

8-6-2017

## Singing Meadow: The Adventure of Creating a Country Home by Peri Phillips McQuay

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### Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Cutler, Randy L.. "Singing Meadow: The Adventure of Creating a Country Home by Peri Phillips McQuay." *The Goose*, vol. 16 , no. 1 , article 17, 2017,

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol16/iss1/17>.

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***Singing Meadow: The Adventure of Creating a Country Home*** by PERI PHILLIPS MCQUAY  
Wintergreen Studios Press, 2015 \$20.00

Reviewed by **RANDY LEE CUTLER**

Categorized under autobiography/personal memoirs, *Singing Meadow: The Adventure of Creating a Country Home* is the first-person account of how author Peri Phillips McQuay and her husband conceive and realize a rural home. After living within Foley Mountain, an 800-acre Eastern Ontario conservation area, McQuay's husband Barry, a nature conservationist educator, makes the move toward retirement. With this life-changing event comes the decision at the age of sixty to finally own their own home. As a result, their devoted relationship deepens further, entering a new phase in how they relate to each other. Through this shared process they hone their negotiating and relational skills as a couple and relearn to communicate with each other, as well as with others.

The book covers the challenges of finding the perfect spot, ideally with a small house. After a year-long search they meet with little success due to their limited budget and expectations to be surrounded by nature. Frustrated and dispirited, they eventually discover a property that immediately resonates with their desire for a diverse and unspoiled landscape albeit with no building on site; meanwhile they had vowed to each other that they wouldn't enter into any sort of building project. At this point, the memoir turns toward the challenging work of the long negotiation process of securing the property and of course working with a contractor and trades people to build a home from the well and foundation up. As the next year unfolds, the couple refine their concept of their dream home in the woods after many visits to the

property, studying the shifting seasonal light, learning about its natural features and the ever-changing wildlife. McQuay's knowledge of the flora and fauna is impressive, whether her discovery of the different trees now in her environs, the distinctive flowers blooming at different times of the year, or the numerous birds that will share this land with her. Just this inventory of feathered creatures is notable: eagle, heron, oriole, red crest, loon, white breasted nuthatch, robin, blue jay, song sparrow, blackbird, rose breasted grosbeak, kingfisher, red wing, wood thrush, oven bird, wood pecker, snipe, bobolink, yellow warbler, red tail, turkey vulture, short eared owl, great grey owl and wild geese.

Environmental literature plays a significant role in how the author conceives her new home. McQuay references Helen Hoover's *A Place in the Woods* as an inspiration for her and her husband to leave their secure jobs for the more uncertain life of living on Foley Mountain. Indeed, *Singing Meadow's* bibliography is an excellent reading list covering such topics as living a simpler, rural life, nature journaling, and sketching, to more philosophical tomes. *A Pattern Language* by influential architect and theorist, Christopher Alexander, is drawn upon for the more subtle design elements, from the fluid and slow process of adjusting the original design to accommodate the concept of 'architectural compression,' whereby many aspects are successfully combined in one space, to the importance of windows whether as a response to the width of peripheral vision or to bring the outside in. The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, also makes an appearance, reminding the author that a suitable house allows one to dream in peace.

Much of the writing concerns project managing the site while simultaneously

taking notes for this book and discovering the botanical details of her newly acquired acreage. McQuay's engagement with the land is impassioned, though further acknowledgement of its first human inhabitants would have shifted the focus from the practicalities of building up her property to the land's larger historical significance. She does mention Lloyd Jones' *Living by the Chase: The Native People of Crow and Bobs Lake*, who writes that First Nations people came to the lakes at the end of the last Ice Age:

In the Woodland Period, about 5,000 BC to 200 AD, there is evidence of clay pottery [...] In the time of recorded European history, Iroquois were followed by dominant Huron. By 1701, Ojibwa, known here in this area as Mississauga, occupied Eastern Ontario. (88)

Later, some Algonquin and Nipissing people came in search of better hunting grounds. And during her time living in the area, McQuay had conversations with long-time inhabitants who revealed their own aboriginal ancestry, which they generally kept secret:

How deeply tragic it was that not only were our earliest people frequently taken advantage of and relocated by Europeans, but, worse, that those who remained were made to feel such shame and fear that to this day they preferred to keep that proud ancestry hidden. (89)

While clearly not her primary focus, the importance of the theft of land and colonial violence nonetheless remains. This context and background might have broadened the

narrative beyond the nuts and bolts of building a home and developing a relationship with the terrain to taking up the complicated realities of owning land with such complex histories.

Despite a focus on the particularities of building her new home, McQuay defers often to the outdoors, stating that the habitus of living close to nature is the most important part and that her constant joy is the land: "For Bob and for me, as it was for Thoreau, our real life was outside" (180). The process of creating a country home awakened childhood memories of being connected to nature, nourished by the silence as well as the sounds—as referenced in the book's title—whether of animals, the seasonal winds, or the almost audible curves and vistas of the local geography. At one point, McQuay writes about a study that claims how plants thrive when they are actively loved and cared for: "Surely this extends to trees and rocks and animals and birds. Our caring notice brought them close to us and, in turn, renewed us" (96). *Singing Meadow* is a memoir about relationships, to people and to the land with its abundance of plant and wildlife, all of which engender a different kind of connection with the world.

**RANDY LEE CUTLER** is a writer, artist and educator. In the intersections of gender, art, science, and technology, her practice takes up themes of materiality and sustenance through performance, video, print media as well as creative and critical writing. Randy is an associate professor at Emily Carr University in the Faculty of Art on the unceded Coast Salish territories also known as Vancouver, Canada.