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The Grey Islands by John Steffler

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John Steffler's Inversions of Nature

The Grey Islands by JOHN STEFFLER

Brick Books, 2015 \$20.00

Reviewed by ROBERT BROWN

First published by McClelland and Stewart in 1985, John Steffler's *The Grey Islands* was welcomed with both praise and hesitation. Composed of an evocative filigree of poetry, prose, documentation, and local legend, *The Grey Islands* traces the intimate relationship between landscape and history on a chain of islands off the east coast of Newfoundland's Northern Peninsula. Voicing Steffler's own struggles with questions of identity, alienation, place, and the marginalization of a Canadian culture other to Ontario, the reader pieces together the fragmentary memories and reflections of a fictional narrator that moves from the streets of Toronto to a misguided and unfulfilling position as town planner of Milliken Harbour and, ultimately, a summer spent in seclusion on one of the Grey Islands. The work was described as "a piece of genius" (9) by some; others were confused by the variation in style or found its conclusion unfulfilling. Either way, the publisher abandoned the book after its first printing.

Rescued, as Steffler puts it, by Don McKay and Kitty Lewis, Brick Books republished *The Grey Islands* in 2000 (201). Now being re-released in celebration of Brick's 40th anniversary, the text has been repackaged with a contemporary introduction by Memorial University of Newfoundland professor emeritus Adrian Fowler and an afterword by Steffler himself. As contextualized by Brick, the text became a classic example of wilderness literature. Citing Don McKay's praise from the front

matter of the second edition, like Thoreau's *Walden* or Leopold's *Almanac*, *The Grey Islands* is among the masterpieces of environmental writing—"an iconic book that sets dramatically before us, in a way that is richly complex, at once meditative and expansive, the difficult and essential encounter of wilderness." By 2010, it was precisely this contextualization of the work that initiated a post-colonial reading by Adam Beardsworth in his essay "Natural's Not in It." For Beardsworth, the romantic notion of wilderness survival incorrectly positioned the narrator as struggling with and against the sublime power of nature to lift the veil of representation and display the truths of an essentialized nature. In this way, the text becomes amenable to a variant of depth ecocritique that pursues the sublimation of an ecological subject while reenacting the work of domination.

Both interpretations are true—but more so, true as representations of a dialectical movement that is essential to the text. As Steffler writes in the afterword, what stuck him about Newfoundland was "how obtrusive and unsubdued the landscape and climate were in the midst of the island's old and sophisticated human culture" (198). Idealizations of an uninhabited island are challenged by rumours of a remaining resident, or more so, by the ruins of previous settlements and the local stories that evoke the complex social and political histories that mark the better part of the work. Citing one such evocation:

the weedy path past my door, the
skeleton
houses: first,
last thing I see in a day.

my only company here: absent people,

gaps

where they would have walked, worked,
stood in their doors.

questions, vanished things, are
solid facts
as large as hills, the fitful bay. (110)

Furthermore, what is prefigured as a pure nature to be dominated gives way to a sense of intrusion and the power immanence. At once there is a distinct autonomy that is given to the natural. Describing night on the island, the narrator writes: "The water, the trees and hills rise up. They roam and assume what shapes they wish." However, this freedom is not without a latent fear of power and violence and the profound closeness that might confer the annihilation of the rational subject. As the narrator continues to describe the moon's light: "It moved briskly, this creature of light, rippling its body with easy energy. And I stood swallowed up, gazing into it. But I could not bear it for long. It was too massive and too cold to confront alone" (95).

This tension between culture and nature is not a foil or simple narrative technique. The text is just as much process as statement. Tracing the dialectical

engagements of cultural labour and natural force, without ever suspending either tension outright, Steffler continually preserves an ongoing movement that attempts to explore the inversions of ruination and creation. Expanding on Beardsworth, if there is something like an essentialization central to the text, it's ultimately negative: beautiful paradoxes, a comfort found in uncertainty, latencies free of fixed beginnings and ends, and the autonomy to be free from oneself. Steffler was once concerned with the survival of the text. In my mind, the survival of *The Grey Islands* is guaranteed: like the return of a repression forever bound to haunt its reader.

Works Cited

Beardsworth, Adam. "Natural's Not in It: Postcolonial Wilderness in Steffler's *The Grey Islands*." *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* [Online], 25.1 (2010): n. pag. Web. 15 Dec. 2015.

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