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Research Article

# "A Mixture of History, Myth, and Bullshit": The Legend of Headless Valley and the Colonization of Nahʔą Dehé, the South Nahanni River Valley

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Abstract: In February 1947, Pierre Berton led a daring, mid-winter expedition into the South Nahanni River Valley (Nahʔą Dehé) in the Northwest Territories to find a secret tropical paradise. Berton's syndicated reports for the *Vancouver Sun* created one of the most exciting and bizarre media spectacles of the early postwar period, and it set in motion a series of events that would lead to the establishment of Nahanni National Park Reserve. Placing Berton's expedition to the Nahanni in a broader context, this essay traces and examines the narrative origins and evolution of a series of lurid tales about the Nahanni wilderness that are collectively known as the Legend of Headless Valley. The Legend of Headless Valley—which includes stories about a secret tropical valley, a lost gold mine, murdered and decapitated prospectors, evil spirits, prehistoric cave-dwelling monsters, and a tribe of head-hunters—remains one of the most enduring legends in the Canadian North and a fundamental feature of the Nahanni wilderness. In examining the narrative history of this northern legend, this essay helps reinforce the idea that stories about northern Canada—however lurid, speculative, or even untrue—are constitutive parts of northern geographies, both real and imagined, and mediating factors in their colonization by outside forces.

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When visitors to Nahanni National Park Reserve in the Northwest Territories gaze upon the South Nahanni River Valley, the "Grand Canyon of Canada," they see a landscape made of rivers, mountains, canyons, waterfalls, forests—and *stories*. There are many stories about the Nahanni Valley, but none is more famous, or perhaps infamous, than the Legend of Headless Valley. The Legend of Headless Valley is a collection of lurid tales about a secret tropical valley, a legendary gold mine, murdered and decapitated prospectors, evil spirits, cave-dwelling monsters, and a lost tribe of head-hunters. Once described by historian A. B. McKillop as "a mixture of history, myth, and bullshit," the Legend of Headless Valley is not only a sensationalized series of stories about the Nahanni wilderness, but a constitutive part of it. As the historian Simon Schama might say, it is "part of the scenery."[1]

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Legend of Headless Valley took root and grew into the Nahanni wilderness, colonizing the landscape like an invasive weed. While it was Parks Canada that ultimately asserted the authority of the Canadian state over the South Nahanni River Valley with the establishment of Nahanni National Park Reserve in 1974, it was the Legend of Headless Valley that initially brought the Nahanni to the nation's attention as a landscape worth protecting. In the early 1970s, when southern Canadian conservation organizations and citizens groups fought to save the South Nahanni River from a hydroelectric development, their goal was not only the preservation of a spectacular and seemingly empty northern wilderness, but the preservation of a storied landscape, "a land of murders, monsters, and mysteries."[2] In this sense, the Legend of Headless Valley operated as an agent in the internal colonization of the Canadian North, a narrative means by which the settler colonial project in Canada asserted its authority over the lands traditionally known to the Dene as Nahʔą Dehé.[3]

In this essay, I trace and examine the origins and evolution of the Legend of Headless Valley and its colonization of the Nahanni wilderness. My analysis starts in the nineteenth century with the search for fur and gold, enterprises that lend themselves nicely to the creation of tall tales about strange occurrences in remote landscapes. As the Legend of Headless Valley took root and grew into the Nahanni wilderness, it picked up other stories along the way, including the myth of the tropical valley. Arguably the most famous tale in the collection of stories that make up the Legend of Headless Valley, the myth of the tropical valley revolves around the notion that hidden somewhere deep in the Nahanni wilderness is a secret tropical oasis. The myth gained traction in the Nahanni region in the 1930s and 1940s and then erupted into a global media frenzy in 1947, when Pierre Berton, a young reporter at the *Vancouver Sun*, led a daring, mid-winter

ski-plane expedition to the Nahanni to find—or better yet debunk—the secret tropical valley. The media spectacle that ensued set in motion a series of events that culminated in the establishment of Nahanni National Park Reserve. Far from trivial, then, the Legend of Headless Valley illustrates the subtle yet powerful ways in which sensationalized stories have colonized parts of the Canadian North.

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Located in the southwestern corner of the Northwest Territories, the South Nahanni River (Nahʔą Dehé) cuts a meandering path through the Mackenzie Mountains before it joins the Liard River (Nácháh Dehé), a major, north-flowing tributary of the Mackenzie River (Dehcho). The Nahanni is a fast-flowing mountain river with many dangerous rapids, a ninety-six-metre-high waterfall (Virginia Falls, or Náįlįcho), and a series of four spectacular canyons, the deepest river canyons in Canada. The surrounding landscape is comprised of rugged mountains, high plateaus, and dense forests. Navigating in and through this remote landscape is, and always has been, a difficult and dangerous undertaking.[4]

The search for new fur-bearing territory brought European traders into the Nahanni region around the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1803, the North West Company established Fort of the Forks at the confluence of the Mackenzie and Liard rivers, approximately 150 kilometres downstream from the mouth of the Nahanni. Soon afterwards, W. F. Wentzel, chief factor at "the Forks," learned about a remote people in the mountains to the west called the "Naha." Wentzel recorded the name of this group and the river valley where they supposedly lived as "Nahany." Unbeknownst to Wentzel, though, Naha was not a self-designation for any one Indigenous People in the region. Rather, it was a term used by several Dene Peoples to denote a "remote" and "hostile" group living to the "west," usually somewhere in the mountains.[5] That this term was regularly used by and applied to different Indigenous Peoples created confusion in the minds of newcomers like Wentzel. "The only information I can get concerning these Natives," Wentzel wrote, "is that they inhabit these rocks, live upon caribou and goat flesh, and make war upon each other."[6]

In 1823, two years after the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and Fort of the Forks was renamed Fort Simpson, HBC trader John McLeod made contact with the so-called "Nahany Indians." That June, McLeod led an expedition up the Liard River and into the lower reaches of the Nahanni, where he met a group of fourteen Nahanys. The people McLeod met were likely Kaska Dena hunters from what is now southeastern Yukon, Tahltan from northern British Columbia, or Sahtu Dene from the Keele River watershed north of the Nahanni. Regardless of who these people were, McLeod described

them in favourable terms. "The Nahanys appear to be a manly race of men and good hunters," he reported, "they are smart, active and quick in their motions, and they are haughty, but seem to be peaceably inclined without the appearance of fears or meanness." The Dene Zhatıé (South Slavey) speaking Dehcho guides who led McLeod to the Nahanni had other opinions, though. The Naha were long-time enemies who regularly raided Dehcho (South Slavey) encampments in the Liard and Mackenzie river lowlands.[7]

The air of mystery that hung over the identity of the people John McLeod met on the Nahanni in June 1823 spawned lasting rumours about these elusive Indigenous traders. Two rumours persisted into the twentieth century. One claimed that the so-called "Nahanni Indians" were led by a "White Queen," a kind of Amazonian warrior princess of European descent. This rumour originated in the journals of HBC trader Robert Campbell, who described meeting the "chieftainess" of the "Trading Nahanies" (likely the Tahltan) along the Stikine River in northern British Columbia in 1838. "She commanded the respect not only of her own people, but of the tribes they had intercourse with," Campbell wrote. "She was a fine looking woman rather above the middle height & about 35 years old. In her actions & personal appearance she was more like the Whites than the pure Indian race."[8] Campbell's description of the unnamed leader of the Nahanies morphed into a story about their "White Queen." The "White Queen" is mentioned in Michael H. Mason's description of the "Nahanni Indians" in *The Arctic Forests* (1924), as well as in several magazine articles about the Nahanni Valley written in the 1930s by Philip H. Godsell (more on Godsell later).[9]

The second rumour of note claimed that the "Nahanni Indians" were fierce head-hunters who guarded the river's rich gold deposits. Part of this rumour is derived from Dehcho (South Slavey) descriptions of their Naha enemies. The gold and head-hunting elements entered the equation only after a handful of prospectors had used the Liard and Nahanni rivers in the late 1890s as part of an "all-Canadian" route to the Klondike goldfields. Of the couple dozen men that likely attempted this difficult route to the Yukon, only a few are said to have succeeded. Most of the men who did not make it failed because of the long and arduous nature of the upstream canoe journey and the strenuous portage around the Nahanni's great waterfall. Some of those men freely admitted their defeat, but others came up with alternative explanations. Poole Field, a former North-West Mounted Police officer in the Yukon and long-time Nahanni trader, reported hearing would-be Klondikers' stories about being chased off the river by a wild group of head-hunters. What were these head-hunters trying to protect? According to Field, it was the Nahanni's gold.[10]

The rumours about the Nahanni that emerged out of the gold rush turned into self-fulfilling prophesies in the early twentieth century. In the summer of

1904 or 1905, three brothers, Frank, Willie, and Charlie McLeod, the sons of the chief factor of Fort Liard, ventured up the Nahanni in search of gold. The McLeods found a deposit of placer gold on a tributary of the Flat River, one of the Nahanni's main affluents. On their return trip downriver, their makeshift log raft capsized in a set of rapids on the Flat, and the brothers lost all their belongings, including a small glass bottle filled to the brim with coarse gold nuggets. Frank and Willie returned to the Flat River the next year, accompanied by a Scottish engineer named Weir or Wilkinson. Legend has it that the three men mined a large amount of gold at the same placer deposit the McLeods had worked the previous year. But when the trio failed to return to Fort Liard, Charlie McLeod figured something was amiss and set off up the Nahanni to find out what had happened to his brothers and the engineer. The youngest McLeod allegedly found the shot and decapitated corpses of his two older brothers on the banks of the Nahanni, at the confluence of a tributary that was later christened "Headless Creek," which enters the main river at the start of a wide valley known now as "Deadmen's Valley." Charlie had found only two bodies, though; there was no sign of the third. Police reports from the next year concluded that Frank and Willie McLeod had probably died of starvation, and that wild animals had likely separated their heads from their bodies. Charlie McLeod was never convinced his brothers died that way. He was certain that the engineer had murdered his brothers and stolen their gold, and he would spend the rest of his life trying, in vain, to prove it.[11]

As word of the McLeod mine spread, several dozen prospectors headed to the Nahanni. The region experienced two minor gold rushes as a result, one in the mid 1920s and another in the early 1930s. During those rushes, about half a dozen men died or disappeared along the Nahanni. One or two of them were even found, like the McLeods, *sans têtes*, adding fuel to the rumours about a group of head-hunters and the generally cursed nature of the valley. The deaths and disappearances also sparked a flurry of additional rumours. Some people thought that the victims had died or disappeared at the hands of evil spirits, or perhaps a cave-dwelling, Sasquatch-like creature known to the local Dene as Nakani. Others postulated that the deaths were the result of a rare strain of viral meningitis endemic to the Nahanni. The rumours continued to grow in the 1930s, propagated by occasional newspaper reports about Nahanni gold and the death of yet another prospector. Although most of the prospectors and travellers who entered the Nahanni region returned alive (and with their heads still attached), the Legend of Headless Valley continued to grow.

At this point, it is important to note that there were conflicting reports about who was primarily responsible for spreading these early rumours about the Nahanni. In addition to the tall tales made up by would-be Klondikers, Poole

Field also reported that the Dene Zhatıé speaking Dene he traded with along the Liard had perpetuated stories about evil spirits and head-hunters in the Nahanni Valley. They used these stories, Field said, as a way of keeping "outsiders" out of the region.[12] But other reports suggest that the Dene were just as taken in by these stories as any of the outsiders. According to a 1936 report in *The Globe*, a large prospecting expedition failed to get going because the thirty Dene hired as gold-panning labourers simply refused to go upstream on the Nahanni. "[T]he expedition failed," the report said, "because the Indians feared the legend that only death awaits prospectors entering the region."[13]

The myth of the tropical valley joined the Legend of Headless Valley around this point in its narrative development. On September 26, 1933, the *Toronto Daily Star* reported on the disappearance, and probable death, of Angus Hall, a prospector from Alberta, who had been searching for gold on the Nahanni. In "Prospector Vanishes in Dead Man's Valley," the author recounted a lurid tale of a haunted river valley in which half a dozen gold-seekers had either died or disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Making the report even more mysterious was the author's unsubstantiated claim that, unlike the surrounding wilderness, the Nahanni Valley was blessed with an unusually pleasant climate. "Despite its position in northern latitudes, Death Valley is said to be almost tropical in nature," the author wrote. "This is due to an abundance of hot sulphur springs in the region and rivers and streams of hot water that are semi-volcanic in origin."[14]

The 1933 report in the *Toronto Daily Star* was one of the first times in print that the Nahanni Valley had been associated with a tropical climate. Since the anonymous author of the report did not provide any sources to back up their claims, it is unclear precisely where and when this part of the Legend of Headless Valley began. What is clear, however, is that, unlike other stories circulating about the Nahanni at the time, most of which emerged out of events that happened inside the valley itself, the rumour of a tropical climate originated from outside the watershed.

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During the Klondike gold rush, the mass movement of migrants into and out of northwestern North America facilitated the spread of rumours and stories. Many tall tales made their way back to fur trading posts, mission rectories, police outposts, mining camps, and local saloons in the Yukon, Alaska, northern British Columbia, and the southwestern Northwest Territories. Some of those stories included fantastical things like phantom lights in the night sky, lost mines, woolly mammoths, and big hairy wild men. While many of these stories were summarily dismissed as the ravings of men who had spent far too much time alone in the

wilderness, one story was believable enough, and had gained just enough traction, to make it into regional newspapers.[15]

In the early decades of the twentieth century, multiple, independent news reports surfaced about a northern oasis, a steamy tropical valley filled with luxuriant vegetation and an abundance of wild game. The peculiar climate of these "tropical" valleys was usually attributed to active volcanoes, hot springs, or some other variety of geothermal activity. Newspaper reports about these places often included first-hand accounts from prospectors or travellers who claimed to have found an "oasis in the Arctic" or a northern "Valley of Eden." Though the exact location of the tropical valley was never disclosed, reports regularly situated it in the Cassiar Mountains of northern British Columbia.[16]

Extending from north-central British Columbia into southern Yukon, the Cassiar Mountains are the most northerly group of the Interior Mountains of the Western Cordillera. After the discovery of gold in the Cassiars in the 1870s, the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC) sent surveyors to the region to begin the long process of mapping the terrain. Surveying efforts in the northwest intensified after the discovery of gold in the Klondike, and although the GSC sent multiple survey crews to northern British Columbia and southern Yukon in subsequent decades, highly detailed maps of the regions were not completed nor publicly available until the 1940s. Further details would be added to regional maps in the mid 1940s and early 1950s, after the Royal Canadian Air Force conducted aerial surveys of the region. Prior to these surveys, regional maps contained many blank spaces where, for some imaginative and credulous folks, a geographical anomaly like a tropical valley might possibly exist.[17]

The possibility of a tropical oasis in the Far North is not as absurd as one now might think. In fact, for most of Western history, it was widely believed that a tropical paradise existed at the northern edges of the known world. The idea can be traced back to the ancient Greek myth of Hyperborea—literally the land above or beyond the boreas, the north wind—which described part of the Far North as a "distant paradise," a wonderful place of peace, plenty, and pleasure. The Hyperborean myth would be expressed in various forms of European culture over the centuries, from literature and poetry to cartography and philosophy. Though it would drift almost entirely into the realm of make-believe by the end of the nineteenth century, there were still some people who believed in the existence of a real northern oasis. Others were more incredulous and sought to disprove the rumours that were circulating at the time in the newspapers.[18]

Rumours of a tropical valley in northern British Columbia piqued the curiosity of American botanist Mary Gibson Henry. In 1931, on one of her many collecting expeditions to the Canadian Northwest, Henry explored the area around the confluence of the Racing and Toad rivers near Fort Nelson, a rumoured

location of a tropical oasis. Henry reported finding a small valley and a series of hot springs, as well as a "rank growth of delphinium often over 8 feet tall … raspberries, roses and vetches … growing in the thickest and most luxuriant tangle I ever saw." She explored the area on foot and on horseback for several days, and concluded that, although the hot springs warmed the ground considerably and made the vegetation particularly "lush," the valley was by no means "tropical."[19]

Charles Camsell drew a similar conclusion about another rumoured site of the tropical valley, the Liard River hot springs. Situated halfway between Fort Nelson and Lower Post in northern British Columbia, the Liard hot springs spill into a muskeg-bottomed valley to form a steaming swamp and two picturesque pools that remain free of ice year-round. Camsell explored the region extensively in 1896 during an expedition with the GSC, and again in 1935 while on an aerial tour of the region as the deputy minister of mines. "Having camped in the valley in February 1896 I have never been able to appreciate why it has been described as 'Tropical,'" Camsell remarked in an address to the Empire Club of Canada in 1936, "especially as during the two weeks I spent there the temperature ranged from 20 degrees to 40 degrees below zero." That Camsell spent about a quarter of his speech at the Empire Club addressing the rumour of the tropical valley is a testament to its popular appeal. Years later, he would dedicate a chapter of his autobiography to further debunking the myth of the tropical valley.[20]

By 1933, the rumoured site of the tropical valley had migrated out of the Cassiars and into the Nahanni Valley. Like parts of the Cassiars, the South Nahanni River watershed remained a large blank space on regional maps of northwestern Canada. In 1887, R. G. McConnell of the GSC mapped the mouth of the Nahanni during his survey of the Liard River. In 1928, American industrialist and amateur explorer Fenley Hunter made a crude but accurate map of the lower Nahanni, which served as the official map of the river until the 1950s. Hunter made no mention of a tropical valley in his published trip report, or in his presentation at the prestigious Explorer's Club in New York, but that did not prevent newspaper reporters from further speculating about its possible existence.[21]

In 1935, two years after rumours surfaced about the Nahanni's tropical climate, University of Alberta professor Alan Cameron set out to investigate. In his trip report, published the next year in the *Canadian Geographical Journal*, Cameron addressed the claims indirectly, neither confirming nor denying them. He described the region's climate as "not extreme," noting that Chinook winds often brought unseasonably warm winter weather, sometimes causing the Nahanni to thaw in January. During his stay at the river's mouth, he experienced summer weather comparable to regions in southern Canada, and in his description of the "valley of the hot springs" he concluded that it was the only part of the Nahanni that "most nearly approaches a tropical valley."[22]

Although explorers like Mary Henry, Charles Camsell, and Alan Cameron had cast doubts about the tropical valley, the myth continued to grow, especially in popular literature. John Buchan, the prolific author and one-time Governor General of Canada, used a visit to the Nahanni in the late 1930s as the inspiration for *Sick Heart River*, his last novel, published posthumously in 1941. The valley of the fictional Sick Heart River is a strangely inaccessible Hyperborean paradise adorned with magical properties and located in a remote part of Canada's northern territories. At the time of the book's publication, it was widely known that Buchan had modelled his northern paradise on the Nahanni Valley.[23]

John Buchan was not the only influential author to find inspiration in the Nahanni. Philip H. Godsell, a former inspecting officer with the Hudson's Bay Company, wrote several magazine articles about the mysteries of the Nahanni Valley. In fact, he was likely the one writer most responsible for keeping the Legend of Headless Valley and the myth of its tropical oasis alive into the 1940s. Using his service with the HBC to promote himself as an expert on all things northern, Godsell launched a successful writing career after his retirement from the fur trade, authoring many books and articles about northern Canada and his travels through the region.[24] Among his writings were a handful of articles about Nahanni legends like the Naha, the McLeods, and the secret tropical valley. Godsell eventually fused these articles into a single essay called "Dead Men's Gold," which he included as a chapter in his 1944 book, *The Romance of the Alaska Highway*. Thanks to public interest in the newly constructed highway to Alaska, Godsell's book became a North American bestseller, bringing the Legend of Headless Valley to an international audience.

Godsell never let facts get in the way of a good story. Although he never once set foot inside the Nahanni Valley, he recounts the "weird story of a tropical valley in the Arctic, and the search for dead men's gold," with expert authority and first-hand details. "It was a fantastic tale," he wrote,

> of prehistoric monsters disporting themselves in a steaming oasis to the northward that had escaped the impact of the Ice Age; of a lost mine, murdered prospectors, outlaw Indians and hidden gold. It sounded doubly strange coming from the lips of a hard-bitten trader like old Beatton, who hadn't an ounce of imagination in his entire make-up, and I little thought as I listened to his gruff voice that my future wanderings were destined to bring me into intimate contact with the people and places he spoke of, or that, years later, I would report to Hudson's Bay headquarters the actual existence of this so-called tropical valley which I had considered a figment of redskin [*sic*] fantasy.[25]

Godsell never visited the Nahanni Valley, so he couldn't possibly have had any proof to support his claims about the existence of its tropical oasis.[26] Nevertheless, his stories about the Nahanni popularized the Legend of Headless Valley and kept the myth of a northern oasis alive through to the end of the Second World War.

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In the summer of 1946, word reached Margaret "Ma" Murray, the gruff and outspoken publisher of the *Alaska Highway News*, the paper of record for Fort St. John, British Columbia, that three prospectors were missing in the Nahanni Valley. Murray assigned the scoop to her daughter, Georgina, who appears to have used Philip Godsell's chapter about the Nahanni in *The Romance of the Alaska Highway* to write a series of sensationalized articles about the mysterious valley and the missing men. Chalked full of claims about murdered and decapitated prospectors, a lost gold mine, and a secret tropical valley, Murray's articles were picked up by wire services and reprinted in several Canadian and American newspapers. By the end of the summer, stories about the Nahanni with "Fort St. John" bylines had appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Los Angeles Examiner*, and *Chicago Tribune*.[27]

The Nahanni story stayed in the news cycle for several weeks that summer and then exploded in early September when a party of three Americans led by James Watt, a school teacher and amateur geologist from Yakima, Washington, went missing on the Nahanni. The search and eventual rescue of Watt, his wife, and brother-in-law made additional headlines in Canada and the United States, not only for the drama of the search and its timing with the other Nahanni stories, but also for Watt's unwillingness "to dismiss the stories about the valley as myths."[28] After news of the Watt rescue came to light, the media floodgates opened and even more stories about the Nahanni poured onto the pages of North American dailies.

Typical of the news pieces circulating about the Nahanni in the fall of 1946 was one by R. A. Francis and Margaret Francis, entitled "Nahanni … Valley of Mystery." "The tumultuous Nahanni tells no secrets," it began, "but the winds above the river are heavy with the breath of mystery, of terror, of nameless, fearsome death dealt swiftly by unseen hands." The authors went on to recount a tale of a lost gold mine, disappeared prospectors, evil spirits, and legends of "head-hunting savages and pre-historic monsters." Adding to the mystery was the claim that the Nahanni housed a secret tropical paradise, "like a cloud-wrapped Himalayan Shangri-La, hidden among the frozen tundras, [where] soft fragrant breezes blow and tropical trees and flowers spring lushly from the fertile soil watered by hot springs."[29] The reference to Shangri-La would have likely reminded many readers

of the Himalayan mountain paradise described by James Hilton in his 1933 bestselling novel, *Lost Horizon*, or Frank Capra's evocation of it in the 1937 film by the same name. Could such a place really exist in the Canadian North?

Thinking that the wave of media excitement surrounding the Nahanni had not yet crested, Hal Straight, the managing editor of the *Vancouver Sun*, allocated more resources to the story. In late fall 1946, Straight assigned "the Headless Valley scoop" to one of his in-house reporters, an ambitious twenty-six-year-old from the Yukon named Pierre Berton. Despite his youth, Berton was already a gritty and hard-nosed reporter with a unique ability to find a story where no story seemed to exist and a great capacity for turning out pages of news copy every day. Whether by chance or by design, Straight now had a northerner—the only one in his office—reporting on a northern Canadian news event.[30]

Born and raised in Dawson City, Pierre Berton knew first-hand how stories circulated in the Canadian North, and how that movement could easily distort or exaggerate even the simplest story or claim. He also knew early on that many of the fantastical claims being made about the Nahanni were categorically untrue, but he never let his incredulity interfere with his reporting on a popular news story. "To print almost anything about Headless Valley required a willing suspension of disbelief," Berton wrote decades later in his autobiography, and that was "something from which we [the reporters at the *Sun*] all suffered." Stories circulating in the press about the Nahanni had been based on "the flimsiest kind of evidence to hang any story on, but I swallowed it and so did the public," Berton admitted. "Overdosed on years of wartime realism, the world that winter was hungry for escape."[31]

Berton tried to deliver the "escape" he thought his readers desired. One of the first stories he wrote about the Nahanni was based on the testimony of Walter Tully, a young man who claimed to have first-hand experience in the valley. Tully told Berton that the Nahanni Valley was "shrouded in mists," which screened it from the outside world, that the temperature was "30 to 40 degrees above the temperature of the outside country," and that its vegetation was "lush" and "immense." Tully also told Berton that he had seen a 3,000-foot-high waterfall and the skeleton of a murdered and headless corpse on the banks of the river.[32] Berton knew Tully's claims were nonsense, but, as he later admitted, "it never occurred to me to make that point to the *Sun*'s readers." At the *Vancouver Sun*, "news was not truth," he wrote, "it was what somebody *claimed* as truth, even though the phrases somebody uttered were clearly balderdash." "As long you quoted your source," he continued, "you could publish the most outrageous hokum."[33] And thus with Tully as his source, Berton revealed to readers "the true story of the South Nahanni River's bizarre 'Headless Valley'…."

There were multiple "truths" circulating about the Nahanni by the end of 1946, and the flurry of headlines surrounding those claims aroused a frantic competition among adventurers to be the "first" into Headless Valley. Frank M. W. Henderson, the nephew of Robert Henderson, one of the prospectors involved in the discovery of gold in the Klondike in 1896, announced his plan to return to the Nahanni with a group of U.S. Marines to search for John Patterson, a prospecting partner of his who had gone missing there the year before. Major-General F. F. Worthington declared his intention to lead a Canadian military expedition to the Nahanni in the spring. The polar explorer Tom Carolan and the miner Hal Hendrickson, both of British Columbia, talked about organizing their own exploration parties. Within a week of placing a two-line classified advertisement in a local Vancouver newspaper soliciting the public for expedition members, Hendrickson received 154 applications, including one from a fourteen-year-old boy in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who had announced that the proposed expedition into Headless Valley was "the most important thing that has happened in my life."[34]

In January 1947, the race to be the "first" into Headless Valley brought press coverage of the Nahanni to a fevered pitch, but that fever was likely to break since each expedition was waiting for spring to launch. Not one to miss an opportunity to keep a popular story in the news cycle, Hal Straight decided to sponsor his own expedition to the Nahanni. He knew the claims being made about the Nahanni were groundless, but he also knew that exposing "the disappointing truth" about the Nahanni and its tropical valley in a dramatic fashion, before anyone else did, could make the most of the current hype and boost sales at the *Sun*. So, without much hesitation, Hal Straight decided to send Pierre Berton north to the Nahanni.[35]

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The *Vancouver Sun*'s "Headless Valley Ski-Plane Expedition" was plagued by delays from the start. On January 25, the commercial flight from Vancouver to Prince George carrying Pierre Berton, *Sun* photographer Art Jones, and veteran bush pilot Russ Baker, was forced to turn around mid-flight because of strong winds and fast-forming ice sheets on the wings of the aircraft. Extremely cold temperatures—it went down to minus sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit at one point on the trip—caused numerous mechanical problems for Baker's bush plane and an endless stream of work for aircraft mechanic Ed Hanratty. These problems led to delays at Fort St. James, Finlay Forks, Fort St. John, and Fort Nelson—outposts in northern British Columbia through which the expedition passed on its way to the Nahanni.[36]

Taking advantage of the delays, Berton filed twice as many reports from the field than what Straight had originally requested for the series. His first dispatch, filed from Prince George on January 27, appeared on the front page of the *Sun* on Saturday, February 1.[37] The story was touted as a *Sun* "exclusive," and it urged readers to follow along as Berton's team attempted to "beat the Yanks" to the Nahanni and become "the first" into Headless Valley. "The decision to undertake the risky Nahanni venture was made only a few days ago," Berton explained. "It was a difficult decision to make. A flight into the Nahanni country in January is almost unprecedented and we are taking a gambler's chance." Berton went on to introduce Russ Baker, "one of British Columbia's best-known bush pilots," and describe the dangers the expedition faced, as well as the precautions the team would take. In addition to hundreds of pounds of equipment and provisions, Berton also packed a Luger pistol and a 30-30 rifle, just in case the group met any of the Nahanni's "head-hunting 'Mountain Men'" or "prehistoric monsters."[38]

Berton filled his preliminary reports with stories about the outposts he visited and the people he met. The brief introduction to Baker he provided in his opening article spilled over into a detailed exposé of the "mad pilot" in his second report from the field.[39] His third report described the abandoned mining town at Pinchi Lake, which had been recently shuttered following the closure of the nearby mercury mine, the largest in the British Empire.[40] In the fourth report, Berton described how Finlay Forks telegraph operator Paul Vatcher and his wife planned their yearly food purchases, and how all that food had to be flown into the remote community. At a time when wartime rationing was still in effect for most of the country, Berton's readers would have been amazed to read about the Vatchers buying "butter by the hundredweight, bacon by the stone and sugar by the sack."[41]

Blizzard conditions and a blown aircraft engine kept the expedition grounded at Finlay Forks for several days. While waiting for a new engine to arrive, Berton received a telegram from Hal Straight announcing the sale of the *Sun*'s Headless Valley series to the International News Service. Readers of more than 2,000 dailies would now be reading about the *Vancouver Sun*'s expedition to the Nahanni. This was in addition to all the Canadian papers that had already purchased syndication rights to the series. With so much attention now on Berton and the *Sun*, Straight worried that the expedition's delays in reaching the Nahanni and Berton's preliminary focus on topics other than the Legend of Headless Valley might harm the story's appeal, especially for international readers, and he said so much in his telegram to Berton.

> GET SOME DRAMA HEADLESS VALLEY INTO EARLY ARTICLES ... STUFF OKAY BUT GET SOME GOLD AND MURDER IN SOON ... STUFF READING FINE ... KEEP PUNCHING AND DONT [SIC] FORGET TO KEEP MENTIONING HEADLESS VALLEY.[42]

Berton would not disappoint. The sixth instalment of the series, published on February 7, turned the focus back onto the Nahanni. After describing how Ed Hanratty had just put a blow torch to a frozen airplane engine and how he and Art Jones had used shovel, crowbar, and jack to pry the plane's skis loose from the ice, Berton let the nominal subject of the series unfold. "We began to wonder what we would discover when we actually reach 'Headless Valley,'" Berton wrote, "where 14 men have perished and the will o' the wisp of a lost gold mine still haunts prospectors' dreams." He went on to describe the Legend of Headless Valley in detail, recounting all the "strange deaths" that had occurred over the years, as well as the stories about "tropical growths," "prehistoric beasts," and "bad Indians." His expedition was going to set the record straight, Berton declared. They were going to be the "first" into Headless Valley and the "first" to report the "truth" about its many legends.[43]

The sixth report changed the overall direction of the series. Berton would continue to report on other things he witnessed during the expedition—Baker's rescue of a trapper's pregnant wife from a remote cabin in the wilderness; the British Navy's secret cold-weather tests of military equipment being conducted outside of Fort Nelson; a stretch of mountain wilderness in the Yukon known as "the graveyard of lost planes," where the wrecks of aircraft lost during the construction of the Northwest Staging Route peppered the landscape. But with that sixth instalment, the series became more about the team's struggle to reach, penetrate, and survive the Nahanni Valley. "Perhaps Berton had this in mind from the outset, secure in the knowledge that most of the Headless Valley legends were groundless," historian and Berton biographer A. B. McKillop writes. Whatever the case, Berton "had found a formula that worked, a mixture of mythic quest and modern adventure, and readers around the world were riveted by it."[44]

At this point in the story, Berton's quest for the tropical valley had turned into the most exciting, albeit bizarre, news event of the year. In addition to all the front-page coverage, the story was also picked up by prestigious news magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Maclean's*. The *New York Daily Mirror* editorialized on the myth of the tropical valley and the high quality of Berton's reporting. American entertainer Jack Benny cracked jokes about the Headless Valley on his nationally syndicated radio program. Lowell Thomas, the first journalist into Germany at the end of the First World War and the first to interview T. E. Lawrence in Jerusalem, dramatized the search for the tropical valley on one of his network radio broadcasts. There was even talk among some Hollywood producers of making a feature film about Berton's expedition to the Nahanni.[45]

The popular appeal of the *Sun*'s Headless Valley series was a direct result of Berton's journalistic prowess. Rather than providing his readers "escape," like he attempted to do in his earlier articles about the Nahanni, Berton now offered

them involvement. Through the shared experience of reading Berton's syndicated reports, the Headless Valley Expedition became a collective enterprise, not just for Canadians, but for international readers, too, and with each new instalment of the series, Berton ratcheted up the excitement.

> Report no. 6, for Sunday, February 9 release. Fort Nelson.
>
> Here, as everywhere, our expedition has been met by raised eyebrows and widened eyes. At the Musquaw post office … the postmistress stared at us as if we were mad….
>
> "I hope you are both good bushmen," she said to me and to Art Jones….
>
> We said we were just newspapermen on a story.
>
> "I hope you come back with your heads."[46]

> Report no. 8, for Tuesday, February 11 release. Fort Liard.
>
> Here on the outer rim of civilization we began at last to gather a few morsels of the facts about the Nahanni region and the Slavey Indians whose superstition has helped to weave a mist of legend about the valley….
>
> I talked today to Willie McLeod, nephew of that same Willie McLeod who came out of the Nahanni in 1905 with an Enos Fruit Salt bottle plugged full of coarse gold nuggets and who with his brother went back to the valley and to his death….[47]

> Report no. 10, for Thursday, February 13 release. South Nahanni River. Precede.[48]
>
> The intrepid ski plane expedition to mysterious "Headless Valley" in the wilderness of Canada's northwest territory has landed successfully on the South Nahanni River at the entrance of the valley itself….
>
> [Our] first discovery—and an exciting one—was that a lone trapper and his wife have been living on the edge of the valley in utter isolation for five years and that the legends about the existence of hot springs in the midst of the frozen wilderness are true.[49]

In the tenth report, Berton's interview with Nahanni homesteaders Gus and Mary Kraus seemed to temper the intentionally overblown claims Berton had made in previous reports. "Nobody can convince Gus Kraus that this wild region in which his snug cabin is built is tropical," he wrote. "As far as he's concerned it's just another valley with a few hot springs at the mouth."[50] After meeting with

the Krauses, the expedition flew over the valley of the hot springs and saw half a dozen or so springs dotting the landscape and throwing steam into the air. They also spotted the First Canyon—twenty-five kilometres long and 1,100 metre deep—which separated the expedition from its goal.

Berton filed his next report from inside Headless Valley. Transmitted to Vancouver over the expedition's portable radio on February 8, the report appeared in newspapers around the world on Saturday, February 15. The series was now more than two-weeks old and having recounted and embellished the Legend of Headless Valley as much as he dared, Berton set out to debunk its myths, one by one. "This was the spot," he wrote, "where the McLeod brothers had been murdered on the way out from their lost gold mine, the spot that Indians had declared was guarded by evil spirits, where head-hunters—great hairy men—were said to roam in bands and where weird mists rise from the ground." It was a mystery no more, Berton declared. "The mystery of Headless Valley melts away when you reach it," he wrote. "It is just another lonely, silent valley … ominous only by virtue of its inaccessibility. It was cursed only by the silence of the tomb. No living thing, beast or human or head-hunter, roams its untrodden snows." The single sign of civilization the team discovered was on the riverbank a mile or so across from where their aircraft had landed. There they found two crumbling cabins, and with them "a rubber boot, an old syrup can, a rusty tobacco tin," and "a pin-up photo of Rita Hayworth—these were the only signs that civilization had come briefly to this valley."[51]

After exploring the valley for half a day, the expedition flew up the Nahanni, around Virginia Falls, and over the continental divide to Watson Lake, where Berton filed his post-mortem on the trip. "We have laid the ghosts of the Nahanni for once and for all [to rest] and returned with our heads from the nebulous Headless Valley," he wrote. "And the strangest thing of all we have discovered about this Headless Valley is that it literally doesn't exist." Headless Valley was not a real place in the Nahanni watershed, he explained, but rather a fictional product of southern Canadian writers, reporters, and radio broadcasters, who had gathered tall tales from across the north and poured them all into the Nahanni wilderness. "The man who can take the credit—or the blame—for much of the Nahanni legend is Philip Godsell," Berton asserted. "He and a double handful of freelance writers have cheerfully rewritten this highly lurid, highly coloured tale and spread the story of the mysterious Shangri-La in the north, each with his own personal embellishments." Berton then punctured each of the myths, again, one by one. The valley was tropical, he wrote, only "if you call a handful of hot springs a tropical valley … but personally I kept my arctic parka on." No tropical mists got in the way of Art Jones's cameras, and the odd "wisp of vapour coming off the hot springs … didn't look very mysterious." What about the head-hunters? "Nix.

The place is deserted." And claims about ghosts and evil spirits? "Sure," Berton quipped, "and we saw Santa Claus riding a winged salmon over Virginia Falls."[52]

After the expedition accomplished its goal, Berton returned to Vancouver to find that he had become something of a celebrity. The press hounded him for more Headless Valley stories. Radio shows clamoured to have him as a special guest. Strangers came up to him on the street and asked for autographs. Admittedly, Berton enjoyed the attention, but he did not want to be known forever as "Mr. Headless Valley."[53] "If one more person comes up to me and says 'Gee—I see you still got your head,'" he said at the opening of a Vancouver radio broadcast, "I think I'm going to impale him on a sharpened copy pencil. That's the sort of thing I've been getting, ever since I returned from the South Nahanni River." He was joking, of course; he spent the rest of the broadcast vividly recounting his trip to the Nahanni.[54]

A few weeks after the Headless Valley series wrapped up, Berton received a job offer from Arthur Irwin, the managing editor of *Maclean's* in Toronto. Berton accepted the offer and spent the next decade working at "Canada's Magazine." There he developed into an award-winning journalist, bestselling author, and critically acclaimed television and radio broadcaster. When Berton departed *Maclean's* for the *Toronto Star* in 1958, "Mr. Headless Valley" was well on his way to becoming "Mr. Canada," the nation's first modern multimedia celebrity.[55]

Throughout his illustrious career, Berton regularly retold the story that launched his celebrity star. In the years following his move to *Maclean's*, he wrote several articles about Headless Valley, delivered dozens of public lectures, and gave "radio talks by the score" over both the CBC and the BBC. In 1956, he published *The Mysterious North*, a bestseller that earned him his first Governor General's Literary Award for Non-Fiction. The first five chapters of that book recounted the Legend of Headless Valley and his expedition to the Nahanni. Berton retold the story on many other occasions as well, including in the last chapter of his first autobiography, *Starting Out* (1987). Aware of how much he had recycled his original Nahanni material over the years, Berton often joked about his readers getting "a little sick of Headless Valley." But he also admitted that, far from losing interest, his readers had a seemingly insatiable appetite for stories about the Nahanni. "The fact is," Berton conceded, "Headless Valley is an indestructible legend."[56]

*

A year after Berton's expedition to the Nahanni, E. G. Oldham, the superintendent of forest and wildlife management in the Northwest Territories, submitted a report to the Dominion Wildlife Service and the National Parks Branch calling for the "immediate" establishment of a national park along the South Nahanni River.[57] Oldham's report focused on the need to protect the region's wildlife, particularly its caribou and wolf populations. While the report made no mention of the media spectacle that took place in the Nahanni Valley the year before, Oldham did refer to the Nahanni River as the site of the notorious "Headless Valley." The Parks Branch considered Oldham's recommendation but decided not to proceed. A decade later, his report resurfaced within the National Parks Branch Planning Section, which had been tasked with expanding the national parks system into northern Canada. Planning for a "national wilderness park" along the South Nahanni River began in earnest in 1958, but the federal government's intention to establish such a park was not formally announced until February 1972.

In the meantime, the Legend of Headless Valley continued to grow. In addition to Berton's many articles and radio talks, the Legend of Headless Valley was further amplified by British-Canadian author and adventurer R. M. Patterson, who wrote a series of popular magazine articles in the late 1940s and early 1950s about his search for gold on the Nahanni and Flat rivers in the 1920s. Patterson transformed those articles into a bestselling travelogue called *The Dangerous Rive*r, which recounted the Legend of Headless Valley in vivid detail. Published in 1954 and in print for more than fifty years, *The Dangerous River* remains one of the most successful adventure books in Canadian literary history.[58] As other author-travellers copied Patterson's narrative model, the library of books about the Nahanni Valley steadily increased, and with each new book came yet another retelling of the Legend of Headless Valley.[59]

Fifteen years after Berton's return from the Nahanni, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) produced an award-winning documentary film about Albert Faille, a prospector who had spent four-decades of his life searching for the McLeods' lost gold mine.[60] Set against the narrative backdrop of gold and death, and with an ominous and eerie score to match, the NFB's *Nahanni* further solidified the ideological connection between the Legend of Headless Valley and the Nahanni wilderness. Throughout the 1960s, the film was shown in elementary and secondary schools across the country as a way of introducing young Canadians to the "fabled northlands" of Canada. The popularity of the film coincided with the release of the first Canadian edition of *The Dangerous River* (1966), as well as with a series of deadly plane crashes in and around the Nahanni

Valley that claimed the lives of thirteen people in the 1960s. Reporters covering these crashes relied on the NFB's acclaimed film, Berton's award-winning book, and Patterson's bestselling travelogue to recount all the lurid and sensational stories that make up the Legend of Headless Valley.

The public's familiarity with the Legend of Headless Valley played a pivotal role in the establishment of Nahanni National Park Reserve. Public support for establishing a wilderness park along the South Nahanni River galvanized only after the announcement in 1970 that federal and territorial government officials and corporate mining interests were planning to build a series of seven dams for hydroelectric power generation and storage on the Nahanni and Flat rivers, including one at Virginia Falls.[61] The National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada (NPPAC, later Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society) reacted to the news by launching a national lecture series and letter-writing campaign to mobilize support for the preservation of the Nahanni.[62] The NPPAC framed the issue in a simple but effective way: "Will part of the Northwest Territories' South Nahanni and Flat rivers region, a land of murders, monsters and mysteries, be a national park or will it be the site of a hydroelectric power dam?"[63]

Wildlife biologist George W. Scotter led the NPPAC's lecture series. Between late 1970 and early 1972, Scotter delivered more than twenty-five presentations on the Nahanni in cities across the country. Most attendees at a Scotter lecture would have known what he was referring to when he described the Nahanni as "a land of murders, monsters and mysteries." In the unlikely case his audience had not yet heard of the Legend of Headless Valley, Scotter was quick to indulge them with tall tales of "rich placer gold deposits, disappearing men, headless men, tropical valleys, fierce natives, [and] mountain men of bad reputation."[64] While Scotter used the Legend of Headless Valley to capture his audience's attention, he did not dwell on the legends and the myths associated with the Nahanni. Instead, he used most of his lecture time to educate Canadians on the need to preserve the Nahanni's unique and fragile ecosystem.

On January 29, 1971, Scotter lectured to more than a thousand people at Eaton's Auditorium in Toronto. Pierre Berton, "Mr. Headless Valley" himself, introduced Scotter to the audience that evening, and, after indulging the crowd with another recounting of his 1947 expedition to the Nahanni, encouraged everyone in attendance to write letters to Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in support of preserving the Nahanni Valley. In subsequent months, Trudeau received hundreds of letters from individual citizens and citizens' groups across the country expressing their support for a wilderness park in the Nahanni Valley. Many letter-writers implored the prime minister to "take immediate action" to protect the "legendary" South Nahanni River.[65] Having heard the public outcry, and having visited the Nahanni in August 1970, Trudeau acted to protect what he

considered to be "the greatest river in Canada."[66] On February 22, 1972, twenty-five years after the world had followed Pierre Berton north to the Nahanni, Jean Chrétien, the cabinet minister responsible for national parks, announced the government's plan to create a national wilderness park in the South Nahanni River Valley.

Today, the Legend of Headless Valley remains an integral part of the scenery in Nahanni National Park Reserve. For the average visitor, it is all around, reflected in place names like "Headless Creek," "Headless Range," "Headless Valley," "Deadmen's Valley," "Murder Creek," "Funeral Range," "McLeod Creek," and more. But, as with most landscapes in Canada, these and other English-language toponyms and the stories they reflect sit on top of Indigenous place names and Indigenous stories. For local and regional Dene Peoples, the Legend of Headless Valley is like an invasive weed that colonizes a landscape and chokes out all native plant life. Underlying the Legend of Headless Valley is a host of traditional Dene stories, the lifeblood of Dene culture.

Recognizing the prevalence of "outsider" stories on the landscape, Parks Canada and the Dene co-managers of Nahanni National Park Reserve created a guidebook to the South Nahanni River as a way of breaking part of the suffocating spell cast by the Legend of Headless Valley. Published in 2017, *Nahʔą Dehé: South Nahanni River Touring Guide* is different from other Nahanni guidebooks because it includes traditional Dene place names for notable landscape features in the Nahanni Valley.[67] Those names and the stories they evoke reflect the fact that Nahʔą Dehé is and always has been a sacred and storied landscape for Dene Peoples. The river's unique tufa mounds (Gahnı̨thah) and its great waterfall (Náı̨lı̨cho) are revered as the birthplace and home of Yamǫ́ria (sometimes referred to as Yamozha or Yampa Déja), the "great chief" and "lawmaker" in Dene oral tradition.[68] The inclusion of Indigenous place names in the guidebook is part of a larger project, started in the early 2000s, aimed at re-asserting and re-establishing a Dene cultural presence inside the national park reserve.

Breaking the spell cast by the Legend of Headless Valley has been difficult. As Patrick Carroll, Cultural Resource Management Advisor for Parks Canada in the Northwest Territories, admits, pushing the Legend of Headless Valley out of Nahanni National Park Reserve is like "pushing against a brick wall."[69] But sustaining that effort is critical work, he argues. Not only has the Legend of Headless Valley covered over the Dene cultural presence that has been in the Nahanni Valley since time immemorial, but it has also perpetuated racialized stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples through association with superstition and savagery, and by casting Indigenous people as fictionalized characters lurking in the background of a dark and dangerous wilderness.[70] Prioritizing the use of Dene

place names in Nahanni National Park Reserve is a simple but powerful gesture of cultural recognition, and a means of alleviating the pressure exerted by the bulk of sensationalized stories that have colonized the landscape over the last two centuries.

Despite these efforts, the Legend of Headless Valley persists, not least of all because settler Canadians like me continue to talk about it. But it also persists because, like all stories, the Legend of Headless Valley is itself material, and it has had real material effects on the people and places it has interacted with. The materiality of this or any other story has nothing to do with it being "real" or "true," however. On the contrary, as the historian Yuval Noah Harari argues, the persistence and power of a story rests not in its "credibility" but in its "connectivity," its capacity to bring people and information together into networks of socio-economic, political, and cultural relations.[71] But when these networks result in the subjugation of Indigenous lands and Peoples by a settler state and society, the mediating story must therefore be considered an agent of the colonial project.

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**Notes**

1. A.B. McKillop, *Pierre Berton: A Biography* (McClelland & Stewart, 2008), 199; Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Vintage, 1995), 61. The "constitutive" nature of stories is derived from Emilie Cameron, *Far Off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic* (UBC Press, 2015), 12; and Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (House of Anansi Press, 2003). See also Sherrill E. Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); and Joan Sangster, *The Iconic North: Cultural Constructions of Aboriginal Life in Postwar Canada* (UBC Press, 2016).
2. George W. Scotter and Norman K. Simmons, "Park of Power?" *Park News* 8, no. 1 (1972): 8.
3. On the internal colonization of the Canadian North, start with Morris Zaslow, *The Opening of the Canadian North*, 1870–1914 (McClelland & Stewart, 1971); and *The Northward Expansion of Canada*, 1914–1967 (McClelland & Stewart, 1988). On the colonization of northern nature, see Paul Nadasdy, *Hunters and Bureaucrats: Power, Knowledge, and Aboriginal-State Relations in Southwest Yukon* (UBC Press, 2003); Liza Piper, *The Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada* (UBC Press, 2009); and John Sandlos, *Hunters at the Margin: Native People and Wildlife Conservation in the Northwest Territories* (UBC Press, 2007).

4. For a "tour" of the Nahanni region, see Charles Blyth, *Nahanni Nahʔą Dehé: A Selection of Photographic Images of the South Nahanni Watershed (2007–2010)* (Creative Publishing Services, 2001); Pat Keough and Rosemarie Keough, *The Nahanni Portfolio* (Stoddart Publishing Company, 1988). For a history of the Nahanni region, see Kerry Abel, "The South Nahanni River Region, N.W.T. (1820–1972): Patterns of Socio-Economic Transition in the Canadian North" (Master's thesis, University of Manitoba, 1980).
5. Beryl C. Gillespie, "Nahani," in *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 6: Subarctic*, ed. June Helm (Smithsonian Foundation, 1981), 451–3. See also John J. Honigmann, "Are there Nahani Indians?" *Anthropologica* 1, no. 3 (1956): 35–38.
6. Keith Lloyd, ed., *North of Athabasca: Slave Lake and Mackenzie River Documents of the North West Company, 1800–1821* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 157–206, 88–364.
7. See Robert G. Williamson, "Slave Indian Legends," *Anthropologica*, no. 1 (1955): 119–43; and "Slave Indian Legends," *Anthropologica*, no. 2 (1956): 61–92.
8. Robert Campbell, *Two Journals of Robert Campbell (Chief Factor Hudson's Bay Company) 1808 to 1853: Early Journal-1808 to 1851, Later Journal-Sept. 1850 to Feb. 1853* (Shorey's Book Store, 1958), 44, 63.
9. Michael H. Mason, *The Arctic Forests* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), 18. See also Philip H. Godsell, "Lost Mines and Lost Men," *The Canadian Magazine*, December 1933, 12, 20, 22–3; and "The Tropical Valley in the Arctic," *Outdoorsman*, March-April 1943, 6–8, 38–9.
10. On the "all-Canadian" routes to the Klondike, see J. G. MacGregor, *The Klondike Rush through Edmonton, 1897–1898* (McClelland & Stewart, 1970). Much of the early gold rush history of the Nahanni region is derived from Poole Field's three letters to Jack LaFlair, dated 1939, in file N-1992-268:1-1, Poole Field Fonds, Northwest Territories Archives, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.
11. There are many versions of the McLeods' story. The most comprehensive compilation of accounts is found in Hammerson Peters, *Legends of the Nahanni Valley* (Hammerson Peters, 2018), 98–169. See also Kerry Abel, "Nahanni Gold," *The Beaver*, Winter, 1984, 22–27; and Neil Hartling, *Nahanni: River of Gold … River of Dreams* (Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association, 1993).
12. Poole Field to Jack LaFlair, cited above.
13. "Indian Superstition Defeats Gold Seekers," *The Globe*, October 20, 1936, 2.
14. "Prospector Vanishes in Dead Man's Valley," *Toronto Daily Star*, September 26, 1933, 3.
15. For some popular and sensationalized stories about the Klondike and the North, see Pierre Berton, *The Mysterious North* (Cassell, 1956), and *Klondike* (McClelland & Stewart, 1958).
16. See "An Oasis in the Arctic," *Valdez Miner,* November 11, 1922, 1; "Winter in Paradise," *Alaska Weekly*, July 25, 1924, 1; "The Valley of Eden," *Alaska Weekly*, June 26, 1925, 1; "More Than One Tropical Valley in the North," *Wrangell Sentinel*, September 24, 1925, 1.

17. Morris Zaslow, *Reading the Rocks: The Story of the Geological Survey of Canada, 1842–1972* (Macmillan, in association with the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources and Information Canada, 1975), 19, 38, 47, 59, 88, 93, 94, 96, 157, 224–5, 318, 435.
18. Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (Reaktion Books, 2005), 20–22; Robert McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 20–33; James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton University Press), 60–67.
19. Mary G. Henry, "Collecting Plants Beyond the Frontier in Northern British Columbia," *The National Horticultural Magazine* 13, no. 3 (1934): 275–76.
20. Charles Camsell, "The Trail of '35," in *The Empire Club of Canada Addresses* (The Empire Club of Canada, 1936 [March 13]), 295–305; Camsell, *Son of the North* (The Ryerson Press, 1954), 70–75.
21. See Fenley Hunter, *That Summer of the Nahanni 1928: The Journals of Fenley Hunter*, ed. Hugh Stewart and David Finch (McGahern Stewart Publishing, 2015).
22. Alan Cameron, "South Nahanni River, N.W.T," *Canadian Geographical Journal* XIII, no. 1 (1936): 37–45.
23. John Buchan, *Sick Heart River* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1941). See also Andrew Lownie, *John Buchan: The Presbyterian Cavalier* (Canongate, 1998).
24. Godsell wrote many books (and magazine articles), including *Red Hunters of the Snow* (1938); *They Got Their Man: A Saga of Traders, Mounties and Men of the Last North-West* (1939); and *Pilots of the Purple Twilight: The Story of Canada's Early Bush Flyers* (1955). All were published by The Ryerson Press.
25. Philip H. Godsell, *The Romance of the Alaska Highway* (The Ryerson Press, 1944). 82–83.
26. Godsell's northern travels, documented in his autobiography *Arctic Trader*, did not include any time in the Nahanni Valley. Because he travelled on the Liard, it is likely he spent some time at Nahanni Butte, but never upstream of there on the Nahanni. Philip H. Godsell, *Arctic Trader: The Account of Twenty Years with the Hudson's Bay Company* (A. L. Burt Company, 1932).
27. See, for example, Georgina Murray, "'Valley of the Dead' Claims New Victim," *Vancouver Sun*, July 16, 1946, 11. For more on the Murrays, see Georgina Keddell, *The Newspapering Murrays* (McClelland & Stewart, 1967).
28. "No Gold, May Be Oil in B.C. Mystery Valley," *The Globe and Mail*, September 26, 1946, 9. The title of this article situates the Nahanni in British Columbia, a mistake that was commonly made in reports at the time. The Nahanni was also mistakenly placed in the Yukon on occasion.
29. R. A. Francis and Margaret Francis, "Nahanni …Valley of Mystery," undated and unattributed clipping in "Nahanni …Valley of Mystery" file, box 163, Pierre Berton Fonds, William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ontario (hereafter Pierre Berton Fonds).
30. McKillop, *Pierre Berton*, 172–95.
31. Pierre Berton, *Starting Out* (McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 311–12.

32. Pierre Berton, "Man Who Came Back Tells of 'Death' Valley," *Vancouver Sun*, January 6, 1947, 11.
33. Berton, *Starting Out*, 311.
34. Pierre Berton, "Valley of Mystery," *Maclean's Magazine*, March 15, 1947, 22, 33–34, 36–37.
35. McKillop, *Pierre Berton*, 198.
36. Pierre Berton wrote four separate accounts of his expedition to the Nahanni. The first is in the form of fifteen telegraphed reports sent from the field to the *Vancouver Sun* offices in January-February 1947. With minor editing, these became the text used by the *Sun* in daily articles between February 1 and 18 ("Dispatches from Headless Valley" file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds). The second account, a series of six scripts for CBC radio talks given in 1952, is more detailed (Headless Valley Radio Series, "North to the Nahanni" file, Box 161, Pierre Berton Fonds). A third account occupies the first five chapters of Berton's bestselling book, *The Mysterious North* (1956), and a fourth account is found in Berton's first autobiography, *Starting Out* (1987).
37. Berton filed his dispatches using local telegraph services. Delays in transmitting these dispatches, as well as the time it took for Hal Straight to edit them, meant that the polished reports did not appear in the *Sun* for several days (or more) after they were filed.
38. Headless Valley Article no. 1, January 27, 1947, Headless Valley file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds. See also Pierre Berton, "Sun Explores Famed Valley," *Vancouver Sun*, February 1, 1947, 1.
39. Headless Valley Article no. 2, January 28, 1947, Headless Valley file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds. See also Pierre Berton, "Veteran Pilot in Sun Party," *Vancouver Sun*, February 3, 1947, 1, 3.
40. Pierre Berton, "B.C. Mercury Centre Idle," *Vancouver Sun*, February 4, 1947, 1, 2, 11.
41. Pierre Berton, "Beefsteaks by Airplane," *Vancouver Sun*, February 5, 1947, 1.
42. Hal Straight to Pierre Berton, January 29, 1947, "Telegrams" file, box 163, Pierre Berton Fonds.
43. Pierre Berton, "Death Tales Rife in North," *Vancouver Sun*, February 7, 1947, 1, 9, 15.
44. McKillop, *Pierre Berton*, 205.
45. Berton, *Starting Out*, 310–21.
46. Headless Valley Article no. 6, February 4, 1947, Headless Valley file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds.
47. Headless Valley Article no. 8, February 6, 1947, Headless Valley file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds.
48. Most of Berton's dispatches to Straight included a "precede," which introduced the piece and captured the readers' attention, and a "teaser," a prelude of what was to come in the next instalment of the series.
49. Headless Valley Article no. 10, February 7, 1947, Headless Valley file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds.
50. Pierre Berton, "Sun Party Near Valley," *Vancouver Sun*, February 14, 1947, 1.

51. Headless Valley Article no. 11, February 8, 1947, Headless Valley file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds. See also Pierre Berton, "Sun Men Land in Headless Valley," *Vancouver Sun*, February 15, 1947, 1, 2.
52. Headless Valley Article no. 12, February 9, 1947, Headless Valley file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds. See also Pierre Berton, "Head Hunters and Spirits Prove Mostly to be Invisible," *Vancouver Sun*, February 17, 1947, 1, 2, 11.
53. McKillop, *Pierre Berton*, 211–12.
54. Pierre Berton, "For Vancouver Sun Broadcast," four-page typescript, undated, "Headless Valley Articles" file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds.
55. Berton, *Starting Out*, 327; McKillop, *Pierre Berton*, xiii, 549.
56. Pierre Berton, "They'll Never Believe the Truth About Headless Valley," ten-page typescript, undated, "Headless Valley Articles" file, box 160, Pierre Berton Fonds.
57. Oldham's original report has been lost, but large parts of it are quoted in various intra-governmental correspondence that still exists. See, for instance, Harrison F. Lewis, Dominion Wildlife Service, to James Smart, Head of the National Parks Branch, February 13, 1948, RG84, A-2-a, Volume No. 1983, File No. U2-20-2, Part 1, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.
58. Patterson, *The Dangerous River* (Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1954). On the life and times of Patterson, see David Finch, *R. M. Patterson: A Life of Great Adventure* (Rocky Mountain Books, 2009). On the publishing history of *The Dangerous River*, as well as Patterson's original Nahanni journals, see R. M. Patterson, *Nahanni Journals: R. M. Patterson's 1927–1929 Journals*, ed. Richard C. Davis (University of Alberta Press, 2008).
59. See Ranulph Fiennes, *The Headless Valley* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1973); Roger Frison-Roche, *Nahanni* (Arthaud, 1969); A. C. Lewis, *Nahanni Remembered* (NeWest Press, 1997); Joanne Ronan Moore, *Nahanni Trailhead: A Year in the Northern Wilderness* (Deneau and Greenberg Publishers Ltd., 1980; Jean Poirel, *Nahanni: La vallée des hommes sans tête* (Stanké, 1980); and Dick Turner, *Nahanni* (Hancock House Publishers, Ltd., 1975).
60. Donald Wilder, "Nahanni" (National Film Board of Canada, 1962), https://www.nfb.ca/film/nahanni/.
61. T. Ingledow & Associates Limited, *Power Survey of the Liard River Basin, Yukon and Northwest Territories (Final Report)*, prepared for the Government of Canada, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, February 1970.
62. Marilyn Dubasak, *Wilderness Preservation: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Canada and the United States* (Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 189–92. See also Gordon Nelson, *The Magnificent Nahanni: The Struggle to Protect a Wild Place* (University of Regina Press, 2017).
63. G. W. Scotter and N. M. Simmons, "Park or Power?," 8–12. Derived, also, from personal communications with Dr. Scotter in February and March of 2021.
64. Scotter and Simmons, "Park or Power?," 8.

65. Many of the letters written in support of preserving the Nahanni wilderness are in the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development fonds at Library and Archives Canada. See RG 22 1388 File 330-12-4 Part 1; RG22 1231 File 330-12-4, Part 3; RG 1003 File 330-12-4, Part 3.
66. Justin Trudeau, quoting his father, Pierre, in Nelson Wyatt, "Justin Retraces Trudeau's Route," *The Globe and Mail*, November 26, 2003, R6.
67. Parks Canada, *Nahʔą Dehé: South Nahanni River Touring Guide* (Parks Canada, 2017).
68. On the significance of *Yamǫ́ria* in Dene culture, see George Blondin, *Yamoria the Lawmaker: Stories of the Dene* (NeWest Press, 1997). On the cultural connection between the Nahʔą Dehé Dene Band of Nahanni Butte and the South Nahanni River, see Wendel E. White, *The Birth of Nahanni – "Nahande Beguli": A Local History of the People of Nahanni Butte.* Microfiche Report Series: 286 (Environment Canada, Parks, 1984).
69. Personal correspondence, Tuesday, April 2, 2019.
70. See, for example, Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992).
71. Yuval Noah Harari, *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* (Signal, 2024), Introduction.

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