

The Oral Tradition is Like the Mackenzie Delta

Robert Kroetsch

1

There are many channels, many currents, the occasional whirlpool and much shoal water, willow-covered islands and muskrat ponds and oxbows and sandbars and walls of black spruce and unseen deadheads, there in the Mackenzie Delta. The water itself carries enough silt so that it is difficult to see beneath the surface. When on a riverboat pushing loaded barges into the Mackenzie Delta, toward the diverging and joining channels, it is necessary to take soundings.

2

I first entered the Mackenzie Delta as the purser on a riverboat (this was back in 1950) pushing barges loaded with diesel fuel and deck freight. The boat was the MV *Sandy Jane*. The four deckhands were busy as we approached Aklavik, so Captain Mercredi asked me to go out onto the forward barge and sound the channel with a long pole that was marked in feet, one foot in red, the next in white, the next in red, and so on, for quick and easy sounding. You read the surface of the water, but you sound its depth.

We needed at least seven feet with the load we were carrying. If we had less than seven feet of water under the moving surface we were about to run aground on a sandbar, and with the current pushing us from behind we would be stranded.

I was to stand on the starboard side of the bow of the barge and measure the depth as we slowly moved ahead; then I was to call back to the wheelhouse the depth of the water, that simply in numbers. Nine. Eight.

I was to call out. The pilot in the wheelhouse was listening.

To enter into the Mackenzie Delta on a riverboat or in a canoe or a fishing craft or a flat-bottomed freight boat is to enter into the oral tradition.

3

J. Edward Chamberlin begins his book on story and home (*If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?*) with this incident:

It happened at a meeting between an Indian community in northwest British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn't understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the elders put what was bothering them in the form of a question. "If this is your land," he asked, "where are your stories?"

The Gitksan elder then switched from English into his own language and told a story. He switched into a language the officials did not understand, and some of the Gitksan did not understand. But everyone knew the river of experience and attachment was being sounded.

Chamberlin writes down in English what was spoken. He raises the questions of home and story and language and translation. Most centrally, he raises the question of the relationship of the oral tradition to our sense of place.

4

How did I arrive at Point Separation, there where the Delta begins?

The *Sandy Jane* serviced the most northern half of the Mackenzie Basin, the section that ran from Dene into Inuit territory. The *MV Richard E* serviced the upper or southern half of the riverboat route. I chanced to work on both boats that long ago summer.

Our journey north commenced in Fort Smith, on the southern border of the Northwest Territories, 1,358 miles south and east of Aklavik. The one photograph I have at hand of our departure from Fort Smith shows the boat tied up, a gangplank leading to the deck of a barge. Perhaps we were pumping off gasoline.

We were under the command of Captain Kirkland. The *Richard E* moved deck freight north, but mostly it carried aviation fuel south from the oilfield and refinery at Norman Wells to Yellowknife and Hay River and Fort Smith. After we had pumped off aviation fuel in Fort Smith we turned downriver. We loaded deck freight at Bell Rock, below the long stretch of rapids on the Slave River. Some of that freight would go to Aklavik and out to the Arctic coast.

We travelled down the Slave to its mouth and crossed western Great Slave Lake and entered into the Mackenzie. In Norman Wells we filled our barges with diesel fuel and loaded drums of aviation fuel onto the deck of one of the huge steel barges.

The *Richard E* was not the boat I was working on when I first arrived in Aklavik, though I did work on the *Richard E* at times. Sometimes the barges were turned over to the *Sandy Jane* in Norman Wells. And the purser along with them. That's what happened on the first trip of the 1950 season.

5

Advice to the Listener

I'm going to tell you a story.
And this one is close to true.
How tell the bear from the berry?
The answer is up to you.

Sorry. I had to try a song of my own. Many of the oral stories are sung. They fit into that place where the emotional and the intellectual come together. That place is the body (not just the brain), located in the entirety of landscape (including the mythical figures that inhabit the landscape).

6

Rudy Wiebe ends the second-last chapter of *Playing Dead*, his book on his own experience of the Arctic, by quoting a song from the Igloodik Inuit shaman Uvavnuk. She sings:

The great sea
Has set me adrift:
It moves me as a small plant
 in the running river,
Earth and the mighty weather
Move me,
Storm through me,
Have carried me away,
And I tremble with joy.

Wiebe begins his final chapter by quoting another translation of Uvavnuk's song:

The great sea stirs me.
The great sea sets me adrift,
It sways me like the weed
On a river stone.

The sky's height stirs me.
The strong wind blows through my mind.
It carries me with it
So I shake with joy.

The song places us in a vast landscape (sea, earth, and sky) in which we confront our vulnerability and our dependence on forces beyond us. And yet we learn much about feeling at home. We tremble with joy. Or we shake with joy. The two hearings of a word, in their difference, resemble the oral tradition itself. By alternate and possibly contradictory routes, we get to the same place: a joy that comes of a sense of connection.

7

The mythic and the personal find each other in the oral. More exactly, they cannot be separated. The question of falsehood is not the question. Every narrator is reliable; the variations help to establish the reality of that fusion of the personal and the natural and the mythic.

8

I have a photograph of my arrival in Aklavik.

The young man standing second from the right is the author not yet become an author. The story precedes him. He also precedes a story. The man on the right in the picture, Little Joe, will, in a few weeks, be killed in an explosion in Norman Wells, killed while cleaning a compartment of one of the steel barges.

I was standing a few feet from the manhole, eating a piece of chocolate cake, when the explosion occurred. Little Joe was halfway out of the manhole. I saw him burst into flame, his skin sliding off like sheets of thin plastic. Before any of us could approach him he leapt into the river.

9

The book in ways is separate from the body. The oral resides in the body. Little Joe's death, for me, shaped itself into my first novel, *But We Are Exiles*. One must beware of finding too wide a gap between the written and the oral.

To sound: to measure the depth of the water with a marked pole or a weighted line. And yet we read the sounding pole as if it were a book.

10

It was in Aklavik that I injured my back, an injury I suffer from occasionally to this day. We were unloading deck freight. The three young women in the snapshot had come aboard the barge to visit Little Joe—the whole length of the Mackenzie is itself a community—and we all welcomed the interruption.

Just a few minutes after the photograph was taken, I asked Little Joe and another deckhand to go into a walk-in refrigerator (a reefer, we called it) and find a dozen or so one hundred pound boxes of frozen boneless beef. When they couldn't find them I said, "Let me in there," and I found the boxes and tossed them one by one over heaps of frozen quarters of beef to the deckhands waiting at the door of the reefer.

We had already left Aklavik on our way to Reindeer Station and Tuktoyaktuk when I discovered I had a sore back (as the oral tradition names it) that would years later make it slightly painful for me to sit at a computer writing down this story. The body is both memory and archive (and the two are not quite the same), as the singer knows before and while singing.

11

Request to the Barmaid

Bring me a glass of whisky.
Don't bring it on a tray.
Bring it to me in your hand.
And please don't go away.

12

You must find (choose? be chosen by?) the channel that will get you and your cargo to Aklavik. But what is your cargo? And didn't the government attempt to move the citizens of Aklavik to a newly created town, Inuvik? But

that was a few years later. What then happens to the songs and stories when a town moves to the shore of the East Channel?

There in the Mackenzie Delta the moving water is home. The changing story is home. The story does not change. By changing, it does not change. The written story becomes obsolete and volumes of commentary attempt to rescue it into our daily lives. The oral story is a part of our bodies, not a part of a book. Or to put it another way, our bodies are part of the oral tradition.

As Uvavnuk would have it, we are each a small plant moved by the running water. Or as another hearing of her song would have it, we are each a weed on a river stone. In the oral tradition we are each a story; each story is the story of all of us. Sound the water. Listen to the Delta as it sings.

Author

Robert Kroetsch is a Canadian poet, novelist, and literary critic. He was awarded the 1969 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction.

Works Cited

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Wiebe, Rudy. 2003. *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic*. Revised ed. Edmonton: NeWest Press.

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