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Sections from *The Winds of Vancouver*

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Sections from *The Winds of Vancouver*

by Kenneth White

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1 The Hour of the Owl

(*Arrival in Vancouver, wandering in the streets and along the docks.*)

I got into Vancouver from a KLM flight out of Amsterdam. It was 3 o'clock p.m. local time, which meant for me about midnight. I might have called it a day, but preferred to wander around for a while, get some initial bearings.

I'd hardly moved a hundred yards when I was accosted by a character looking like an old Klondiker or maybe, back of that, some kind of Ancient Mariner, who said:

"Any change, Sir?"

I don't often have cash on me, but did then since I'd just changed some euros at the airport in order to pay the taxi into town. So, delving into my pocket, I fished up a dollar, which is called here in Canada a loonie because, if it has the face of the British Queen (Elizabeth II, D. G. Regina) on one side, it has the figure of a loon (*Gavia immer*) on the other, and gave it to this pilgrim .

Looking a bit surprised, and in a to my ears antiquated style of parlance, he said:

"Thank you very much, Sir. God bless."

Five minutes later, I heard a scuffling behind me and was joined by a younger fellow, who, skipping along at my side, delivered a rambling rigmarole as follows:

"My uncle had a kid, the kid had asthma, he had to have his lungs pumped … bad day, bad day … you have no idea … go ahead, go ahead . . .", at which he scudded off, flailing his arms and shouting: "Bad day! Go ahead!"

*

By now I was in the middle of Gastown.

This precinct started up when an enterprising little Englishman by the name of Jack Deighton, originally from Hull, but who had bummed his way across America, becoming in turn miner, journalist and steamboat pilot, turned up one morning on Burrard Inlet in a leaky canoe, rolled ashore a keg of some liquid he called whisky, and established a saloon. Having the gift of the gab, and being a great adept of interminable monologues, the said Deighton soon became known as Gassy Jack, hence, by derivation, the popular name of the district in which he operated.

Anyway, that's the story I got that night on Vancouver's Eastside in a pub called The Red Dog ("Your day starts here with ice-cold beer").

*

Out of the Red Dog, I came across what had to be the Scottish section of Vancouver: a huddle of little hostels bearing names like Balmoral House, Holyrood Rooms, The Bruce Arms, that lead me finally to the Carnegie Library. At its door, a ragtaggle band of derelicts, beggars, druggies and winos, among them a wench in a black leather jerkin and a skirt made of tattered tartan rags, around her head a scarf decorated with skulls, a spider tattooed on her left cheek, who, with her red, rheumy eyes raised to the heavens, suddenly started up a banshee howling. The tortured soul of old Caledonia…

*

On leaving my hotel, I'd walked left. Now, retracing my footsteps back to the hotel, I walked right.

Here, things were more spaced out.

I passed along Coal Harbour, first of all a waterfront promenade for the citizens of Vancouver; then a marina, with smart yachts and speedboats (*North Wind, Star of the Sea, Wild Spirit*…) registered in Vancouver, Seattle, San Diego; at the back end, a cemetery of old paintcrackled hulks (*The Columbia, Pride of Vancouver, The Olympiad, The Prince of Whales*…) lying in a romantic sump of

scum and detritus.

Moving on, I found myself in Stanley Park. There I came across a cluster of totem poles and posts, replicas of ones that had mouldered away in Skidegate or in this or that village of the Salish, the Haida, the Nootka, the Kwakiutl or the Tsimshian: Chief Skedans' Mortuary Pole, the Thunderbird House Post of a Kwawaka'wakw group…

I ended up on a cold shore, where ravens were picking up cockles and breaking their shells on the rocks, gulls fished alongside a lone heron and where, further out on the mud flats, a band of long-necked, grey-brown Canada Geese looked as if they were getting ready for another migration.

Back at my hotel, the Pan Pacific, I ordered a room-service meal with a bottle of California merlot from the cellars of The Burrowing Owl, and sat at my wide window, watching a white light blinking over by Hallelujah Point.

2 The Great Gateway

(*Portrait of the port of Vancouver. Conversations with its citizens.*)

It was only the next morning I realised just what a weird kind of establishment the Pan Pacific on Vancouver's waterfront was.

It had been recommended to me the night before by a taxi-driver as "the place where people meet". I now realised exactly what that meant.

The Pan is situated in the same building as the Vancouver Convention Centre. Which means that, before going up a flight of stairs to the hotel area, but for the moment thinking naïvely you are *already* in the hotel, you are in fact in Grand Central Station.

That morning, hundreds of people were milling about with name tabs clipped in their coat lapels.

It was a World Psychotherapy Gathering, lectures and seminars going on in a dozen halls (*Psychosis 1, Autism 3, Neurosis 5*) and participants sitting on the floor along the walls of the concourse eating cardboard meals from makeshift stands.

Understandably enough, there was an overspill, so that those who couldn't find wall space to back up on would come up the stairs and sit around the Pan Pacific fountain, called The Fountain of the Future, the base of which, in tesserae, was a map of the North Pacific Rim, from Malaysia to Alaska, via the Philippines, China, Japan, Kamchatka and the Aleutians.

It was a picturesque enough spectacle. But after a look around I was glad to take the elevator up to the fifteenth floor where my room was.

From up there, amid the keening and clamouring of gulls, I had a panoramic view of Burrard Inlet: the First Narrows up to Indian Arm, and, across the bay, the peaks of the coastal range – the Grouse, the Cypress, the Seymore .

A big OOCL cargo laden with containers that had just negotiated the Lions Gate Bridge was moving slowmotionly up the Inlet, making for the area of red cranes, docks and railroad tracks there to the right, where containers from the K Line, Cosco, Hyundai, Han Jin and Yang Ming companies were

already amassed. All around, the revving of float-planes, the throbbing of helicopters bound for Victoria, Nanaimo and beyond, and the trundling of railway wagons ready to serve the West Coast and from there the whole wide world.

"By sea, land and air, we prosper", was, and still is (though, like everywhere else, the perspectives are not so bright as they used to be), Vancouver's motto. Prosperity had begun with the delivery of supplies and outfits up to the Yukon and Alaska, and the bringing back down of gold, lumber and fish. Then it had extended to the Far East – China, Korea, Japan – with the tea, spice and silk trade. Those were the heigh days of the CPR, the Canadian Pacific Railroad, its ships of the White Empress Line berthed there at Pier BC eager to transfer all that delectable booty to the tea-trains, the silk-trains, the spice-trains that rushed non-stop across Canada on a 4-day transcontinental run to Montreal, from where the goods would be routed to New York and London. *The Empress of India*, first of the great transpacific ships, arrived at port in Vancouver on April 28, 1891, followed by *The Empress of Japan* and so many others, carrying not only consumer goods, but passengers, some out simply to enjoy the trip in luxurious staterooms, others, immigrants, hopefully eager to grab at least some crumbs of the promised land cake. It was the CPR that largely built up Vancouver, with its wharves, offices and hotels. But other railroad companies were also in the import-export business: the Canadian Northern, the British Columbian … And the show goes on.

*

Sitting at breakfast there in the Pan Pacific, I was reading a glossy magazine I'd found in my room called *The Essential Vancouver*, the lead article of which went like this: "Vancouverites already know their city is special. It's Los Angeles without the smog, San Francisco without the fog, Seattle without the traffic and Toronto without the snow. […] Our safe, clean streets are gay-friendly and our hotels and beaches get pooch approval. Our fair city is accustomed to having accolades heaped upon kudos piled upon praise: world's most desirable place to live, top Canadian destination, best North American neighbourhood. We've won them all. We're placed in the top ten for gay-travel destinations and the top five for bachelor-party cities. Vancouver is third in the world for quality of life. […] Vancouver also happens to be one of the most cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse cities around. According to the 2001 census visible minorities make up 37 percent of the city's population."

If with all that you're not glad you came to Vancouver before you leave this

world you must be a cynical dog indeed.

When I'd finished my breakfast, the waitress, a very garrulous little body who spoke Canadian with a distinctly Scottish timbre, said:

"Have a good one!"

Down in the streets, I flagged a taxi, with the idea of taking a trip out to the Ethnology Museum for a little preliminary substance.

"Where do you come from?" the taximan asked.

"France. And you?"

"The Punjab."

Another one, I said to myself, thinking of the taxi I'd taken the day before from the airport, driven by a jumpy little Pakistani from Karachi.

Before coming to Vancouver, this man had lived for three years in Montreal. The people in Montreal had been "very helpful, very nice." It was there he'd learned his English, as well as some French, before that he had "no language". I asked him how things were in Vancouver. "Busy, busy, busy", he said. "I love it, but no more. I go to Saskatoon. That is a twenty-four hour drive in the middle of the Canada." "Why Saskatoon?" I asked. "Easier to create a business there, you can sponsor your family"…

To this Punjabi driver, I now said: "Quite a lot of Punjabis here?"

"Oh, yes, a lot. You know what they say: Punjabis are like potatoes, you find them everywhere."

"And they all drive taxis?"

"Many many."

"How come?"

"Not much education, not much language. So they go to lumber or taxi. It is good money too, very profit-making."

He told me he worked for a company. For license, gas, all in all, the car cost him C$3000 a month. Beyond that, the intake was all his. He worked from seven to twelve hours a day. On Sundays, he didn't work, he'd caught on, he had somebody else drive, and took a commission.

"Like it here?"

"It's open, it's free, it's cool. You know what they say: if the US is a melting-pot, Canada is a salad bowl. I came to Canada in 1972. In Victoria for one year. Then in Alberta for four. In Vancouver since 1977. If I said I did not like it, it would not be logical."

"Maybe you're so used to it all, you don't ask yourself logical questions any more."

"That is probably so."

"Ever feel like going back to India?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Too many people, too polluted."

"And the Punjab?"

"You know the Punjab?"

"No, but I know a little about it. The five-river country up there in the Himalayan North West, the Thar Desert from where the gypsies came to Europe, those wild dancing girls who started up the flamenco in Spain……"

"You must be a history professor."

"Well, something like that."

3 A Story Written on the Winds

(*Reading Vancouver's* Voyage *at night in the Pan Pacific – a long white night*…)

On the afternoon of June 13, 1792, a ship nosed its way up a sound that had as yet no name, at least in English, passed by what the captain thought was an island, and was making along a large arm to a smaller arm when it was met by about fifty Indians in canoes who showed an inclination to trade, offering fish for iron. This first exchange over, and after a little conference, the Indians dispersed except for three or four canoes that hung on to the new arrival till it was anchored for the night, at which the Indians, receiving a few more gifts, were asked, by signs, to retire and did so, promising, by signs, to bring more fish the next day. The next morning, they were duly there, to deliver the promised fish, and to satisfy their curiosity, the captain noting in his journal: "A great desire was manifested by these people to imitate our actions, especially in the firing of a musket, which one of them performed, though with crude fear and trembling. They minutely attended to all our transactions, and examined the colour of our skins with infinite curiosity. […] The general tenor of their behaviour gave us reason to conclude that we were the first people from a civilized country they had yet seen."

*

The vessel in question was T*he Discovery*, that had left Deptford, England, on January 7, 1791, loaded with trade goods (iron, copper, cloth, nails, beads, assorted trinkets), rounded the Cape of Good Hope, passed through that difficult area of islands and reefs that the French had called "L'Archipel de la Recherche" (The Archipelago of Research), spent some time in sultry, seductive Tahiti before moving up to the wild and windy coast of North America. The captain, George Vancouver – as his name indicates, of Dutch extraction (Van Coeverden) – had sailed with Cook and had now been entrusted with a very complex mission: make a survey of that North American coast, so as to ascertain once and for all if there was a Northwest

Passage; judge what possibilities of trade could be opened up for Britain; see what the French, the Russians and the Americans were doing in those remote regions; and engage in diplomatic relations with the Spanish. Not only was it a tricky mission, but it was going to take place in very intricate and uncharted territory. What maps that existed were not only incomplete but almost totally unreliable – the artefacts of what Vancouver called "closet geographers", who built up fictions from scanty knowledge and irresponsible imagination.

On the subject of cartography, Vancouver's task was to "discover and delineate", beyond all hypothetical projections and idealistic imaginings, "the general line of the sea coast", which implied "the strictest examination of every arm, inlet, creek or corner". If he by no means underestimated (even at the starting out), the troubles of that undertaking in what he called "the northern extremities", that "unfrequented space", Vancouver was going to find himself faced with more difficulties than he'd expected. Once inside the work-field, the programme became a purgatory. Even getting the vessel to move was a tedious, laborious process, with head winds coming perpetually from the North and North-West in what the French navigator Fleurieu had called "the whirlpool" of the North Pacific. Add to that the fact that in one single inlet there could be various sets of tides, one driving to the south-east, another to the north-west, and a mass of irregular soundings, which made anchorage complex and precarious. At times too, thick mist would reduce visibility to next to nothing. Vancouver had with him, of course, for astronomical and nautical observations, an assortment of instruments, but the chronometers played havoc on him and the compasses read crazy owing to magnetic disturbances. Such too at any time was the sheer number of islands, islets, rocks and shores between the vessel and the continental shore that to trace its line from the vessel was out of the question. Excursions lasting days or weeks at a time had to be made out from the principal vessel in yawls and launches propelled by oars. Despite all this, thanks to a persevering ranging ("Our researches were not carried on in a direct line, but in various directions"), enough information was gathered together – compass bearings, sets of azimuths taken on shore, records of course and distance, logbook data of all kinds, sketches – as, by degrees, to trace the lines of that "intricate labyrinth".

*

If technical map-making was his principal preoccupation, Vancouver also took time out for general sensation and contemplation. He speaks of

"the very extraordinary region we have lately passed through", evoking its "grand and interesting character". He describes cascades as "large, grand, tremendous". We hear of "a stupendous snowy barrier", of "rude masses of almost naked rocks rising into rugged mountains" and of "conspicuous ridges". But if Vancouver's senses are open, and if he sometimes rises to "interest" and "grandeur", his psyche was moulded to strictly classical forms, and it is this which makes him finally experience the "extraordinary" space as dismal, dreary, barren. "This inhospitable region", he says, "whose solitary and desolate appearance, though daily more familiarized to our view, did not become less irksome to our feelings". Or again: "Our residence here was truly forlorn; an awful silence pervaded the gloomy forest."

The prevailing gloom was only relieved by the sudden appearance from out those forests of Indian bands.

Here's a meeting with Yurok Indians at the mouth of the Klamath River as described by the ship's doctor and naturalist, Archibald Menzies, who had done his studies at Edinburgh: "The whole crew consisting of four men stood up and gave us a song accompanied by a dance, if bending their bodies forwards and moving them to and fro with the most humorous gestures without changing their situation in the canoe could be called such. They kept beating time with their paddles on the sides of the canoe seemingly in perfect unison with the song which was a kind of solemn air not destitute of harmony and ended in a loud shriek in which they all joined, raising up their heads at the same time, one of them also broke off at intervals during the song with a kind of shrill noise in imitation of some wild animal."

Here's Vancouver describing the Kwakiutl canoe: "The largest, in which was the chief and his family, had its head and stern curiously decorated with carved work, and rude and uncouth figures in painting, resembling those with which they adorn their houses." Regarding those houses, he has this description of a Kwakiutl village: "The houses, in number thirty-four, were arranged in regular streets; the larger ones were the habitations of the principal people, who had them decorated with paintings and other ornaments, forming various figures, apparently the rude designs of fancy; though it is by no means improbable they might annex some meaning to the figures they described, they were too remote, or hieroglyphical, for our comprehension." If, in the earlier excerpt, there is, alongside a downright refusal and rejection, an awakening of curiosity ("*curiously* decorated"), in this latter piece there is an admission of the inability to interpret adequately, and the opening of a possibility of deeper understanding.

*

Vancouver's general attitude to "the savages" was similar to that of the Spanish captain, Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, author of the *Expedición de limites*, who became his friend: "I can perhaps flatter myself that, treating these Indians as men ought to be treated, and not like creatures of inferior nature, I have lived in the very breast of tranquillity." During the great majority of his encounters, Vancouver speaks of "quiet intercourse", the few exceptions (on one occasion, he discreetly mentions "improper conduct" and "some slaughter") being due, as he began to realise, to the various behavioural characteristics among the tribes (there was no Savage monotype), and to changing circumstances. If trade had gone on at first in a peaceable way ("they brought us the skins of the sea-otter, of an excellent quality, in great abundance, which were bartered for sheet-copper and blue cloth"), the Indians began to see that they were not getting a fair deal. Not only were they no longer willing to be bought off with beads and trinkets, more and more they were demanding firearms and ammunition. This latter development might have arisen on its own, at least here and there, but as a global transformation in relationships it was largely the work of an increasing number of American traders who, to quote Vancouver, "consider gain as the only object of pursuit", and who "fomented discords, stirred up contentions" in order to increase the demand for weapons. Strife and contention became more and more frequent since the Americans didn't even do a fair trade in weapons, palming off on the Indians inferior models whenever they could. The result was increasing tension followed by terror.

An example of the kind of context that could arise took place further up the coast, when Vancouver came in touch with the Tlingit: "A smoke had before been observed amongst the trees on the eastern shore, but we then saw no appearance of any habitations. These people approached us without much hesitation, and in their countenances was expressed a degree of savage ferocity infinitely surpassing any thing of the sort I had before observed in the various tribes that had fallen under my notice. Many of these we had seen before had their faces painted in various modes, but these had contrived to so dispose of the red, white and black, as to render the natural ugliness of their countenance more horribly hideous." There was the physical appearance, there was the obvious attitude of hostility – and there was a feature of Tlingit practice that Vancouver had never seen anywhere else: the presence, in the stern of many canoes, of an old woman with "a froward, shrewish aspect", who not only

steered the boat, but egged the warriers on. It was at the instigation of one such virago that the men in the first canoe got ready their bows and arrows, laid out their spears, while the chief "put on a mask resembling a wolf's face." When closer contact was made, they kept knives dangling from their wrists. The tension engendered might have risen into open, bloody conflict. But even here, some kind of propitiation and reconciliation occurred, recourse being made to the accustomed ceremonial formalities, with the singing of songs and the making of speeches. The last scene in this incident on those wan waters surrounded by boreal forest is that of a man (a shaman?) making a speech, holding in one hand a sea-bird, with the other plucking out feathers, and, at the conclusion of certain sentences, blowing them into the air.

Who was getting that message?

4 Renaissance Rock

(*The contemporary discourse of the First Peoples.*)

Next morning, I awoke to drum beats in the downtown streets.

It was National Aboriginal Day, a great gathering of the First Nations there in Vancouver, every one bringing a contribution to the pow-wowing potlatch. The Squamish nation was there with its Eagle Song Dances, the Chinook nation with its Songcatchers, the Métis Nation with its Louis Riel Métis Dancers.

I had got the information from a First Nations newspaper, *Drums*, which presented itself as "Canada's National Native Newspaper". It ran articles mainly on the social condition of First Nations people, like this one, about Vancouver's Skid Row, that had a different tune from the glossy I'd read the day before:

"This rotten core of the Downtown Eastside where once hard-working hard-drinking longshoremen walked the streets north of Hastings is now a breeding ground for maggots fattening up on the dying meat; this is where psychopaths come when they feel the urge to exploit human weakness. The life story of the population of this place is the dark legacy of colonialism, residential school abuse and foster home alienation: the deadly plunge into drug addiction and prostitution supported by the skewed legislation in the City of Vancouver. […] News that about half of Canada's Aboriginal population now lives in cities and towers would not surprise anyone familiar with the derelict streets of the poorest postal code in Canada, the meanest streets in North America […]. The cultural genocide that was historically perpetrated against the First Nations of this continent continues to this day in myriad more subtle forms to thwart the efforts of aboriginal communities to rebuild their dignity."

What was nutshelled there was the whole history of the relationship between First Nations and government, federal or provincial, in Canada, since the beginning of colonisation.

*

In 1996 appeared a five-volume report, the result of years of study and reflection by a royal commission set up by the federal government. Its overall conclusion was that: "The main policy direction, pursued for more than a hundred and fifty years, first by colonial then by Canadian governments, has been wrong." After digesting this for a couple of years, the federal government made the following public and official announcement: "The government of Canada today formally expresses to all Aboriginal people in Canada our profound regret for past actions of the federal government which have contributed to these difficult pages in the history of our relationships together."

Among the "past actions" referred to was the condonement from the colonial administration of land-grabbing by newly arrived colonial settlers, as a result of which the First Nations lost vast stretches of their traditional territories. Even the "reserves" left them tended to shrink with every passing legislation. Then there was the governmentally approved missionary work, the main purpose of which was to tear up Aboriginal culture by the roots and wipe out any memory, any consciousness of it. To all that, on a succinct list, can be added the residential school system, the rules of which were laid down by the government, while the execution was performed by the churches: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist or Baptist. The idea here was not simply conversion to Christianity, but an "education" into the models, methods, and manners of a modern society. If the word "education" has to be put in inverted commas, it was because the type involved was deliberately low-geared when it wasn't demeaning. No cultural subjects were taught at all. What education signified here, more or less exclusively, was instruction in the simpler forms of farming and trade. Which meant, plainly, in the minds of these administrators, that "Indians" were to be maintained in a strictly subordinate position, with little to say, and no language in which to say it.

Well, an apology had been made and a "healing fund" was set up, to the tune of $350 million. But *Drum* (and another First Nations newspaper I came across later, *Kathou*) obviously felt that no real advance had been made, no real change had taken place: only more hand-outs. No mention, apparently, of the commendation made by the Royal Commission concerning the creation of an Aboriginal Parliament and an ongoing agenda of First Nations programmes, no attention at all paid to the question of culture.

What *was* implemented, with much fanfare, was National Aboriginal Day.

*

Out in the streets I saw a tipi erected in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Now, no Indian anywhere near Vancouver ever dwelt in a tipi. A tipi is a Plains Indian dwelling. But, OK, no quibble, a symbol recognized by everybody, I didn't stop at that.

In fact, I went conscientiously from venue to venue, listening to the Aboriginal Blues of the Mohawk and the Micmac, the Rock of the Tlingit nation, the Folk Rock of the Cree, the Pop Rock of the Ojibway, the "Spirit of the Ancestors" performance of the Haida, and watched the dancing of the Old Elk and Black Fish nation as well as Mooshum Bob's Little Jiggers.

It was pleasant enough. It had all the trimmings and all the trappings of "the restoration of wonder", as proclaimed by the old ethnologists such as Margaret Mead, or "the re-enchantment of the world" as proposed by sociologists such as Max Weber. But as real organic culture it was non-existent. Just a dose of Native Noise added to the general cacophony.

In the evening, still conscientious, I went to a meeting called *Forum for the Future*, where I listened to a talk by one Patrick Blue Cloud Murray, a Mohawk from a Six Nations reserve on the Grand River:

"We have to try and think ahead. So as to leave a legacy for future generations, the unborn, our family. We want to show them that we made a commitment to the environment, to the land. We fought for it. That got us here in the first place. […] What we're saying is, no more development, no more river pollution, no more poisoning. We want the government to respect the treaties, to honour our chiefs and most of all honour our Clan Mothers. […] Our responsibility here is to look after the land. This is our Mother Earth, it is where we come from, this is our culture. We are the guardians of the land. We ask that Mother Earth is honoured, that the Native People are honoured, that our native struggles, our commitment to Mother Earth, are honoured. Mother Earth is wounded, she can't do what she used to. Watch the weather, and you'll see that the universe is talking on behalf of the Indigenous Peoples. […] The people in Canada can be the catalyst for the environment, but this isn't happening because the people here are not listening to the Native People, the Aboriginal People. We are the heart beat of the environment. […]There is a wisdom different from that of the White People. We are Christians, but we keep our traditions. Our art comes from spirituality. Even after the onslaught of another culture, our spirituality and our beliefs are alive. […] The culture is still there, and we are adding to it, strengthening it. The Magical World returns! We welcome you to the Supernatural! Return to the Myth! Beat the drum, live

the dream! Follow the road that makes your heart feel good!"

I had a lot of sympathy with this. But at the same time I couldn't stomach it. It was one awful All-American mix of sentimentality, religious revivalism, identity ideology, and mythological mumbo-jumbo.

Even the best of such intentions – political, ecological, cultural – just don't have the adequate thinking and language.

The real road, if there was one, had to be elsewhere.

5 Inventing an Itinerary

(*Examining maps and charts. Meeting with a man who owns a boat and is ready to travel.*)

In coming to Vancouver, I had a lot of vague ideas in my head, which I'd figure out on the spot, but in the first instance I had planned an itinerary: a trip full of movement and vision, from Vancouver to Seward, via Ketchikan, Wrangell, Juneau, Skagway and Sitka.

Out there, as the man said, in the great I Am, the great It Is, an immense Here and Now, a Something-Nothing-Everything. With a logic gradually growing, in a quiet secretive kind of way, from this or that fleeting cause. Sea-lines and mind-lines. Cosmographical correspondences. An initiation, an exitiation. With always a critical eye open to the ways of the world.

Such was the wild project.

What I didn't have yet was a boat.

From breakfast and coffee tables in the Pan I'd gathered in quite a lot of information about the cruise ships, all of which berthed only a few yards away, and had gone to the local offices to check them out. One of them, *The Odyssea*, less "titanic" than the others, attracted me. Because of the simple fact that, at the stern, port and starboard, it had two spacious cabins. I could imagine living in one of those, totally isolated during all the trip, having all my meals in my cabin, out on a private deck with its 270° view by day and by night, sleeping very little…

That at least is what I was thinking as I sat in the Pan one evening at dinner, with another bottle of that Burrowing Owl.

But in fact another possibility turned up.

*

"You from Scotland?"

"Yes, I am."

This was in a groggery on the Eastside waterfront. The man putting the question had heard me asking for a certain whisky.

"Thought so by your accent. On business here?"

"No, just moving around."

"Moving around – I've done a bit of that myself. Name's Jim Carron Baird. I've got Scotch ancestors somewhere. That middle name Carron is from Loch Carron – you know, where they used to make the carronades."

"My name's White, Kenneth White. Middle name, John Dewar, collector of folktales, distiller of spirits, you take your pick."

"Pleased to meet you."

"My pleasure too."

Jim Baird was a grizzled fellow of about sixty, an American, originally from Oregon, but who had lived for long years in Alaska. He'd just been down to Seattle, to pick up a boat there: a 70 foot tugboat, built for the U.S. army in Alaskan waters during World War II, when the Japs were coming up the Aleutians. He'd had it revamped and fitted out, with the idea of going into the charter or cargo business, whatever turned up to make a dollar with.

He was going to be heading up the Passage in a couple of days.

"Will you be making stops?"

"Sure. Got people to see here and there."

"Me too."

"That means you want to come along?"

"Could be an idea."

"Maybe you'd like to see the boat first?"

"Right."

"Come tomorrow morning. You know the Coal Harbour marina?"

"Yes."

"That's where we are, me and *The Experience*."

"Your boat?"

"Yes."

"Quite a strange name for a boat…"

"Comes from the name of the company I've started up: the Alaska Experience. My latest attempt to realise the American Dream and make a fortune. I'd actually thought of calling it something even more abstract. Everybody's talking about concepts. So I thought I'd use something like Concept Wilderness. Then I thought again, that might put a lot of people off … Well, look, I got to be going. See you around ten tomorrow if you can."

*

The next morning around ten I was duly at Coal Harbour.

And there she was, *The M/V Experience*, – a sturdy, determined-looking craft, looking as if it could go through hell and high water, and still come out smiling.

On board, in addition to Captain Jim, there was a deck-hand and a cook.

"Her name is Cinderella, believe it or not. From the Philippines. We've agreed to cut it down to Cindie. The other guy's name is Chris. Ex-beatnik from San Francisco. Come and see below."

He had five cabins fitted out, and one of them was big.

"Looks good", I said.

"Consider it yours."

"OK. How much will it be costing me?"

We worked out a price per day for cabin and board. I was to make out a list of stops. The trip would last as long as it lasted.

"It's a deal."

Back up on the Coal Harbour waterfront, we saw a joker dressed in a yellow tracksuit with a red baseball hat and blue hockey gloves running along the pedestrian walk, stopping every twenty yards with his arms outstretched, shouting: "The end of the world is at hand! The end – of the world – is at hand!"

*

I spent the next couple of days getting some things together for the trip.

I already had a good map of Alaska. To it I now added a layout of bedrock across the North-Amerian continent done by the U.S. Geological Survey, a big Digital Shaded Relief map of Alaska, and the Alaska Atlas and Gazetter with its detailed topographical maps, from Ketchikan just inside the U.S. border to Point Hope up in the Arctic.

All set, more or less.

6 An Ancestor who Passed this Way

(*Still wandering around Vancouver, at night in the Pan Pacific, I read the Journal of the first white man to cross the American continent from East to West, from the Labrador to Alaska.*)

In his journal, Menzies, the Edinburgh surgeon-botanist who sailed with Vancouver as naturalist, refers at one point to "the adventurous and persevering views of the Canadian and Hudson's Bay traders" who had explored and prospected "the interior chain of lakes and rivers".

If ever there was a man who knew all there was to know then about those lakes and rivers, about the North-American fur trade, about French-Canadian canoe-men and about Indian life, it was Alexander Mackenzie.

Born in Scotland, in the Outer Hebrides, on the Isle of Lewis, at Stornoway, in 1764, Mackenzie was ten when he accompanied his father to New York. He might have stayed in New York and become a tycoon there, the way Andrew Carnegie did in nearby Pittsburg, but after the War of Independence had broken out, and was seen as going to last, he was sent up to Montreal in Canada to continue his schooling. At the age of fifteen he entered the service of the Montreal fur-trading company Finlay and Gregory. His work was so much appreciated that by 1784 he was an associate. Between 1785 and 1787, he was head of the trading post at Île-à-la-Crosse. Then in 1787 Finlay and Gregory joined forces with the new North-West Company, and from then on Mackenzie was an associate of this bigger outfit.

In the years that followed he was stationed in the Athabaskan country where, with Peter Pond, he founded Fort Chipewyan. Pond had the idea that a certain river flowing West from the Slave Lake ought to lead to the Pacific. Mackenzie, alone after Pond had gone back East, put the idea to the test in 1789, finding that the said river (later to be called the Mackenzie) lead not to the Pacific but to the Arctic. Still with the idea of an opening from the inland country of lakes and rivers on to the Pacific, he set out on a second expedition four years later, passing the winter at Fort Fork in the upper reaches of the

Peace River before heading West in the month of May, travelling by canoe and on foot, getting information from Indians all along the way, information that was sometimes factual and at other times fantastical.

In 1795, Mackenzie left the West, becoming an associate with McTavish, Frobisher & Co in Montreal that handled the business of the North-West Company. He had the idea of one big trading business that would unite the North-West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, but he didn't see it coming. Which is maybe why he decided to pull out, returning to Britain in 1799.

*

During his years of hard travelling and keen trading, Mackenzie had kept journals and piled up notes. With the help of a ghost, he now wrote them up, bringing together the journal of his 1789 trip from Fort Chipewyan to the Arctic, his 1793 trip from Fort Chipewyan to the Pacific, along with a "General Account of the fur Trade from Canada to the North-West" and "An Account of the Knisteneaux Indians", and publishing them, at London, in 1801, under the title: *Voyages from Montreal on the River St-Lawrence, through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans.*

I bought that book, second-hand, years ago in Glasgow, and it has accompanied me on my various removals ever since. It wasn't the fur trade in itself that attracted me, it was the workings of Mackenzie's mind, his attitude to French Canadians and Indians (everybody nowadays has a general picture of the Indian condition, earlier caricatural, now moral-political, but devoid of the telling existential detail), and his relationship to the land itself.

The French-Canadians Mackenzie knew and worked with were those canoe-men that did the long run from Grand Portage up to Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabaska via Lake of the Woods, Flin Flon, Île-à-la-Crosse, Lac La Pluie and Fort McMurray, using either the 12 meter long Montreal canoe or the shorter, 8 metre long, North canoe. Men whose motto was: carry, paddle, walk and sing. If you were young, or youngish (what was sure was, you'd never live to be old), not too tall, even better on the short side, but strong, willing to work at least eighteen hours a day, eat cheap, you could get a job with the North-West Company Mackenzie worked for. The Scotsman was often exasperated by these Franco-Canadians: to his mind, they were improvident and dissipated, indifferent to property, licentious in manners, they squandered all they ever earned, caring only for the pleasure of living

a life free of restraint. But he admired their skills, second only to those of Indians and Eskimos. As Mackenzie saw things, the French in general weren't too interested in trade, what they cared about was culture, honour and glory, almost as bad as Spaniards. Their language wasn't geared to reality: what the British called "the trade winds", they called the "*alizés*", wherever that word might come from, but it sounded lazy. They lived in a world of ideas, and those ideas could take them to all kinds of extravagant lengths. For example, they had a tendency to go native, even their missionaries. But, despite the fact that, like many of his compatriots back there in the eighteenth century, Mackenzie had decided to become as British a bulldog as was possible, there was a certain Frenchness even to him, something that had rubbed off on him in Montreal. It was evident even in his language. "I ordered my hunters to arrange their fuzees", he says in his journals, using the French word, *fusils*, in place of rifle or musket. Of a canoe, he says it "was broke to pieces and lost all her menage", again that "menage" is the French *ménage* (goods and chatels). And of a band of Redknife Indians he'll say: "They had given *parole* to Mr Leroux", and not just in plain English, "their word".

*

Mackenzie's general attitude to Indians was a compound of caution and curiosity, free both of ignorant contempt and naïve idealisation.

I love that general panorama he gives, evoking "a ridge of high snowy mountains", on which "we perceived several smokes". On closer acquaintance, the Indians are seen as small, wandering bands of savages, akin to wolves. As to mentality: "These people are of so changeable a nature that there is no security with them" – though whether that volatile changeability is due to caracterial, congenital instability or swiftly changing circumstance is left moot. On the moral plane, they don't think like Christians. Child-murder (from the Indian point of view, simply to keep the population down) was not infrequent. When a woman tells Mackenzie about the shooting by some paleface hunter of her dog, saying the loss of that dog meant more to her than the loss of five of her children the previous winter, he says he cannot understand such an attitude – but probably came to suspect that it is much easier to beget children than to get hold of a good dog.

The Indians Mackenzie knew best were those of the interior, mainly Chipewyans, whom he frequented from his base on Lake Athabaska ("The

place I made my head-quarters for eight years, and from whence I took my departure on both my expeditions"), "a country hitherto unknown but from Indian report", and which in the Knisteneaux (Cree) language, he says, means "swampland". He describes these Chipewyans as "sober, timorous and vagrant" and as "the most peaceable tribe of Indians known in North America." They had apparently no regular government, but followed certain general principles. They had a creation myth according to which, in the beginning, all was one vast ocean, till a mighty bird, the Thunderbird, whose eyes were full of fire, whose glances were lightning, and whose wings flapped thunder, touched the water and made earth emerge out of it, calling then into existence all the other birds and animals. In their ceremonies, they try to imitate the bear, the wolf and the caribou. They also draw figures, usually in red, on rocks and make offerings to them. In addition, they have "spirit stones" which they consider "good medicine", keeping them as among their most precious possessions in special "medicine bags."

They speak, he says, "a copious language which is very difficult to be attained." Mackenzie began to study it, making a list of words comparing Indian lexicons of the West (Athabaskan) and the East (Algonquin):

	Kristeneaux	Algonquin
man:	ethini	inini
woman:	esquois	chquois
beaver:	amisk	amic
wolverine:	qui qua katch	quin quoagki
bear:	masqua	macqua
otter:	nekick	niquick
wood:	mistick	mitic
rain:	kimowoin	kimiwoini
snow:	counah	soquipo
north:	kywoitin	kewoitninak
earth:	askee	achki
sea:	kitchi kitchi	kitchi kitchi

Coming into contact with more and more tribes, including the coastal peoples

("well-set and better clothed with flesh than any of the nations of the interior"), and the Eskimos who came in from the North in search of flint stones to point their spears and arrows, studying their ways and words, he comes to have a synthetic sense of all the Indian movements in the territory.

Of the Eskimos, he has this to say: "Their progress is Easterly; and, according to their own tradition, they came from Siberia; agreeing in dress and manners with the people now found upon the coast of Asia." On the Chipewyans, he has this: "They have also a tradition amongst them, that they originally came from another country, inhabited by very wicked people, and had traversed a great lake, which was narrow, shallow and full of islands, where they had suffered great misery, it being always winter, with ice and deep snow", which could also indicate a movement, a forced one this, out from lower down the coast across the Bering Straits. And of the Blackfeet and Blood Indians he says that "they are a distinct people, speak a language of their own, and, I have reason to believe, are travelling North-Westward", as though they were completing the circle, going back to source.

*

If Mackenzie was there in Canada, and in the North-West territories in particular, it was principally with "commercial views". His job was to extend trade from sea to sea, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, by exploiting, for furs, that "mostly barren and broken land" between Montreal and Lake Athabaska. Having shown early on what he could do with a small "adventure of goods", he had become part integral of the newly created North-West Company, out to best the Hudson's Bay Company by travelling further, going to the farthest limits of the French discoveries, right until they were "stopped by the frost".

When Mackenzie was on the trail, and he often was, he was meticulous to an almost maniacal degree: he even counted the number of paces to be made at the carrying places (*portages*). His *Journals* are filled with inch-to-inch steering directions, and in the introduction, he apologises for this, saying no "romantic adventures" will be found in them. But who wants "romantic adventures"? We've had a glut of them. I for one prefer by far a document like that of Mackenzie's to so many novels. Especially as he is not so restrictive as he makes himself out to be. Realising acutely, in the course of his first long voyage, his lack of astronomical and navigational knowledge, he went back to Britain to learn some. And if he says he lacks "the science of the

naturalist", he nonetheless has his eyes and other sense organs open, as well as his mind. Remarks on cedar, hemlock, white birch and other trees abound in his pages and he has a keen perception too of animals and their ways. He describes in detail ("10 ft deep, 5 ft high, 6 ft wide") the den of a bear, using the Indian term, *watee*. Beaver he describes as "those wonderful creatures", those "active and sagacious animals", and he evokes a wolf "parading a ridge". When he encounters a phenomenon he doesn't understand, he notes it and leaves a question mark, as, for example, the strange rise and fall, the "irregular influx and deflux" of waters at Grand Portage, or his general sense of a change in the climate: "… some predominating operation in the system of the globe which is beyond my conjecture." All in all, a country unfolds itself, is dis-covered, with all its blanks and obscurities, its beauties and its revelations.

*

The country was that wide tract of mountain and valley and wide-spread forest presented at first, without amenity, with no attempt to raise aesthetic expectations, as "a dreary waste". But what at first, to a civilised mind, seems "dreary" is gradually invested with "a rude and wild magnificence", containing "such an astonishing and awful combination of objects" that it leaves Mackenzie, literally, speechless. At those moments, he is reduced to the simplest of sentences which, to my mind, contain more of the real basis of poetry than so many more elaborate efforts "At the setting in of the hard frost"; "the weather was cold and raw, with small rain"; the weather was clear, with a sharp air". Here he is arriving on the coast at the mouth of the Bella Coola River that late July 1793 at the end of his great overland crossing: "The tide was out and had left a large space covered with sea-weed. The surrounding hills were involved in fog." Where Mackenzie debouched on to the Pacific was just a little to the north of Elcho Harbour at the mouth of the Bella Coola River, having completed the first overland crossing of North America. To commemorate the event, he mixed up some vermilion in melted grease, and inscribed, in large characters, on the South-East face of the rock on which he and his companions had slept the previous night, this brief memorial: *Alexander Mackenzie, from Canada, by land, the twenty-second of July, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-three."*

He also wrote a letter, put it into an empty rum-cask and entrusted it to the waters of the world, around which it may still be rolling. Rolling in its own orbit, like so many other lost letters of the world.

7 The Opening Space

(*Moving out across the Gulf of Georgia. Then up north, calling in at Bella Coola and Ketchikan.*)

Three days after my meeting with Baird, we were moving out, making for the Lions Gate Bridge at the exit of Burrard Inlet, along the log-strewn shore. Stanley Park and its totems there to port, West Vancouver to starboard, and a cone of sulphur piled up on a wharf gleaming bright-yellow in the morning sun:

"It gets transported by rail from Alberta, and it's shipped from Vancouver all round the Pacific Rim", said Cap'n Jim.

We passed by a big red-hulled cargo of the Hyundai Line, registered in Monrovia, a Seaspan pilot boat, a black barge with two cranes being pulled by a blunt-nosed tug, and a flotilla of six fishing boats:

"They come in all kinds – gill netters, purse seiners, trollers, long-liners."

Moving out.

The skyline of Vancouver slowly receding.

Then up through the Narrows, under the bridge, and out into the Gulf of Georgia.

To port now, the Vancouver Island Heights that rise up from Nootka Sound. To starboard, the great gleaming peaks of the Pacific range looking over Jervis Inlet, Knight Inlet, Seymour Inlet.

A tug towing a great barge piled with sand.

Smoke rising from a pulp mill at Campbell River.

Islands of floating logs.

A great rumour of waters and a wind rising.

The Three Sisters lighthouse on Texada.

Seymour Narrows.

"The Indians called it Yaculta. Name of a wicked spirit. Because of a whirlpool of waters around Ripple Rock. Got in the way of traffic. Used to

cause a lot a wrecks. Was blasted by dynamite in 1958."

Alert Bay.

"That's a Kwakiutl Indian base. They'd come down to work in the canneries. But they still kept to their old ways, with totems, potlaches and all."

Moving west-nor-west up the Gulf of Georgia, with the idea of calling in at Bella Coola, where we'd spend the night. Jim the captain had some business there.

So we moved up the narrow sea-arm to Bella Coola, past bold greyblack ice-scarred granite bluffs, and clumps of hemlock, sitka spruce, red cedar. Here and there, the great sprawling nests of white-headed eagles, the birds either hunched, or spreading their seven-feet wingspan. Seals, harbor seals, swimming with their smooth heads just breaking the surface of the water. Sea otters nestled in clumps of seaweed, basking, the image of absolute innocence.

Once we were tied up at the wharf, I went for a walk into town, where I saluted the ghost of Mackenzie on Mackenzie Street.

*

On the following morning, it was the great blue misty expanse of the Queen Charlotte Sound. Over there to the west, the Queen Charlotte Islands, called by the Indians the Haida Gwai, "the Islands of the People".

We were now moving up close to the Canada-USA, British Columbia-Alaska frontier at Dixon Entrance.

The next port of call was to be Ketchikan.

Which meant going up the Revillagigedo Channel, past the north end of the Annette Island Indian Reservation, into the Tongass Narrows.

To starboard, forest – the cry of a raven. To port, settlements – shacks on pillars flying American flags, old boat hulks surrounded by refuse.

Here and there a little floatplane.

Fishing boats coming out from Ketchikan: *Sea Mist, Miss Teal.*

Half-moon hanging in the sky, sun rising, smothered orange, over snowy mountains.

*

WELCOME TO KETCHIKAN
Salmon Capital of the World.

If Ketchikan got itself billed, at least in South-East Alaska, as "the wickedest little town in the country of Uncle Sam", it was because of a line of saloons and bordellos that got set up as from the end of the nineteenth century along the banks of Salmon Creek, then on the edge of the community, and which did great business during the flush times of the salmon canneries. As Thelma Copeland, alias Dolly Arthur, the Madam of Dolly's House, speaking of the salmon-fishers, put it: "When they're out fishing, all they talk about is Creek Street." Alongside Dolly's House stood The Star that, in addition to an assortment of sporting women, also offered as background accompaniment the catchy piano-playing of Blind Ernie. Nearby those two illustrious establishments, there were about thirty others. Despite efforts by missionaries such as the Canadian Robert Dicks and reformed soiled doves such as Molly Walsh, who herself performed a kind of missionary work by opening a Coffee & Doughnut tent on the Canadian side of the White Pass summit, where she encouraged young ladies of fortune to go back home, the red lights continued to glimmer up to 1954.

"Like to come in, honey?", she said.

She was a good-looking woman, whorishly dressed in a flouncy crimson dress, face rouged and powdered:

"Some other time", I said. "Maybe a hundred years ago."

Before white miners and fishermen, followed by gold-seekers and loggers, came to settle the place in 1885, KichXáan ("eagle wing stream") was a summer fish camp of the Tlingit. It was of Tlingit and Tsimshian people I was thinking as I left Creek Street along the quiet Married Man's Trail, past the American Legion, past old Dodges and Pontiacs abandoned here and there, past a garden bearing on its gate this piece of bold Byronic verse:

Here lies, cold and hard
the last damn dog
that pooped in my yard

to the Totem Heritage Center up on Deermount.

It was a young fellow of about eighteen who was officiating at the reception desk:

"How are things?" I said.

"Oh, not so shabby."

Since business was slack, he proposed to guide me through the exhibits, but I said, thanks, I'd rather just move around on my own.

So, it would appear that the Tlingit were divided into two lineages, according to their totemic ancestors, the Eagle and the Raven. Each of these divisions was further subdivided into clans or houses: in the Eagle lineage, for example, the Bear clan and the Wolf clan, in the Raven lineage, the Ork clan and the Salmon clan. If this structure gave the human being a larger identity, it was also at the base of a social organisation, itself based on biological considerations: to prevent degeneration, exogamy was the rule – an Eagle had to marry a Raven. Each lineage owned specific territories, resources, privileges, names and crests. It is the descent from the animal ancestor, as well as other information concerning clan and family and individual, that are carved and painted on the totem poles. There at the Ketchikan Center they had gathered in old poles from the forest, old poles decayed, covered with moss, such as the Haida poles from Old Kasaan (Gas a' a'n).

Those old poles, as well as some others I saw later, at Saxman, a couple of miles out of town, meant more to me than any of the fine remakes I'd seen here and there. If they'd been left to decay, it was because the Christian missionaries had said they were devil's work, as likewise all the rituals and dances connected with them. A statement by a woman who had lived at Metlakalta went like this: "My grandmother told me when Christianity came her uncle went down to the shore and burned everything. He had heard that the Lord would not receive you into heaven if you still held on to your treasure and looked to it." Referring to one of these missionaries, another statement, made with wry humour, has this: "We didn't know that when William Duncan handed us the Bible we would be losing our lands and our fishing rights."

One of the ceremonies that was put down by law in 1884 was the potlatch. If this consisted of songs and dances celebrating names and history, its most spectacular gesture was the wholesale distribution of wealth, mainly in the form of blankets. I've seen this interpreted in purely economic terms, but if these gifts were made (the term potlatch itself comes from a Chinook word meaning "to give"), it was, as I saw in a little note made by a Tlingit there at Ketchikan, so that, having received a gift, "people would remember what they had seen." It might only be a family eager to display wealth and power, but the larger background would also come into it. It was that larger background which was maintained by the secret societies such as the Hamat'sa who danced with blackened faces or wearing masks. I'm no ethnologist, and have no interest in renaissances. If some, indeed many, of the artefacts I'd seen

had fascination for me (I'm thinking of a "speaker's staff" decorated with octopus, frog and raven I saw there at Ketchikan), my tendency is always to extrapolation and abstraction. So that, unwilling to interpret the totem solely as "family tree" or heraldry or coats of arms, I choose to see in totemism mainly a sense of totality: human connected to animal and animals connected to the elements in which they live (air, land and sea). Extrapolation, abstraction – and basic sensation. As when, on some country lane, you see in the morning mist, looking into a pale white sun, a crow perched atop a telegraph pole.

*

After the museum, I went back downtown.

City Hall.

Masonic Temple.

Tongass Trading Store.

Annabelle's Keg and Chowder House.

The Sourdough Bar.

On the pavement in front of the sourdough, an old codger was holding up the wall wearing a miner's tin helmet, at his side a beautiful husky with dollar bills stuck in her collar:

"Name is Katie. She's a real good gal … We'll go get a drinka water. She's hot."

I ended up facing a plate of chowder at Chinook Charlie's.

The conversation at the table next me there in Chinook Charlie's place, talk between an older man and two younger guys, was all about boats and fish and money.

"A wild salmon run is a thing of the past", the older man was saying. It was all hatcheries now. At the time of the imprinting, they'd set the graylings in a certain water. That's the water they'll return to. Days were, the scows would be coming in loaded with fish – salmon trollers, halibut schooners. At one time there was a flotilla of twenty of them schooners. Then it all failed. The price of halibut slumped, and the boats went down to Seattle.

One of the younger men had worked in a cannery, on what he called "the slime line". You'd get ten guys in a row, each one with a special task. One to slit the fish open, one to cut off the gills, and so on. Lousy work. And the wage minimal. The worst job he'd ever had. The big money was in diving. He'd been on a dive boat just a few months back. Wasn't diving himself, just handling

the gear. Even then, it was good money. But it was the divers that got the big bucks. Diving for sea cucumber and those clams – the geo-clams – markets in Japan and Hong Kong. A diver could rake in a thousand dollars a day, no kidding.

The other young fellow said he was waiting for his PFD cheque to buy himself a new rig of clothes.

I know about that PFD dividend, because Jim Baird had told me about it. The Alaska Permanent Fund gets 25% of State mineral income and distributes the money to all those who have lived in the State for at least one year. Jim had told me that in 2000 he got close on 2000 dollars. Some years it could get as low as 300. "But even then, you know, it's a welcome boon – like Santa Claus."

*

Out of Charlie's, I continued wandering around Ketchikan.

Saw in the window of an old curiosity shop the picture of a legendary logger, Arvid the Swede.

Passed the workshop of a local artist, Johnny Troll, who sculpts monsters.

In a mineral shop, picked up a piece of smoky quartz – like a glacier surrounded by black mountains.

8 Salutations to the Ice-Chief

(*Portrait of a mountaineer-philosopher, close to my heart since I first made his acquaintance at the age of fifteen, back there in Scotland.*)

On the morning of July 20, 1879, a man leapt on to the pier at Fort Wrangell from the monthly mailboat. He was about forty years old, lean and wiry, with wavy red-brown hair, slightly stooped, wearing a Scotch cap and a long grey ulster.

His name was John Muir. For those who went in for official titles, he was "Professor Muir, the Naturalist". For himself he was a "geologico-botanico-ornithologico-poetico tramp". For the Stikine Indians, those among them who didn't *wawa Boston* (speak English), he was to be known as *Glate Ankow*, the ice-chief.

He was born in Scotland, at Dunbar, twenty five miles east of Edinburgh, in 1838. Eleven years later, the family emigrated to America, where his father, a strict, God-fearing Calvinist, ready to work both himself and his offspring to the bone, set up a farm in Wisconsin. While toiling on the farm, John also found the time to explore the territory around it, read books and, thanks to a mechanical invention of his, attend for a while the University of Wisconsin where, though attached to a technical department, he followed courses in geology and botany. Determined to have nothing to do with the Civil War, he lit out for Canada. Once the War was over, more and more a student in what he called "the university of the wilderness", Muir undertook the trip that he was to recount later in one of his books, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, intending to make for South America. But he stopped over in California and, discovering the valley of Yosemite, stayed there for six years, amazed by its beauty, studying its fauna, its flora, and its ancient glaciers. In a novel, *Zanita, a tale of the Yosemite* by a certain Thérèse Yelverton, published in 1872, in which Muir, caricatured, but in an admiring way, appears as the character Kenmuir, first seen by the female narrator at Glacier Point, one finds this piece of dialogue:

"What on earth is that?", I exclaimed, pointing to the singular creature extending itself as though about to take wing from the very verge of a pinnacle overhanging a terrific precipice. "Is it a man, a tree, or a bird?"

"It's a man, you bet", replied my guide, chuckling. "No tree or shrub as big as my fist ever found footing there. It's that darned idiot Kenmuir, and the sooner he dashes out that rum mixture of his he calls brains the sooner his troubles'll be over, that's my idea."

John Muir was to remain a "singular creature" for many, and a "darned fool" for just as many, but he was the man who persuaded the president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, to set up a continental system of National Parks in North America and who founded the first conservationist organisation, the Sierra Club.

*

It was after eleven years studying ecstatically the forest and wild life, but above all the glaciology of the Sierra Nevada, that, "eager to gain some knowledge of the regions to the northward, about Puget Sound and Alaska", Muir left San Francisco in May 1879 aboard the steamer Dakota, with "no definite plan", but with "a grand object in view".

On that morning, as he watched the mailboat leave from the Wrangell waterfront, he who loved being all on his own in the wilderness, felt, for the first time in his life, strangely lonesome.

Wrangell was the roughest, most inhospitable place of habitation he'd ever seen: "No mining hamlet in the placer gulches of California, nor any backwoods village I ever saw, approached it in picturesque, devil-may-care abandon. It was a lawless bedraggle of wooden huts and houses, built in crooked lines wrangling around the boggy shore of the island for a mile or so." Placer gold had been discovered on the Mackenzie River and its tributaries about 200 miles inland in 1874, so that, every year since, Wrangell had witnessed a passing horde of miners and prospectors (eighteen hundred that year of 1879), about half of them Chinese. The Stikine River on which they had travelled inland would be freezed over from October to end of April. Some would walk its frozen length. But most waited for the breakup and the steamer. They'd go up country in May, and come back down in September. Maybe two thirds of them would winter in Portland, Oregon or Victoria, British Columbia, but the poorest would hang around Wrangell, dozing and

boozing. That annual invasion apart, the permanent population consisted of about fifty whites who traded in fish and furs, owning half-a-dozen stores, and a hundred or so Indians of the Stikine tribe. The Whites inhabited the middle of town, the Indians the two extremes. All lived in houses of logs and planks, the Indian ones, or at least some of them, being fronted by totem poles.

There was no tavern or lodging house, and the mission house where the Presbyterian missionaries Muir had travelled with on the mailboat was full. That wouldn't have bothered him if he could have found a good place to camp. But he couldn't, the ground was too marshy. For while he got leave to spread his blanket in a carpenter's shop. Then one of the wealthier merchants, a Mr Vanderbilt, offered him a room in his home. That solved the first problem, and in addition at the Vanderbilts he met prospectors and traders as well as leading Indians from whom he could get direct information. What he was waiting for, trusting always to his good luck, was a chance to get away into the wilderness and pursue the "grand object" he had in mind.

In the meantime, he wandered around Wrangell and the immediate countryside.

He watched the Indian women who sold berries – huckleberries, salmonberries, cranberries – and berry cakes along the street, in front of the trade shops, the old women blanketed, with blackened faces, the young ones dressed in showy calico, with jaunty straw hats. He watched the men going out to fish in canoes with "high and long beak-like prows and sterns" and "lines as fine as those of the breast of a duck". And once he was invited along with merchants and missionaries to a dinner and dance at the local chief's house. What surprised him at the dinner was that there was no trace at all of Indian dishes, the whole meal consisting of "imported canned stuff" served "Boston fashion". As for the dances, they were Indian all right: "A monotonous stamping accompanied by hand-clapping, head-jerking, and explosive grunts kept in time to grim drum beats, with, in the bear dance, the deer dance, the porpoise dance, wonderfully agile and true-life imitations of animals." But when the time came for speeches, the dance display was repudiated: "That is the way we used to dance. We were long in the dark, but now we are not blind. We will not dance any more." At the end of the evening, in a kind of latter day potlatch, all the dance-dresses were given away, and Muir got "one of the fantastic head-dresses worn by shamans".

But if he kept an eye on Indian life, Muir spent most of his time gazing up at trees and poking among plants, thereby arousing wonderment, amused contempt, even suspicion, in Whites and Indians alike. Who was this fellow

who seemed to have no fixed business at all, no serious object in life whatsoever, who went around looking at stumps of trees "as if he expected to find gold in them"? If pushed to it, Muir would say that he was engaged in "forest and glacier studies". But since that only made things worse, he preferred to keep silent, enjoying the company of his "old favourites", the heathworts (*kalmia, pyrola, chiogenes*) along with "darling linnaea", carex, and grasses with purple panicles, studying the growth of hemlock, spruce and Nootka cypress. One night when a heavy rain-bearing wind was blowing, he made his way unobserved up to the hill back of the town, in order to "see how the Alaska trees behave in storms and hear the songs they sing."

He had quickly got over his lonesomeness, and he was beginning to take a liking to Wrangell. Despite its disorder and squalor, its weather was salubrious, and he especially liked its *atmosphere*. In California, the light was bodiless, pure essence, with hardly any atmosphere at all. Whereas here the light, a pearl-grey haze or a glowing silver, was substantial, palpable. The brightest of Wrangell days were not what Californians would call bright, and what prevailed was a wet mistiness, but even on the most bleak and dismal days, there would be "a flush of early or late colour", or "some white illumination" .

So Muir came to be happy enough in Wrangell. But he never forgot his "grand object", which meant getting into the wilderness as deeply as possible, and pushing his studies to the limit.

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The first opportunity that presented itself was a trip up the Stikine river in the company of the missionaries whose acquaintance he had made in Wrangell. Of all the rivers that cross the coast range, the Alsek, the Chilkat, the Taku, the Chilkoot, the Stikine, the latter was then the best known because, as aforesaid, it was the best way to the Mackenzie River gold mines. About three hundred and fifty miles long, it was navigable for a hundred and fifty up to Glenora.

The little steamer Cassiar that had been chartered for the trip moved up the Stikine river canyon between its many glaciers ("admired even by the passing miners with gold-dust in their eyes", says Muir) and tied up at Glenora around one in the afternoon. The general proposition there was more sight-seeing, followed by a missionary meeting (a "big talk", *hyou wawa*) with a local band of Stikine Indians. But, straining at the leash, Muir had other ideas. With his eye on a group of mountains rising to about 7000 feet 8 miles NE of the landing, he determined to climb the highest summit in order to get a general view of

the peaks and glaciers and enjoy the sunset from up there. It was by now after 3, and the captain of the Cassiar said he'd be heading back to Wrangell at 2 in the morning. Muir was sure he could make it. To most of the missionaries it was a harebrained scheme. But one of them, Samuel Young, expressed the desire to go along with him. Muir strongly advised against it: a sixteen mile walk followed by a 7000 feet climb, all to be done in ten hours, some of them night hours, would be a fair day's work even for a seasoned mountaineer, which Young probably wasn't. Young said he was a good walker, had some experience of mountains, and re-expressed his keenness, so much so that Muir finally gave in, while waiving all responsibility. So off they went, each with a couple of hardtack biscuits, Muir's staple mountain diet. When the climb started, Young proved indeed to be no novice among the rocks, and Muir began to have some confidence in him. As for Young's own feelings, if he'd been with mountain climbers before, he had never seen anyone move like Muir. This fellow loped like a deer, leapt like a hare, slipped along like a snake. For a while all went well enough. But what Young hadn't told Muir (probably not wanting to admit it to himself) was that, because of a horse-riding accident, he was weak in the shoulders. So that when, at one rough spot, he took a fall, he dislocated both his arms, the humerus ripped right out of its socket. Muir managed to set one arm, not the other, which he simply bound tight to the body, before beginning to get his crippled companion back to ground level. It was a long, slow, harassing process. But, with a mixture of skill, determination and sheer physical stamina, Muir saw it through.

He was to travel again with Young, whom he called an "adventurous evangelist", but never in similar circumstances. If they climbed a mountain, Young would stop at a couple of thousand feet while Muir did the other few thousand on his own.

Back at Wrangell after that first *rendez-vous manqué* with the Stikine territory, Muir knew he had to get back up there, and this time absolutely solo.

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He did so not long after, first taking the regular steamer up to the head of navigation at Glenora, then pushing inland along the Cassiar trail, with time at his disposal, exactly the way he liked it.

At Dease Lake, he took a pause to lay out in his mind a map of fluvial geography, seeing the waters of Dease Creek, along with those of the other creeks in the vicinity (the Thibert, the McDame, the Defot) joining with those

of the Mackenzie and flowing into the Arctic Ocean "by a very long, round-about, romantic way". Not so long ago savage, the activity on them now was industrious, often sordid, sometimes pathetic, always restricted. All of these streams had proven rich in gold, and were littered now with wing-dams, flumes and sluice-boxes. Muir wandered along their banks, reflecting on mining and the meaning of wealth, taking a look also into the taverns frequented by the miners along that Cassiar gold trail, the worst he'd ever seen: rough shacks with dirt floors, dirt roofs, and dirt meals – "a potato, a slice of something like bacon, some grey stuff called bread and a cup of muddy, semi-liquid coffee that the California miners call slumgullion". The conditions of life there, as well as its perspectives, contrasted strongly with those of a band of Toltan Indians he'd seen at the North Fork of the Stikine, catching their winter supply of salmon in willow traps. These inland Indians, he noted, pale copper-coloured and with small hands and feet, were very different physiologically from the thickset, heavy-featured coastal tribes, and maybe culturally too.

It was at a trading post, where the French-Canadian had come to buy flour and bacon, that Muir met Le Claire, an old *coureur de bois* who at that time had a gold mine at the head of Defot Creek. Le Claire invited Muir to his cabin, and Muir went. He admired several things in Le Claire: his generosity, his capacity to carry a heavy load and still tread lightly over rough trails (the Defot Creek was about 40 miles long), and the fact that, despite the rigours of a hard wilderness life, he had maintained undimmed a real love of nature. Once at the cabin, Le Claire introduced Muir to his favourite flower, the forget-me-not (his wife and children lived away down in Victoria) and to one of his close friends, a brown-speckled marmot, already concerned, "every hair and nerve a weather instrument", about gathering in winter supplies. They talked there in the "wild garden" about the "plant people" (bluebell, blue geranium, larkspur, *linnaea borealis*…) and the "mountain people" (caribou, ptarmigan) before climbing up to the ridge behind the cabin to gaze out over the vast expanse of that great mountain region until sundown. Thereafter it was supper, then blankets laid out on the floor, and Le Claire telling stories of his life with Indians, bears, wolves, snow and hunger.

Another day like that, and Muir made his way back to Telegraph Creek, the end of his 200-mile inland walk, "happy and rich without a particle of obscuring gold-dust care". From Telegraph, he travelled the fifteen miles down river to Glenora on an Indian canoe with four paddlers. He hadn't forgotten his plan to climb to the top of Glenora Peak and get the general view of the coast Range that he'd missed out on when he'd made his first try with Young.

Once up there, he enjoyed one of the most "impressively sublime" of all the mountain vistas he'd ever known: more than three hundred miles of the amazing Coast Range and upwards of two hundred glaciers of every size and shape and context – crawling through gorges, pouring over cliffs, walled up in mountain cirques with only their edges flowing in blue cascades. "All the world seemed new-born. Every thing, even the commonest, was seen in a new light." It was a culmination point. But the sight of all those gleaming glaciers had put Muir into an appetite for direct contact with one. After ecstasy, study, then after study, another ecstasy, and so on, *ad infinitum*. On the very next day he made for Dirt Glacier, so called because of its lateral moraine, pushing his way through thickets of thorny devil's club (*echinopanax horridum*), till he got into its high white world, crossing over it for eight miles, wishing that in place of the few crackers he had in his pocket he had a good supply of hardtack and could spend a whole week. Back down, still obsessed with "ice-work", he went to Buck Station, where the keeper, a Frenchman by the name of Choquette, provided him with biscuits made by his Indian wife, some dried salmon, sugar and tea, a blanket, and a piece of light sheeting before he left for the Big Stikine glacier:

"When can I expect you back?"

"Oh, any time. I shall see as much as possible of the glacier, and I know not how long it will hold me."

"You know how dangerous it is. Russian officers from Sitka went up that glacier from here and they never came back."

"Never mind me. I am used to caring for myself."

He was back a week later, having learnt, as the result of "exhilarating study", "a most telling lesson in earth sculpture". He rested a while at Choquette's house, writing out his notes, "planning the work that had long been in mind", then went back down to Wrangell in a passing canoe, the "grand object" with which he had come to Alaska in the first place more and more "in view".

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The Stikine trips were in fact preliminary preludes to a grand programme which included in the first instance a consequential trip up north to the Chilkat country.

A first attempt to get into these regions which "burned in his mind" had been made when Muir joined a party composed of missionaries out to ascer-

tain the "spiritual wants" of the ferocious Chilkats and business people out to see opportunities for commerce. Always ready to seize on any chance if it was liable in one way or another to further his studies, Muir, his mind on "mountains, glaciers and forest", was more than willing to string along, paying his passage with lessons in geology: reading from "Nature's Bible", "preaching glacial gospel". All might have been well if the engine of the chartered steamer hadn't begun to show signs of exhaustion and if the missionaries hadn't got worried at the lengthening of the trip and therefore the lengthening of the bill – a situation and a consideration which resulted in a majority decision to turn back. "The extra dollars outweighed the mountains and the missions", was Muir's ironical comment off. But, as usual, he made the best of things, managing to extract something of value even from the most unpromising contexts. Twice he grabbed the chance of a short anchorage to jump ashore and study forest plants, and once to climb a glacier. He also learned more about Tlingit architecture and totem poles from a visit to a ruined Indian village. But compared to what he'd originally had in mind, it was a false start.

It was only when Muir got back from his lone Stikine trip that the great plan really got underway.

This time, with the exception of Young, there would be no missionaries, and no steamer. What was needed was a good canoe, with a crew of Indians who knew the way. The canoe, a 6 fathom red-cedar craft, they got from a Stikine chief that Muir calls Toyatte and that Young in his account calls Tow-a-att (Young knew more Indian language than Muir). Toyatte, as owner, and as chief, would be captain, the other crew members being Kadachan, a Stikine sub-chief who was kin to a chief of the Chilkats, Stickeen John and Sitka Charley.

The idea was to travel up north-west through the myriad-islanded Alexandria Archipelago, across a territory of land and sea that was still virtually *terra incognita*. Vancouver's chart was good, but would almost certainly be found wanting (which proved the case), if only because the landscape would have considerably changed since 1807: new islands would have appeared volcanically; tides and rivers would have opened new passages, closing others; glaciers dumping moraine silt would have created new promontories; some glaciers might have advanced, others receded, the sea there running into long fjords and enlarging bays; and where before there was one big wall of ice, you might find now a dozen separate glaciers.

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In the course of this eight hundred mile trip, there would be a double agenda. On the one hand, mission activity, with Young preaching, arranging for churches and schools, making censuses; on the other, Muir's more undefinable explorations. On the one hand ethno-evangelistic work; on the other, geo-poetic work. But there could and would be interrelationship and collaboration. Young was interested in Muir's preoccupations, and Muir was not totally indifferent to at least part of his.

Muir liked to listen around the evening's camp fire to the Indians talking about their old traditions, religion and customs, and about their relations to the wild animals. They were superstitious, but no more so than many other people. They engaged perpetually in inter-tribal warfare, but so it was all over the world, with, on national and imperial battlefields, more disastrous consequences. What he admired most was a faculty of attention to surroundings, far superior to the "poor shallow comfort of town-dwellers", and a large sense of space: those people thought nothing, for example, of a thousand-mile canoe trip from the Chilkat country to Victoria.

When asked to declare themselves on the approach to a village, Stickeen John, in the office of interpreter, would cry out: "A preacher-chief and an ice-chief are coming among you!" At the meetings, if it would be first and foremost Young who would do the talking, Muir too was often, indeed regularly, asked to speak. He'd begin by demurring: he wasn't a missionary, he was only "travelling to see the country, the glaciers, mountains and forests." But these subjects, strange to say, he notes, "seemed to be about as interesting to them as the gospels." Given the context, he obviously stuck to homiletic generalities such as the love of the Great Father for all men, the beauty and power of God's creation, and so on. But the Indians thought he spoke well. Better in fact than Young. After one such meeting, Toyatte said to Young: "*Mika tillicum hi yu tola wawa* (your friend leads you far in speaking).

In fact, Muir was in his element, engaged in what he called "foundational truth", with prime material, primal movements, right before his eyes, enhancing his senses, enlarging the scope of his thought: "fresh beauty everywhere and facts for study", facts about "world-shaping".

As they moved west across Sumner Strait, between Kupremanof and Prince of Wales, then northwards up the Keku Strait, thereafter Frederick's Sound, then up Chatham Strait to Icy Strait, and from there up the Lynn Canal, travelling sometimes late into the dark, every stroke of a paddle making a surge of white light in the phosphorescent waters, Muir had before him

every day, in all kinds of atmospheres, a multitude of islets and islands. The variety was bewildering, but back of that bewildering variety he sensed an underlying harmony, conceiving it all in terms of a complex poem still to be grasped in its entirety: "Viewed one by one, they seem detached beauties, like extracts from a poem, while, from the completeness of their lines each seems a finished stanza in itself."

Close to the Chilkat country, ready to hold a direct course up "the lovely Lynn Canal", Muir and his companions got wind of trouble among the Indians: the Chilkats were on a whisky rampage, drinking and fighting. Because of this the party turned westward towards a great bay of ice that Sitka Charley had visited years before but of whose exact location he was no longer certain. In Icy Strait they met a band of Indian seal-hunters:

"Are you going to preach to the seals and gulls?"

"This is not a missionary. He wants to see ice-mountains."

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One of the seal-hunters accepted to serve as guide, and that was Muir's introduction to Sit-a-da-kay (Glacier Bay), the grandest "congregation of glaciers" he had ever seen. There they rose, lofty cliffs of ice that he would name the Geikie (after James Geikie, the Scottish geologist), the Hugh Miller (another Scottish geologist), the Pacific, the Muir…The next day being Sunday, Young stayed in camp because of religion and the Indians because of bad weather, so Muir left on his own "to see what I might learn". What he wanted was a general comprehensive view of the whole area, the whole arena. And he got it, that Sunday and on the days following, trudging through rain and mud, ploughing through snow up to the shoulder, doing mountaineering of the toughest kind, tracing his way amid mazes of crevasses, up to heights of 15,000 feet, sketching, writing in his notebook with benumbed fingers. Glacier Bay with its huge glaciers and the berg-filled expanse of its waters was "a solitude of ice and snow and newborn rocks, dim, dreary, mysterious." If it was "dim and dreary" (a condition which in no way lessened Muir's exaltation) that late October, the Bay could also light up suddenly with all shades of blue, from a pale, shimmering limpidity to a startling almost shrieking vitriol. And once at dawn, in a deep brooding stillness made all the more intense by the thunder of bergs newly broken off the glacier fronts, he saw a strange unearthly light, crimson, then red, then rose, spreading over the topmost peaks of the range, as though it came from inside the mountains themselves,

as though matter itself was illuminated. To Muir, the Glacier Bay experience was an insight into the morning of creation, it was world in the making ("for the world, though made, is yet being made"), landscape following landscape "in endless rhythm and beauty".

But time was running short. The Indians began to talk of a *skookum house* (a jail of ice), and even Muir had to admit that the danger of being imprisoned in a jam of icebergs was real and imminent. So they made back to Wrangell, with Muir "taking last lingering looks at the wonderful place I might never see again."

He actually did see it again, because the whole area, Glacier Bay in particular, drew him like a magnet, and because, in addition to his other qualities, Muir was as persevering and determined as they make them. He was back in August of 1880, with a different crew, and on a different route, and he was back again in June of 1890, nearly blind with ice-glare, almost dying of a fall on the Muir, later near getting crushed in his lone canoe between bergs. As always, he travelled, studied, noted, knowing "measureless enthusiasm", but it's maybe in that first 1879 trip that he experienced the greatest "auroral excitement".

It's with a chapter on Auroras (of which he'd seen many, from all the variant colours of the "intense white splendour") that Muir's *Travels in Alaska*, written practically on his deathbed and published posthumously, ends.

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It's possible to say that Muir's books are poorly composed, it's possible to say that the writing is full of purple patches, it's possible to say that his religiosity, if not his religion (there he can be humorous and ironical) is all too present, and that his argument from design and divine intention is antiquated. I go with all that. In my account of Muir's Alaskan travels, I have deliberately played down the excessively religious metaphorisation (looking at a glacier: "we have met with God!"; describing a line of bergs as "the jewel-paved streets of the New Jerusalem"), preferring to use where it exists in his text a less loaded and connotated vocabulary, extract and amplify what I consider essential. And if, in his company, I had heard him say once too often: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!", I'd either have suggested he pipe down or, more likely, moved off on my own to a less effusively theistic spot. But to stick at this level would be to look at Muir from the wrong end of the telescope, and miss out entirely on the full scope of his intentions, the whole scape of his mind. Muir had vision, a hyper-heraclitean vision of the universe as "an infinite storm

of beauty". He's well aware of the toughness of the world, well aware of the forces of destruction in it, but he sees beyond them. Of the "flower-gardens" on the lower reaches of what is now called Muir Glacier, he has this: "Out of all the cold darkness and glacial crushing and grinding comes this warm, abounding beauty of life to teach us that what we in faithless ignorance and fear call destruction is creation finer and finer." It is this kind of vision, backed up by fact and reference, that comes across in his books and that inspired his notion of national parks that would be more than a commercial tourism enterprise, more than a kind of nature reservation, more than a mere place of recreation, but, at least the way I read him, as the locus of a re-creation of humanity and culture that would go beyond all the divisions (to begin with, those of White and Indian, then man and animal, then mind and universe) that can make the world a hell. He got that idea going, but even before his death, he saw it being corrupted and corroded. Towards the end of his life, he was isolated – but that is what has always happened to the really interesting minds since humanity began its confused propagation and heavy propaganda.