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The Once and Future World: Nature As It Was, As It Is, As It Could Be by J.B. MacKinnon

Pamela Banting
University of Calgary

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***The Once and Future World: Nature As It Was, As It Is, As It Could Be* by J.B. MACKINNON**

Random House Canada, 2013 \$29.95

Reviewed by **PAMELA BANTING**

In *The Once and Future World: Nature As It Was, As It Is, As It Could Be*, J. B. MacKinnon, co-author with Alisa Smith of *The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating*, turns his attention to problems of the extirpation and extinction of species and to the concept of re-wilding both the earth and ourselves. While *The 100-Mile Diet* propelled the Slow Food Movement in Canada, *The Once and Future World* may also spur considerable discussion and debate. Given the subject matter, however, it will be somewhat less open to trial and adoption on an individual basis: individually one can buy locally or grow your own peas and carrots but to re-wild a habitat or bring a species back from extirpation requires collective will and action.

The nonfiction narrative opens with MacKinnon's recollections of growing up "on a prairie that had no name." Readers of Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, Robert Kroetsch's *A Likely Story* or *A Lovely Treachery of Words* or essays by Rudy Wiebe may be surprised to witness this writer in his mid-forties recapitulating his predecessors' experiences of growing up in Canada without knowing, in Wiebe's words, "where is here." If any confirmation were needed that, to use Kroetsch's phrase, the moment of the discovery of America continues, then MacKinnon's childhood bewilderment about the history and natural history of his home

range would supply that proof. As long as successive generations of non-indigenous Canadian children grow up without knowing what bioregion they inhabit and the natural and human histories associated with that place, the colonial condition is perpetuated. In that respect, even as I enjoyed the narrative I found myself a bit impatient with the author's decision not to name his birthplace. Whether the decision not to name the area except obliquely was an attempt to give the reader a sense of the ongoing and all-pervasiveness of the condition or a way of enacting on the page the feeling of not knowing one's whereabouts, initially I felt aggravated with what I felt was protraction of the very problem under critique. Upon further reflection, however, I think the strategy to withhold the name of the place was a good one, the reader's own frustration on this point serving to underscore the myriad connections between the colonized mind and environmental destruction.

One important manifestation of the colonial legacy pertains to 'shifting baseline syndrome' (a.k.a. 'double disappearance' and 'environmental amnesia'), the fact that with degradation of our environment, successive generations come to accept a greatly diminished world as normal. MacKinnon quotes a biologist who says that as species disappear, "they lose both relevance to a society and the constituency to champion their revival, further hastening their decline. We need to rewind important historical connections." One afternoon in fall while I was reading this book, I was teaching Don McKay's lovely and, I thought, accessible poem "Poplar" to

eighty first-year students. Once I realized that they were clearly failing to understand even the denotation of this simple poem, I asked how many of them knew what a poplar tree looked like. Three out of eighty raised their hands to testify that they could identify one of the most common trees in western Canada. Shifting baseline syndrome is a far more complex and insidious problem than the mild-sounding abstraction suggests. As MacKinnon points out, along with the challenges associated with living in a world in which nature today is roughly 10% of what it once was, other species “don’t only have the capacity to inspire our imaginations, they are a form of imagination. They are the genius of life arrayed against an always uncertain future, and to allow that brilliance to wane out of negligence is to passively embrace the death of our own minds.” Indeed some of the pleasure in reading this book comes from knowledge about other creatures: that it is thought that chickadees grow a larger brain in autumn when they need to remember seed caches and shrink it again in spring to conserve energy for the rigours of mating; that the first waves of scuba divers in the 1960s reported that “the spawning chant of huge white sea bass rising up from the depths was as loud as a freight train.”

In 2013 British journalist George Monbiot also published a book about the idea of rewilding, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea and Human Life*. MacKinnon’s focus is primarily North America, but there is an uncanny similarity between “Ghost Acres,” Chapter 6 of MacKinnon’s book, and “The Never-Spotted Leopard,” Chapter 5 of Monbiot’s. Both chapters deal with

the large number of undocumented panther ‘sightings’ each year in Britain. MacKinnon interviewed Mark Fisher, and Monbiot records in a footnote that Fisher’s work “has been influential in shaping this book” (10). Both visited Glen Affric, an area in the Scottish Highlands where a large-scale reforestation project is in process. Both books are well-written and insightful, and I enjoyed both. However, Monbiot’s book does have an undercurrent of machismo running through it in the sense that he connects rewilding with possibilities for the restoration of manliness among the populace. At very least, one can say that Monbiot does not make the case for the benefits for women or femininity of rewilding. MacKinnon makes no such equations.

Interestingly, like *The 100-Mile Diet*, *The Once and Future World* also concludes with the author seeing a bear. MacKinnon notes that his mother’s people are bear-people, a suggestion that he is involved in a lifelong process of discovering both where he is here and his own familial cultural lineages and connections to place and other creatures. As an insightful and hopeful counter to the pervasive notion today that wild beings are superfluous, unnecessary, quaintly antique, or beneath us in the order of things, MacKinnon writes: “Every species still in existence is exactly as contemporary as you or I, and nature’s potential . . . remains unchanged. It is this potential, rather than some replica of the past, that awaits restoration.” *The Once and Future World* is an eminently readable, rich text on rewilding that connects colonization, decolonization, and environmental restoration.

Works Cited

Monbiot, George. *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea and Human Life*. Toronto: Allen Lane—Penguin, 2013.

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PAMELA BANTING is currently researching in the fields of animal studies and petrocultural studies.