

Although at times repetitive, this well-researched contribution to Nunavut history is a “must read” for all northern educators, politicians, and government officials.

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***Living with Wildness: An Alaskan Odyssey.* By Bill Sherwonit. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2008. 220 pages.**

“We only truly love and value—and protect—that which we know.” This central thesis draws together, with varying degrees of success, the inquiries, discoveries, and testimonials that compose *Living with Wildness*. Bill Sherwonit chronicles a personal journey toward a more intimate knowledge of home, which in his case is the city of Anchorage, its Hillside neighbourhood, and the nearby wilderness of the Chugach State Park. He describes a cultivation of alertness to the wildness around him that leads to a deeper contemplation of the wildness within him, ultimately drawing upon the Wild Man archetype of the mythopoetic men’s movement inspired by Robert Bly’s *Iron John*. From counting frog calls on the muddy banks of a roadside pond near the airport, to shooing a black bear from the frozen piles of mouldering sunflower seeds under his birdfeeders, the best of *Living with Wildness* is the pleasant ramble through the minutiae of Sherwonit’s personal awakening to a sense of purpose and guardianship. When the focus widens philosophically to a broader social context, however, the book becomes sluggish with uncertain and often contradictory ideas about the relationship of humanity to its neighbours, trading its good-naturedly astute questions for self-consciously imprecise answers.

Living with Wildness begins with a long list of arrivals: Sherwonit’s first few summers in Alaska in the mid-seventies when “something shifted and opened up”; his introduction to nature writing and the literature of place; his purchase of a home in the Hillside neighbourhood of Anchorage; and the sudden awareness of the first of his “teachers,” the black-capped chickadee. In these early chapters, Sherwonit describes an openness, a readiness to be moved by what is around him that, coupled with a humble awareness of how little he understands, lends an immediacy to his observations and a full translation of his wonder and surprise. Sherwonit’s observations are specific and explicit and his immediate responses to those observations are sensory and emotional. The proximity of these responses to the stimuli of his experiences lends a sincerity to the first third of the book that allows

Sherwonit to write such phrases as “holding one of those pollywogs was like grabbing a bit of magic,” or that he could look “to the northern horizon, and be touched by grandeur, or memories of high places, or something that resembles grace,” and be fully believed.

Sherwonit is a confessed amateur at most of what he attempts in the book—bird watching, hiking, biological study, environmental awareness—and he spends a good deal of time in the eager pursuit and development of these skills. His honest appraisal of himself—“Though a rather timid outdoorsman, I craved the outdoors”—draws a reader into his self-discovery. The third chapter is a collection of journal entries, chronological by season but from different years, all following a cycle of observation, query, research (or contemplation), and a return to observation. Upon noticing a snowshoe hare in his yard only halfway through its autumn color change from brown to white, he is struck by a flurry of questions: “I wonder when this transformation began, when it will be complete. How long does the color shift take? Does it vary from year to year, from individual to individual? And why do I almost never see hares in winter? Is the white disguise that good?” Inviting the reader into this cycle of observation and inquiry, Sherwonit generates the credibility to buoy the philosophical meanderings that accompany his early discoveries, the “beneficence” he senses in nature, for instance. “Life truly is a miracle and I am part of that miracle, along with oak and snake and swamp bug. In my own boyish way, I come to sense a sort of holiness—and wholeness—that I don’t get from religion.” His musings, even when they approach religious rhetoric, are still rooted in an earthy selfness, a calm acceptance of himself as a natural human animal who, in nature, can find an “escape from the tyranny of judgments.”

As Sherwonit becomes more adept at observation, participating in the first survey of local populations of wood frog, his euphoria at reawakening to the natural world is confronted with the experience of loss. Of the multiple sites he volunteers to monitor, he becomes most attached to the micro-ecosystem of a tiny pond near the airport where he first hears the croak of the male wood frog, one of only two species of frog in Alaska. Predictably, Sherwonit’s fragile “Airport Pond,” which he visits often and where he first observes multiple minute phenomena, is paved over and disappears. He is surprised by how deeply this grieves him. This first bitterness marks the beginning of a new arc in the story.

The enormous narrative momentum of “Airport Pond” and the preceding chapters slows to a near halt, like a boot stuck in the mud, with “Living with Bears,” a long and, for the first time, pedantic treatise on human-bear relations in Alaska. Herein are the first contradictions between Sherwonit’s

beliefs and what he presents as their logical underpinnings. In discussing the community's demand for the killing of the brown bear responsible for the fatal maulings of two runners in Chugach State Park in 1995, Sherwonit argues that, however tragic the deaths, the bear was only acting in defense of a moose cache near the trail. He wishes that people would not "seek revenge on a bear that behaves like the wild animal it is." The bear was "just doing what bears do." In a later anecdote, a brown bear charges Sherwonit and his guide while hiking on an island they knew to be inhabited by a sow and cubs. The sow leaves them unharmed. While rehashing the event, the men decide that the bear could sense their "energy," knew that they were not aggressive (he suggests their not carrying firearms as an important factor), and that is why she left them alone. It is difficult to reconcile both rationalizations of bear behaviour without injury to Sherwonit's credibility.

There are other places in the narrative where Sherwonit's emotional or spiritual interpretations cause an uncomfortable rift with the epiphanies offered to him by the observable natural world. In "Wonders of the Night Sky," he writes: "So many stars. Such immense, unfathomable distances. A taste of infinity, an escape from ego." He ponders the naming of the constellations, the strange coincidence of multiple ancient cultures seeing the form of a bear in Ursa Major. But while our culture has blotted out the stars with urban lights, Sherwonit warns,

the heavens themselves have become the domain of astronomers, physicists, and other scientists who, with their high-tech instruments, probe, dissect, and analyze the universe as they 'figure out' its mysteries.... [T]here's too much science and analysis, too little myth and magic. Too much arrogance, too little humility. Too much separation from the rest of creation, too little connection.

On one page, he asks if the aurora are really "nothing more than upper-atmosphere phenomena easily explainable by science." On another, the science behind the aurora is "complex and difficult to comprehend, but the results are pure beauty," prompting him to "choose rhapsody over rational thought, poetry over physical phenomena." Rejecting science as ego, as an obfuscation of the purer stuff, confuses rather than complicates Sherwonit's arguments for conservation. It also cheapens the most meaningful parts of the narrative where it is precisely those natural mechanisms revealed by scientific inquiry that generate the most wonder and joy. Sherwonit would illuminate an elegant physical phenomenon by rejecting what it is for what it represents, because "science will never capture its essence. That requires a greater leap of faith, a sense of the mystical, the sacred."

Placing science at odds with profound personal revelation deeply unbalances *Living with Wildness* without delivering a coherent larger philosophy that necessitates such a contraposition. In fact, the essay that follows, “Going Solo Through Gates of the Arctic,” contains much of the best writing in the book—soaring descriptions of the Valley of the Precipices and Mount Doonerak accompanied by the kind of self-conscious but sincere responses that make Sherwonit himself as fascinating as the scenery—without any of the derision for science of the previous chapter. “The combined effect of mountains and gorge is one of extreme verticality. The landscape sweeps sharply upward, more than a mile into the sky. I can easily understand why Marshall estimated Doonerak’s height at more than ten thousand feet. It seems such a soaring mountain must be at least that tall.” Here is an elegant example of astonishment and awe frustrating, but nonetheless firing, the tools of objective reasoning. This frustration, this need to understand, to measure, to articulate, that follows so quickly on the heels of sublime experiences is most readily approached with *both* reason and wonderment. The rejection of either seems counterintuitive and in disharmony with Sherwonit’s best written passages.

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***Globalization and the Circumpolar North*. Edited by Lassi Heininen & Chris Southcott. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2010. 328 pages.**

Globalization and the Circumpolar North adds to a growing literature on the Arctic and Circumpolar North but this is the first to specifically focus on globalization and how it impacts the region. This edited volume is unique in that respect and is a welcome edition. It does not adopt a rigid definition of the Circumpolar North as there are varying definitions depending on context, discipline, and sources being used. For the purpose of this book, the region consists of Alaska, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the northern regions of Russia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Canada.

There are nine chapters in the volume, the first by Heininen and Southcott serving as the introduction and setting the scene for subsequent chapters. There are as many definitions of globalization as there are people examining the subject and here economic (increasing integration of global economies), political (internationalization of political activity), and cultural (the homogeneity of western culture) definitions are used as frameworks. Following this is an excellent chapter on the history of globalization in the Circumpolar North by Southcott, which correctly points out that linkages