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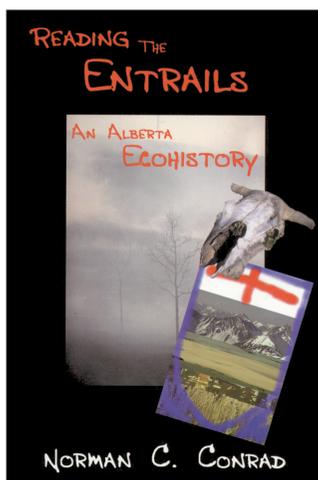
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READING THE ENTRAILS: AN ALBERTA ECOHISTORY

by Norman C. Conrad

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EPILOGUE

This story began at the end of the last ice age. But glaciations also have their beginnings. Long before ice takes hold, thousands of years before thresholds are encountered, those circumstances that favour ice take seed, gestate and grow; their power accumulates. As potent as these may be, pre-threshold changes are subtle, often imperceptible, and the land and life seem strong. Once critical thresholds are crossed the onset of an ice age can be geologically instantaneous, as little as five years some think, and consequences colossal. Ice laminates the land, submerging it to the deeps and stripping it of life. Ice and abiotism take dominion for, what is on human timescales, an eternity.

On this book's timescale, the last 10 to 15,000 years, immense changes of other sorts, anthropogenic in origin, many on the global scale, have occurred. The five to 10 million hunter-gatherers on Earth at the last ice age have grown to six billion, scarcely any of who today are hunter-gatherers. This radical lamination of the human species on Earth is now virtually complete in expanse but not in intensity. Population continues to grow onward to 10 billion or more and per capita impacts elevate ever upward as appetites and human technological powers bound higher and higher.

The Quaternary extinctions eliminated much of Earth's Pleistocene mega-faunal life at the genera and species levels. Since then almost all other large life forms, and many small, have been stripped away, some by extinction and, with alarming and increasing frequency, by extirpation and elimination of populations. In their place have been laminated the new plastic beasts, domesticated animals. These are dedicated not to the Biosphere but to service of the Noosphere. Most arable lands have been stripped of wild flora and fauna, displaced or replaced by domestic plants, resources to feed the Noosphere. Plantations and tree farms increasingly rise up where Earth's forests once grew. Seas are harvested, fisheries stripped to the point of collapse in many instances. Biodiversity is plunging and intact ecosystems are utterly endangered. Earth's atmosphere is being polluted and its climate

is changing, loaded with the greenhouse gases and other chemicals produced in the last several centuries of industrialization. Each change changes others. The Biosphere is in full retreat, the Noosphere is in brazen, unconscious advance.

Today's ambition is to pick up the pace of global "development" as the Noosphere confidently goes down a never-before-trodden path with scarcely a thought for where it leads. The fresh new land, Alberta, has been developed and plundered in quick time, so fast and furiously that there has been barely opportunity to reflect on it. In just over one century so much has been stripped and laminated that Alberta is synthetic in many ways. Provincial leaders shrilly exhort all around to take and plunder more, faster. But where does this lead? What prospects are there for the future in a fabricated world in which most are motivated by the ravenous twins, production and consumption?

BACK TO NEIGHBOURS

About six years ago, just after writing the prologue, I moved away. Recently I returned to the old neighbourhood. The house looked content, congenial and happy to see me. Someone else lives in it and the cottonwood still stands. The ash that the girls and I planted on Father's Day some years back, grows, much larger now. The wild rose, the one lovingly dug with my father, our last real interaction before disease took his memory and then his life, is gone. Memories fade, places are lost, but the exotic ash thrives. Things look neat and clean.

The nice neighbours down the street and across the alley and that silly grain elevator birdhouse, pluck full of English sparrows, remain. It is a fine neighbourhood still. Over on the hill I wander and wonder, possibly looking for the bed of gentian, perhaps that swatch of prairie wool, maybe the bones of Holden Caulfield. There are improvements there too. A nature trail now winds up the hillside over the bed of gentian. Too bad about those gentian; no longer part of the Biosphere and all. When asked about them, a neighbour said he did not know them. Maybe it is easier not to know what was. Perhaps the problem is with remembering too much—one can only embrace so many neighbours, whether place, plant, animal, human, past, present or future?

But we risk much to forget the future. The Biosphere is shrinking and the Noosphere is growing in a dialectic that leads in never-before-experienced, never-charted directions. What will this old place be like next century? What of this old world? What new strips and laminates, what new dynamics? What synthesis? What resolution?



And what of mental environments? Illusions rule. Our collective mind thinks that the Biosphere is not being stripped away, that it is still intact and dutifully working for us, helping fulfil our destiny. But this too is a laminate. Crafted over the growing Biospheric void are faux mnemonics of what once was. If these new illusions of what-once-was-but-no-longer-is are the navigation points guiding the Noosphere into the future and our aggregate appetite is the compass, we have passage on a voyage to a strange and dangerous unfoundland, a new *terra incognita* or possibly *terra nullius*. Without a polestar and with only our voracity for a pilot we cross risky thresholds on the way. Once there we may find that nothing inhabits this fabricated future-land other than, perhaps, willful monsters and a haunting echo of Margaret Atwood's words in *Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein*:

Doctor, my shadow
shivering on the table,
you dangle on the leash
of your own longing;
your need grows teeth.

You sliced me loose

and said it was
Creation. I could feel the knife.
Now you would like to heal
that chasm in your side,
But I recede. I prowl.

I will not come when you call.¹



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