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***The Oil Man and the Sea: Navigating the Northern Gateway* by ARNO KOPECKY**

Douglas and McIntyre, 2013 \$26.95

Reviewed by **PATRICIA AUDETTE-LONGO**

In the summer of 2012, members of a joint Environmental Assessment Agency-National Energy Board panel flew in and out of communities across British Columbia, listening to local people respond to the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline proposal. In community halls and hotel conference rooms set up to look something like courtrooms, people shared their stories of traditional foods, water use, and land use. Everything said was streamed live online and later made available as transcripts. As part of a second round of hearings, in places like Skidegate on the Haida Gwaii islands, time limits were monitored by a table-top black box that flashed and sounded at the seven-minute and ten-minute marks (Joint Review Panel for the Enbridge Northern Gateway Project), rendering the personal stories of local economies and cultures legible as the testimonies of a quasi-judicial hearing. These testimonies, it was said, would inform the three-member panel's ultimate recommendation on the proposal to build a bitumen-carrying line between north-central Alberta and Kitimat, BC, where 525,000 barrels of oil would be loaded onto tankers each day.

The same summer, journalist Arno Kopecky and photographer Ilja Herb took a 41-foot sailboat named *Foxy* north along the BC coast, from just outside Victoria, through channels and narrow passages, to Kitimat.

It is their journey, with its many stops and many people, which yields the

pleasurable piece of travel writing and long-form journalism before us.

The choice to make this journey by sea represents more than a bid to convey a great story or adventure. Just as the proposal to build the Northern Gateway has never been treated by residents, government, media, or scholars solely as a matter of moving bitumen west, or even opening a direct trade route to Asia for Canada's molasses-thick oilsands oil, Kopecky's tale of "navigating the Northern Gateway" is not solely a travelogue. It is an opportunity to examine, up-close, an area European sailors long before Kopecky and Herb described as the "Graveyard of the Pacific"—the same areas tankers may have to navigate now that both the joint panel and the federal government have approved the project.

For the reader with limited interest in how a boat actually works—how constant engine malfunctions are overcome, for example—Kopecky's lengthy descriptions of the problems and challenges of seafaring may grow somewhat tiring. However, it is the ability to show first-hand that navigating the northwest coast is no easy feat, and human and mechanical errors can never be completely accounted for or prevented, that best serves the book's thesis.

This said, Kopecky's work should not be read entirely as a crusade to stop the pipeline or prevent heavy-duty tanker traffic, either.

Certainly, at different points, Kopecky describes his project as an effort to respond to a federal government that had begun "attacking environmental NGOs in order to defend Big Oil," a way of offering "awareness and voice for BC's threatened coast," and a journey to "stop Enbridge from ruining the Great Bear Rainforest."

And nearly every story shared—plus the 16 full-colour gorgeous pictures printed at the end of the book—puts the project and its promise of unmatched economic development under the microscope.

Nonetheless, to categorize Kopecky's book as advocacy journalism would be to avoid contending with the difficult questions he offers with regard to cross-cultural engagement and the stakes of development.

In terms of development, what comes across as Kopecky's own struggle to offer solutions is made particularly obvious as he draws to a precarious conclusion, pulling far away from his west coast journey to consider the Quebec town of Lac-Mégantic, all but destroyed in the summer of 2013 when a derailed train carrying oil exploded in the middle of the night and killed 47 people. It seems Kopecky is not speaking to the converted, but to everyone who must answer to similar questions:

[A]t what point do the costs of growing our economy outweigh the benefits? . . . Seeing as we live on a demonstrably finite planet, the pursuit of endless economic growth seems like a risky paradigm to follow. And yet we pursue it more doggedly today than ever, fuelling it with oil every step of the way.

While *The Oil Man and the Sea* does its work as both a solid piece of travel narrative and political journalism, its richness and warmth lays in the conversations Kopecky and Herb have with too many people to count, some named and some left unnamed. Kopecky draws out quintessential turns of phrase, the odd curse, and the willingness of strangers to at once welcome him and Herb into their

communities, while also—sometimes—questioning the motivations of just the most recent writer-photographer team to arrive during the Northern Gateway hearings.

These conversations, removed from make-shift hearing rooms or time-keeping black boxes bring the reader to workshops, homes, and boat decks up and down the west coast. But this is no easy feat. Critically assessing the art of travel writing, Carl Thompson argues:

If all travel involves an encounter between self and other that is brought about by movement through space, all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entailed. (10)

Kopecky must somehow navigate away from portraying the region and the people who live there as culturally static. At times, the resulting balancing act between acknowledging how communities and economies change, while drawing upon shared vocabularies for how differences between First Peoples and settlers are understood in Canada, yields wince-worthy exchanges. Midway through his book, for example, Kopecky relays a question he asked of a community member in Bella Bella, BC: "What does it mean to be an Indian in the twenty-first century?" Her response—"That is the most asinine question a journalist has ever asked me"—provides little relief to the reader. After all, defining indigeneity is politically fraught, and, implicitly, works through testimonies offered over the course of the pipeline hearings as First Peoples throughout British Columbia and Alberta explained the

importance of local lands, plants, salmon runs, and shorelines. Since the beginning of the Northern Gateway pipeline debate—and even in the days after the federal government's decision to accept the proposal—popular discourse and court challenges have positioned First Peoples in British Columbia as most able to provide a "powerful and unbroken wall of opposition" (Yinka Dene Alliance) that could ultimately prevent the project. On the other side of the debate, the project has been cast as rife with economic and development promise for First Peoples.

But in Kopecky's careful handling of the stories of people living in and moving through the BC coast in 2012, he side-steps—for the most part—colonial essentialisms that would render coastal people as *symbolic* of lifestyles that would be directly affected should oil ever meet water. Instead, in Kopecky's work, people speak to a range of issues and questions about what the region's future holds, including but not limited to the pipeline and whether tankers can safely navigate water routes between Canada's west coast and the open Pacific. Further, everyone he and Herb encounter—life-long residents, local scientists and anthropologists, passing-through journalists, review panelists, and even, briefly, someone from Enbridge interviewed by phone—is more or less put in conversation with one another. In offering a venue for "awareness and voice," Kopecky lays a great deal of groundwork for

more cross-cultural discussion, and a different kind of space and time to listen than seems to have been accorded in national debates to date.

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