. I don't know why they robbed, or rather tried to rob, that particular bank. Maybe they were spooked by the place, that whacking big mountain back of town on which McClure's god

cleaned his boots, sending down avalanches of snow and rock in all seasons, those ghostly willows and gnarled moss-covered cottonwoods that look like hairy mastodons in jungles drawn by artists in the last century who had never set foot out of Clapham Common.

If the thought of seven Russians from the United States robbing the Canadian branch of an English bank and being shot by a Scottish minister of the Church of England, using a Belgian rifle with French bullets strikes you as bizarre, you are approaching a definition of what it means to be a Canadian. Very eclectic bunch we are—and thrifty too. The first Russian, lifted out of the doorway by the force of McClure's bullet and dropped facedown in front of the wicket, simultaneously closed his account and took out permanent residency, the easy way.

You can still find the odd postcard in Hazelton with a photograph of Boris Manikoff, taken after he was sentenced to twenty years on May 13, by Judge Young in New Westminster. You'd have to have a name like Young to throw time around so casually. The number on Manikoff's postcard is 67391, if veracity concerns you. He looks neither mad nor inspired, only bored, as if he'd read too much conventional fiction. Arthur Polson's widow donated a couple of other photographs to the public archives in Victoria, one of which shows two of the wounded Russians laid out like firewood in a wagon, where they subsequently died. The other shows two more sprawled dead on the boardwalk, arms akimbo, one with his right boot crossed neatly over his left ankle, as if he were taking a nap under the hazel boughs.

If you've paid attention, alert Reader B, you'll have noticed that only six Russians are accounted for. The seventh, who was apparently the leader, escaped severely wounded, like those bad guys in the movies who learn nothing from the sacking of Paris or Nanking or Lawrence, Kansas and survive, out of spite it seems, to outdo themselves and plan some grotesque revenge in the sequel. Don't look now, but this guy who was tracked downriver and managed to evade the good citizens of Hazelton may still be out there somewhere, working for B.C. Forest Products or plotting World War III as an encore. My theory is that the seventh Russian was so disenchanted by his failure to acquire private capital that he returned to Moscow to lead the Bolsheviks to victory.

The writer of postmodernist fiction is not, of course, concerned with cause and effect. It doesn't matter a whit to him that Reverend McClure over-reacted in shooting those robbers or that, perhaps, he

was enacting some fundamental truth of human nature which says that violence is a response to too much stimuli, that it is an attempt to restore the order and identity that has been threatened by an avalanche of unfamiliarity. Put on your high beams some night during a snow storm and observe that the driving snow has a hypnotic effect that begins to make you feel dizzy or sick. It's enough to drive an epileptic into seizure. Imagine yourself, then, in a frontier situation in which things are coming at you too quickly. You can't organize them, can't find a base to hold on to. All your familiar faces and landmarks are behind you, rituals too. So you hang on desperately to the religious observances and one day something happens to rob you of the comfort of those observances, to tear off your mask of order and respectability, and you go haywire. We don't need fiction to tell us this kind of thing.

What, then, do we need? Now that the real enemies of fiction have, like the Russian Gang, been eradicated, the stage is clear to get on with the main business at hand. But what is that other business, Reader B? Art is a two-way process, a collaboration between writer and reader, so the onus is on you to tell me where we go from here. Seriously, I'm at a very delicate stage in my literary development; I could regress completely, backslide all the way to realism. There's bound to be a lot of residue from all those years of mistaking art for life. Landscapes don't bother me. The ones I pass on the train from Rupert to Hazelton or Kamloops to New Westminster have been imitating art for so long, they look less like themselves than passages from the work of my favourite writers. The same is true of friends; all their misadventures sound as if they've been lifted from the pages of Dostoevsky or Vonnegut. That's why they throw around words like 'tragedy' and 'farce' so loosely, to describe such non-literary events as missing a bus or swallowing an emerald.

But characters? Don't ask me about characters. You hang around them too long and you start treating them as if they were human. I mean, try telling a young character who's hot-to-trot for whatever life fiction has to offer that he's only a linguistic construct and watch the shit hit the fan. You'll be lucky if you wind up with only a sleepless night, a bloody nose, or a lawsuit. Try convincing a crowd of placard-waving characters that the dehumanization of art is not inhuman and they'll probably lynch you to prove their own humanity. They think God put writers on earth to give life to every unborn character. Who wants to be nothing but a conduit between

past and future? Not me, I assure you. I've had some bad moments lately, in connection with McClure and his dance-partners: late-night calls, threatening letters, even offers of money. The wife of Boris Manikoff wrote to me from a small town in Oregon to say that, unless I gave her admittance to this fiction, she'd show up in court and tell the jury that one of her eleven children had been in desperate need of an expensive operation to save her life. You can imagine what complications that would have caused, shifting the weight of sympathy away from McClure and towards his victims.

Yes, I'm embarrassed to say, they read me, know my weaknesses. Like panhandlers, they know at once if you're a soft touch. Like refugees, they'll do anything—I mean anything—to gain admittance. When I was considering the elimination of that small passage pertaining to Graham Cox and the stained-glass window, as being of marginal significance to the fiction, I received a hand-delivered parcel late at night from a dreadful criminal type whose face had been so badly cut up he wore a permanent sneer on one side of his mouth. The parcel contained a hundred dollars in American funds and an ear.

Believe me, Reader B, I've tried everything: unlisted numbers, emigration, plastic surgery. But they always find me. When my publisher objected to an earlier version of this piece as inconclusive and sub-standard and advised dropping it from the collection, my house was picketed for several weeks and none of my friends in the Writer's Union would cross the picket-line. Maybe God had in mind a nice abstract creation, too, an exercise in pure form, but couldn't hack the pressure, all those disembodied voices out there whispering: Write me in, write me in, write me in.

Reading over what I've written, I see an apology is in order for indulging my penchant for sarcasm and giving in to a lately developed urge towards self-exposure and exhibitionism. I see, too, that a couple of subliminal fish images have surfaced that may be significant. The fish is supposed to be a Renaissance symbol for Christ. Are these images evidence of an evangelical strain akin to that of Reverend McClure moving unnoticed in me or just indicators that I'm destined to open a fish and chip joint in Hazelton, little fried fingers of Pacific cod wrapped in news of the latest war or bank robbery? I wish I knew. One thing's for certain: somebody's going to make one helluva film out of the stuff I can't use in this story.

By the way, last week a friend of mine told me the Indian name for Hazelton is *Kitenmax*, meaning people who fish by torchlight. What do you make of that?