



BORDER FLOWS: A Century of the Canadian-American Water Relationship
Edited by Lynne Heasley and Daniel Macfarlane

ISBN 978-1-55238-896-9

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



Acknowledgement: We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, **re.press**, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>



PART FOUR

Reflections in the Water

The Lakes at Night

JERRY DENNIS

Late one night, standing on the deck of a two-masted schooner sailing across the top of Lake Huron, I had an encounter with history. The *Malabar* was a replica of schooners that had worked the lakes by the thousands in the nineteenth century. That was part of the history I sensed. Another part of it was personal history, memories brought vividly to mind while seeing new places—or old places in new ways. That night it was possible to imagine that the Great Lakes had not changed in hundreds, maybe thousands, of years. I saw what the First Peoples must have seen: the lake calmed to mirror flatness, the stars as bright on the water as they were in the sky, water extending in every direction to the horizon. I sensed the wash of time and an old longing rose in me: to engage more fully with the world, to get beneath the surface, to try to understand a place I cared deeply about.

The Great Lakes have always been a powerful presence in my family. As a young man, my mother's father worked as a lifesaver at the U.S. Life Saving Station on South Manitou Island, in northern Lake Michigan. Later, he raised his family a short walk from the lake in Leelanau County, the "little finger" of Michigan's mitten, and told his children stories of shipwrecks and storms. He died a few months before I was born, but I grew up hearing his stories from my mother as we walked the beaches or fished the lake or climbed the dunes at Empire and Sleeping Bear. As a family we made regular excursions north, across the Mackinac Bridge connecting

Lakes Michigan and Huron, across the Upper Peninsula to the wildest lake of all, Lake Superior. Every summer we went farther north yet, across the border into Ontario at Sault Ste. Marie, and into the bush to fish rivers and lakes in country that in those days was still wilderness. On the way home we would stop along the rocky, wave-battered shore of Superior to fish for coaster brook trout and pick wild blueberries.

But even after a lifetime on the lakes, I didn't truly understand them until that journey from Michigan to Maine on the schooner *Malabar*. Our trip up the northern quarter of Lake Michigan and across the lengths of Huron, Erie, and Ontario was not a casual tour, but a job. I was one of five crewmen who had been assigned to deliver the schooner to its new owner in Bar Harbor, and I went along not as a writer but as a volunteer deckhand. As such, I hauled sails, sweated lines, pumped the bilge, secured dock lines, and piloted the yawl boat to nudge the *Malabar* into its dockages. I took my turn cooking and washing dishes; repairing toilets and motors; helping to dismantle the rigging and step the masts for the Erie Canal, and then to raise the mast and re-rig in Albany before we descended the Hudson River to the Atlantic. I stood watch at all hours of the day and night, in all weather, on fresh water, brackish, and salt, and took the helm during the worst storm I have ever experienced.

During all those weeks, I never lost sight of the lakes themselves. They wouldn't allow it. The Great Lakes are like five beautiful and charismatic sisters: willful, tempestuous, frequently charming, ultimately unfathomable. I had set out to know them, but it was an impossible task. Knowing a small place is hard enough—you can spend a lifetime getting to know a woodland pond or a patch of woods. The Great Lakes are beyond our capabilities. They're too big, too varied; they sprawl across too large a swath of the continent.

For centuries the Great Lakes were the main trade route to the interior of North America. For that reason, and because they are surrounded by lands flush with resources, they were central in transforming the United States and Canada into industrial and economic giants. Yet the lakes remain among the least appreciated of North America's major geographic features. No longer am I surprised to meet people who don't know that the lakes are too large to see across or that they contain most of the surface fresh water on the continent. I am constantly surprised, however, by the number of people I meet who assume that the water is there to be ransacked.

Maybe the lakes are too great for their own good. If they were contained entirely within a single province or state, they would be easier to defend. Instead, they overlap two provinces, eight states, and more than two hundred tribal governments and thus are constantly snarled in legislative complexities that make them vulnerable. And because they contain such an enormous volume of water—nearly a fifth of all the liquid fresh water on the surface of the Earth—many assume that they're inexhaustible. With that much water, the thinking goes, there should be plenty for everyone.

That could possibly be true if the lakes were merely storage containers. But they are vital ecosystems supporting complex communities of animals and plants—some of them found no place else, all of them dependent upon a consistent supply of clean water. Some of those communities are human: about forty million of us live around the lakes, drawing our drinking water from them, bathing in them, fishing from them, boating upon them. Many of our cities sacrificed their environmental health to build the United States and Canada and have since been abandoned for their troubles. Go to Gary or East Chicago or Hamilton to see what the steel mills and petroleum distilleries have wrought. The best hopes for those and dozens of other cities are the lakes themselves. Once they were highways for shipping and dumping grounds for waste, but the current renaissance of waterfronts in Toronto, Milwaukee, Duluth, Cleveland, Erie, Buffalo, and many other cities makes it clear that we've entered a new stage in our relationship. The Great Lakes are no longer merely useful. They have become determinants and indicators of the quality of our lives.

I thought of many of these things that night on the *Malabar*. I thought also of the borders we were crossing. National borders lay north, south, and east of us; anyone who travels on or around the lakes must negotiate customs and security checkpoints at many places between the two countries. But those borders are porous. Fish and wildlife don't recognize them. Neither do the storms that sweep the lakes or the winter ice that clogs the shipping channels. Earlier in the night we had passed over a pair of oil pipes on the bottom of the Straits of Mackinac that for sixty years have transported a constant flow of petroleum from Canada, across Michigan, and back to Canada at Sarnia. Those pipes are the subject of much concern because they are old and insufficiently inspected and barely regulated; many of us worry that they will rupture, pumping millions of gallons of crude oil into the lakes and creating a catastrophe on both sides of the border.

I was on that journey in part to observe and document the hazards of petroleum transport and other environmental concerns. Already I had spent years talking to people and observing the consequences of our misuse of the Great Lakes: invasive species, chemical and petroleum spills, faulty municipal sewage plants, agricultural runoff of fertilizers and pesticides, degraded shorelines—the list was long and getting longer. And I was starting to lose heart.

But those hours of night watch on the *Malabar* gave me a break from worry. Alone, surrounded by starlight, with the water spread out to the horizon, it was possible to imagine that we had never introduced zebra mussels into the water or pumped crude oil through it in deteriorating pipes. I wasn't sticking my head in the sand—just the opposite. I was opening my eyes and seeing more clearly than I ever had the beauty and singularity that make the lakes a natural wonder of the world and a place worth defending at all costs. The history of the Great Lakes and my personal history were joined for just a moment—and I was lucky to be transformed by the encounter while the lakes remained unchanged.



The chapters that follow are very different from those that make up the rest of this volume. The title of the section, “Reflections in the Water,” suggests the introspective and meditative tone of many of the pieces as well as their subject. That water figures so prominently is notable not only because the political border dividing the United States and Canada is such a waterlogged one, but because water is so often a central and transformative element for those who grow up near it. It is a theme that runs through Western literature from *The Odyssey* to *Huckleberry Finn* to *Life of Pi*. I suspect it is a prominent theme as well in the personal histories of many of the people who devote themselves to environmental studies and the natural sciences.

The contributors to this section are a varied and well-travelled group. All, in one way or another, have committed a significant portion of their careers to studying aspects of the border between Canada and the United States. But their studies have not been limited to analytic research. They have been to the places they study; have waded in and gotten muddy; have hiked, sailed, canoed, kayaked, bicycled, and fished there. I would argue

that those immersive activities have carried them deeper into their subjects than scholastic work alone could take them.

Such personal and immersive connections with the land are central to the long tradition of nature writing, a genre that the essayist Edward Hoagland defined as “biology with love.”¹ Writers and thinkers as varied as Montaigne, Gilbert White, Darwin, Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and E.O. Wilson have demonstrated that writing creatively about a place makes that place immediate to readers. A narrative that includes a deeply felt personal connection draws the reader even closer. Done well, such writing engages us, stimulating our imaginations to see, hear, scent, and feel the place as vividly as if we had actually been there. The same process is at work in fiction when a character “comes alive” for the reader. Precise and evocative language and carefully chosen images inspire emotional responses that many readers find more convincing than even the most carefully crafted dialectic treatments.

It should surprise no one that writing about experiencing a place is markedly different than writing about the place from a purely academic or scientific point of view. It’s personal, and it should be. There’s room for personal pronouns and the active voice. There’s room also for humour, metaphor, and imagination. In my own experience—being a writer trained in literary arts, and having earned my living for many years writing about personal encounters in nature for a popular audience—those techniques are completely natural. They’re the tools I reach for reflexively. So it always interests me to work with scholars who have been trained to eliminate the personal and imaginative from their work. It is equally interesting to see how eager many of them are to break those strictures and make their writing more vivid, lively, and interesting. I’m confident that those qualities are appreciated by readers of every kind.

What follows are the reflections of seven very different writers remembering the very different waters that have wound through their lives. The results are as diverse and interesting as the border country itself.

Note

- 1 *Tigers & Ice: Reflections on Nature and Life* (New York: Lyons, 2000).

