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## Islands of Grass by Trevor Herriot and The Long Walk by Jan Zwicky

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## The Myth of the Plough: Reclaiming the Earth and its Creatures

*Islands of Grass* by TREVOR HERRIOT  
Coteau, 2017 \$39.95

*The Long Walk* by JAN ZWICKY  
University of Regina Press, 2017 \$19.95

Reviewed by **gillian harding-russell**

Trevor Herriot's collection of essays, *Islands of Grass*, with photographs by Branimir Gjetvau, and Jan Zwicky's *The Long Walk* share a love of nature and concern for the environment though their genres differ. Whereas Zwicky writes poems that are, by the nature of the genre, oblique and approach the subject sideways, 'moving through' as it were, Herriot, in writing prose, comes to the subject with a more hands-on and practical approach, though his writing, too, breaks into moments of lyricism. Moreover, both poet and prose writer look at the effects of colonisation on the land, the depletion of the environment and extirpation of species, and both works may be seen as paeans to nature and what remains of the prairie.

Interestingly, the epigraph for Herriot's *Islands of Grass* is drawn from Zwicky's poem "Desire." In this poignant poem, desire is seen as the driving inspiration in human endeavour that "lift[s] us each day" (1) and "drag[s] us half senseless / through the gift of our pain" (3-4). But mistakes have been made — historic and otherwise — by those "who are ashes

and sleeping now / under the lake" (10-11). The speaker laments "the droughts and the floods, the poisoned and vanished" that "pile up and stagger against the horizon" (25-26):

The souls of the alders, the soul of  
the firs,  
the souls of the red-bellied  
newts and  
The golden-crowned kinglets, the  
uncountable souls of  
the grasses,  
making one soul, one  
bending

at dawn. Where will my soul go  
when it can't walk  
among them? (29-34)

In this poem, with its glorious colours and natural imagery, a love for the grasslands is heartfelt and reminds us that, removed from our environment, we risk becoming something less. Without the land as an extension of our psyche, where might we draw our metaphors for understanding? Without a repertoire of nature to fall back on, the speaker vows, "I will lie down, then, in the wreckage of meaning," "the dust of you filling my mouth" (37, 40).

Herriot's purpose in writing *Islands of Grass* is stated in the first essay, "Prairie Eye," in which he writes, "the images and essays in this book are an invitation" (25). They are intended to entice the reader to "take a second look at the native grassland," those last large "islands of grass

surrounded by a sea of cultivation that continues to lap at their edges” (25). Accordingly, Herriot’s alluring title metaphor of “islands of grass” appears unobtrusively in this introductory essay in which he, with a certain whimsicality and humour, calls on the reader, after exercising his or her eye reading and looking at photographs, to go out physically into the land itself where “the plants and creatures take the lead” (25).

In the second essay, “Gifts of the Prairie,” Herriot describes the grasslands in the “Rocky Mountain rain shadow” as “an ecological membrane that governs what is happening in the soil and water on the surface” (27):

Depending on the timing and degree of grazing and fire, the nature of the soil and climate, grass organizes a diversity of ecotypes that shift over time and from place to place, providing organisms in the soil, on the land and in wetlands with particular niches that come and go on spontaneous schedules: several hundred species of grasses and flowering plants and an astonishing array of animal life. (27)

Unfortunately, Europeans, with their myth of ploughing the land to make it more fertile, have played their part in destroying fragile grassland habitat that should never have been cultivated.

In fact, Herriot recounts the experience of his own grandfather, who

homesteaded on the edge of the Great Sandhills, “smiling ear-to-ear” in a photo of himself holding “one of the gifts” from the prairies “in his arms” after having reaped a bumper crop. The successful crop yield, however, died out after a couple of years as his grandfather learned the cost of ploughing “light soils in a dry land” (32).

On a similar note of European wrongheadedness, Zwicky, in “Depth,” begins, “You come from the same direction that / they did: misinformed” (1-2). And since that time the elevators, that used to number in the thousands, number only 169 in the year 2000 (19-20), the speaker’s mother wants to raise money to save the icon, making a postcard of it and “pay[ing] a kid / to sit all summer at the office desk in case of tourists” (22-23). Nevertheless an advocate of making the best of things and honouring what is human, the speaker applauds her mother’s “loyalty”:

But she was right, my mom, to try to  
save  
the elevator. Loyalty  
isn’t clinging, it’s a way  
to know. Long love, its fragile  
afterlife:  
details we can’t forget.  
What’s coming  
won’t be human if it has  
no ghost. (67-74)

Here, as in the affirmative poem “Yes,” Zwicky’s approach is not so much to lament the past as to go forward, learning from such ghosts as they reshape one and foster

new understanding: “*This is my life / and what my life / became. Yes, what my life becomes still,*” in an unending process, “*thanks to you*” (31-34).

Not intended as a criticism of forefathers, Herriot’s purpose is also essentially affirmative. He chronicles measures taken by historical conservationists such as George Ledington, who founded the Saskatchewan Natural History Museum and was influential in the development of the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration (PFRA), which, unfortunately, was decommissioned by Stephen Harper in 2012. Herriot also gives credit to Wallace Stegner, author of *Wolf Willow*, who chronicles his boyhood years living near Cypress Hills and who influenced the US government to pass the Wilderness Act, which protects grasslands south of the border. The best proof of Herriot’s driving inspiration is this eulogy of the prairie witnessed firsthand:

From earth to sky it was all song, an improvised jubilation: the swishing notes of Sprague’s pipits spiraling three hundred feet overhead, meadowlarks proclaiming from fence posts, longspurs and buntings teetering in the breeze, and a dozen Baird’s sparrows singing from who knows where. [...] The air resounded with their song in a music that is as suited to the prairie as the scent of sage or the shamble of a badger. (65)

After such a presentation of living and breathing beauty, Herriot points out which species are threatened, the larger species of birds being taken first. One of the more heart-breaking losses is that of the whooping crane, the last of which was shot down by a pair of geese hunters in 1921. In a letter later published in the Saskatchewan Natural History Society’s journal, *The Blue Jay*, one of the hunters confessed that he did not realize that the birds were so scarce and that the meat was so tough that he gave it to his dog (67).

In a litany of verses, Zwicky also lists extinct species in her ironically titled “*Consummatum Est.*” In “*Above the Falls,*” we see the fate of a bee that drops off a blue harebell into the waterfalls, a moment that becomes a metaphor for all such accidental deaths in nature. The most beneficent and beautiful poem in the collection may be “*Haydn: The unpublished sonatas, HP XVI 18-20,*” in which the speaker, after a “*long walk*” — the title line for the collection — in the “*winter night after snow,*” comes home:

Only your footsteps,  
and what you carry underneath your  
coat,  
what you have folded in your arms,  
what is cradled on your heart.  
(10-13)

And that which is brought home from nature is “*so close, / maybe it has become your heart*” (13-14). So inextricably are we

connected to nature that, in holding onto it, we too are held.

A review of *Islands of Grass* is not complete without a remark on the co-author photographer. Complementing Herriot's often lyrical commentary on the prairie, Branimir Gjetvaj's photographs bring its magic alive. Ranging from a photograph of a coyote on a snowy field with the caption "winter or summer, the prairie is a landscape that invites contemplation" (12), to the sunbathed photograph of little blue stem grass against a background of circular blazing sun (59), to the photograph of male greater sage-grouse performing "a 'lek' or mating dance" (70), the photography is as magnificent as it is powerful in capturing the changing spirit of the prairie.

In conclusion, these three authors — a prose writer, a poet, and a photographer — have together managed a celebration of the prairie while raising concerns about its preservation in the face of historic and ongoing misconceptions about cultivation, the economy, and political fallout in more recent years.

**gillian harding-russell** is a poet, writer, editor, and reviewer. She received her PhD In English Literature from the University of Saskatchewan. A new collection of poems, *In Another Air*, will be released by Radiant Press in the fall of 2018.