



**WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity**  
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# Gwen Pharis Ringwood and Elsie Park Gowan: Writing the Land 1933-1979

*Moira Day*

## Introduction

“What a piece of work is man,’ cried Hamlet, and for centuries the world echoed his admiration,” noted Elsie Park Gowan in the 1930s. “Frailty, thy name is woman,’ exclaimed the same Prince, and for years they have been making us believe it” (Gowan, “Woman” 307). Thus Gowan succinctly outlines not only the ongoing historical challenges confronting women, but the larger pattern of conflicts, ironies, and contradictions surrounding the lives and careers of herself and her contemporary, Gwen Pharis Ringwood. They were women writing plays in a classical humanist tradition that regarded playwriting and theatre alike as dominantly male domains. They were Canadian regional writers forging a native tradition of playwriting in the face of an imperial British and older central and eastern Canadian tradition of letters that viewed not only men, but also Hamlet and all of Shakespeare’s princes and kings, as the measure of all things.

Yet, paradoxically, if Laurier declaimed in 1904 that it was Canada that would “fill the twentieth century,”<sup>1</sup> he might equally have asserted the same of women and the opening western provinces. Elsie Park (Young) Gowan, born in Helensburgh, Scotland (1905), and Gwen Pharis Ringwood, born in Anaton, Washington, USA (1910), moved to the new “boom” province of Alberta—Gowan to Edmonton in 1912, Ringwood to McGrath in 1913—when waves of immigration and new forms of feminism and

populism were radically transforming its social, political, intellectual, and physical landscape. It was a richness that left both playwrights “writing the land” and its people long after many of the other great possibilities hinted at, in 1904, had failed them.

## Gowan: Depression and War 1933-46

With *Homestead* (1933) Gowan became an Albertan pioneer of the new folk play genre favoured by the Irish Renaissance and American Little Theatre movements. As Sam Selden, later one of Ringwood’s mentors at Chapel Hill, explained:

The term “folk,” as we use it, has nothing to do with the folk play of medieval times. But rather it is concerned with folk subject matter: with the legends, superstitions, customs, environmental differences, and the vernacular of the common people. [...] The chief concern of the folk dramatist is man’s conflict with the forces of nature and his simple pleasure in being alive. (60-61)<sup>2</sup>

Gowan also became one of its first Alberta defenders when a 1935 Dominion Drama Festival adjudicator attacked “God Made the Country,” a revised version of *Homestead*, as representative of a new school of local playwriting seemingly intent on reducing Canada to “a land of kitchen stoves from end to end” peopled by “old ladies sitting in rocking chairs” moaning and groaning, while surrounded by “those wide open spaces” just “waiting to claim a victim in time for the curtain to fall” (Morley 12). Gowan’s spirited riposte certainly defended the folk play as authentically Canadian:

It’s just Mr. [Malcolm] Morley’s bad luck that we misguided playwrights have tried to create a drama distinctively Canadian. We believed that the quality of our lonely land might be found in its far places [...] that its reality might be best known by those close to its prairies and forests and mountains. We

imagined a dramatic theme in the impact of these tremendous forces on the spirit of man. (Gowan, "Another" 8)

However, as Wagner indicated in 1987, the discussion was not just about aesthetics. If Gowan resented Malcolm Morley's implication that Canadian playwriting should mimic, if not Shakespeare, at least the best of British drawing-room comedy, she breathed fire over his suggestion, especially in the midst of the Depression, that the quintessence of Canada was to be found in the glittering circles of privilege he had encountered in "our best hotels and transcontinental trains" (Gowan, "Another" 8) as an indulged guest.

By 1992, Gowan had mellowed enough to agree about the rocking chair and kitchen stove: "you don't stay in the log cabin forever." But she still felt Morley had never understood "those wide open spaces" and what constituted "the main problem in Canada. Land" (Day, *Hungry* 42). In analyzing the 1930s prairie drama of Minnie Bicknell, Elsie Park Gowan, and Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Arnd Bohm argues that in their eagerness to refute Morley's argument about the narrow, provincial nature of the folk tragedy, Canadian critics have sometimes fallen into the opposite trap of "[r]eading these plays in terms of universal symbols and abstracted myths" that can filter out "their specific historical meaning" (257). Without that contextualization, one can miss the significance of the dramas not only as sophisticated, compact analyses of the social, political, and economic assaults on the family unit by the global crisis of the Depression, but as feminist critiques presenting women as frequently more resourceful and resilient than men in their response to breakdowns in the patriarchal system. Similarly, without due regard to "specific historical meaning," one can miss the increasing complexity of Gowan and Ringwood's approach to "Land" long after they had left the "log cabin" behind.

Gowan credits her own near-fatal encounter as a rural teacher with falling trees in a storm, and then preoccupation with Thomas Hardy as the initial inspiration for *Homestead* (Day, *Hungry* 38-39). The ending of the play may indeed suggest the cruel and arbitrary nature of the environment, as Freda, having decided to leave her brutal spouse for their sympathetic neighbour, Hugh Forbes, finds her happiness and escape thwarted by a falling tree that kills her lover rather than her husband. But arguably, the real turning point is the refusal of Freda's husband, Brandt, to consider

Hugh's neighbourly proposal to adopt a more co-operative approach to managing their respective lands. Despite Hugh's pleas, as seconded by the desperate, pregnant Freda, that such a scheme would alleviate their crushing work load, terrifying physical and human isolation, and vulnerability to political and economic exploitation, Brandt holds stubbornly to his individualistic and proprietorial approaches to property, chattel, and wife, and goes out (illegally) hunting. Had Brandt stayed to talk the proposal through, likely none of them would have been out in the lethal windstorm when the tree fell.

Gowan's preoccupation with the conflict between those who see land as a beginning point for building co-operative human, social, and economic community, and those who exploit it to build personal empires maintained by oppression, violence, and self-interest, accelerated in her 1937 *Building of Canada* radio series. The three episodes dealing with the settling of Manitoba cover a sweep of times, countries, and families over three generations, starting in 1812 Scotland and ending in 1870 Manitoba. If Gowan contrasts the initial romantic image of "the log shack in woods" that lured *Homestead's* Freda into her marriage—"I thought how pretty it would be, like on a calendar" (54)—with the grueling reality of the life she finds there, Gowan draws a similar contrast in "X The Silver Chief" between the romantic, beautiful Scotland for "successful poets" that Sir Walter Scott can still afford to live in, and the far more brutal one now inhabited by the McLeods and the McKays, representatives of those "Highland crofters" (1) who have been pushed off the land by the Enclosures. "XI Seven Oaks" shifts the action to 1814 and the arrival of the Selkirk settlers in the Canadian Northwest, but hardly to an empty land. Having been violently dispossessed of their own land in Scotland by the mercantile forces of the Industrial Revolution, they now find themselves in turn being viewed suspiciously in Manitoba as potential dispossessors by the English Hudson's Bay, French Norwesters, Métis, and Aboriginal communities that already occupy the land. The settlement eventually finds its own place, but only through cooperation and negotiation.

Both episodes paved the way for Gowan's unusual "take" on the 1870 Red River Uprising,<sup>3</sup> "XVIII Red Star in the West." Jean McLeod, a descendent of the original Selkirk settlers, is the maternal voice of moderation and reason. Given her own crofter ancestry, she sympathizes with the Métis cause and approves of Riel's standing up to the Canadian surveyors.

But the same communal memory running back to 1812 also leaves her suspicious of potential Empire-builders, whether she finds them in Thomas Scott, Riel's implacable Orangeman enemy, or in Riel and his growing dictatorial and military aspirations. In their escalating conflict, she sees unfolding yet another cycle of the violence and irrationality that threatens family helping family in a free and co-operative fashion, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender. While Jean mourns the loss of both young men—one left dead by the hand of the other, and the other fled to escape retribution—she nonetheless closes the play with the thoughtful words, "I pray we'll have no more dictators on the Red River ... or anywhere else in the country ... from this time forward" (18).

There are echoes of Riel's 1869 defiance of the federal surveyors on the Red River in the comic 1930s confrontation between the dim but likeable Davys and the local surveyors sent by a scheming lakeside developer in Alberta. But while inspired by an actual incident of a family commandeering "a pile of stones, a club and a fierce dog and a Boer War shotgun" (Day, *Hungry* 149) to defend their lakeside property from all comers, Gowan's first full-length comedy, *The Last Caveman* (1938), was even more transparently than *Red Star*, a parable about the growing international threat of fascism. *Caveman's* message, that sovereign nations could no longer settle their differences like "cavemen" given their greater capacity for destruction, had become even stronger by 1946, when the play, in a revised form, was launched on a professional five-month western Canadian tour. The idealistic young professor of 1938 promoting his book on the concept of a co-operative world government had been replaced in 1946 by an angry, somewhat cynical war veteran; his sweetheart, Miranda, also having seen two major wars in less than twenty years, and this "brave new world" of postwar prosperity threatened by a shadow of the nuclear bomb, was even more insistent that her publisher father spread the book's urgent message. Otherwise, she suggested, it would be neither trees nor surveyors dropping next on Alberta's little "two-by-four piece[s] of land" (Day, *Hungry* 148):

I don't call it freedom when we're all afraid. Deep down in ourselves, even when we're doing happy things—sailing the boat, working at our jobs, dancing and laughing—somewhere inside us we know it's only a breathing spell. The horror will come back. Bombs will fall, children scream, boys will die in

flames. [...] I've got a high enough opinion of the human race to believe we could extend our loyalty to a federation of mankind. (*Caveman* 208-09)

## Ringwood: The New Alberta 1949-56

In February 1949, Leduc No.1 blew, and Joe, the young crewman in Gowan's *Who Builds a City*, crowed, "On the horizon ... the smoke and the flame—Nothing around here's going to be the same!" (Gowan, *Who* 43). If Gowan's 1954 civic pageant managed to usher in the Oil era on a celebratory note (Nothof, "Making" 176), Ringwood seemed more ambivalent about "the change in the landscape, a change in the sky" (Gowan, *Who* 43). She had made her reputation at Chapel Hill writing lyrically on the influence of drought, hardship, and the Depression on the land and its community in such folk tragedies as *Still Stands the House*, *Pasque Flower*, and *Dark Harvest* (1938-39), and at least superficially, the Alberta Folklore Project plays, written between 1944 and 1946—*The Jack and the Joker*, *The Rainmaker*, and *Stampede*—seemed a continuation of that phase. In truth, she was later to confess to theatre scholar Anton Wagner, land remembered as historical myth became her sanctuary from a war that had devastated her personally. If her husband's enlistment left her a single parent for most of the duration, other losses were more permanent and profound:

My two eldest brothers were in the Air Force and both were killed in action while Barney [her husband] was overseas. [...] I think my youngest brother Bob never got over his grief entirely, and from that time suffered severe depressions which later resulted in his death. (Letter to Wagner 1979)

Confronted with the magnitude of a human evil and violence seemingly beyond personal comprehension or healing, the Alberta Folklore plays allowed her to retreat into an idyllic semi-mythic world of the past, "symphonic," full of "music, color, bigness" in which the elements of celebration considerably lightened the darker, sadder, or more menacing undercurrents in the material. "[W]ith my personal life so torn by the war [...] it was a relief to write plays about Alberta's past" (Letter to Wagner 1979).

But after 1949 she was forced to consider how unexpected prosperity might paradoxically prove as destructive to land and community as deprivation. In her folk farce, *A Fine Colored Easter Egg* (1950), it is too many resources rather than too few that threaten the Ukrainian-Canadian Nemitchuk family. Ironically, both marriage and farm are saved when the oil wells drilled on the property prove dry. Nonetheless, given the allure of the encroaching cities, Wasyl's dream of bequeathing the land to his newborn grandson may prove as illusory as Olga's dream of it yielding a gusher of new furniture and appliances.

Ringwood's first full-length comedy, *Widger's Way* (1952), turns to Plautus' *Pot of Gold* for its basic story of a miser who sacrifices his own and everyone else's happiness for the love of his gold. However, Ringwood's parsimonious, anti-social farmer gives the Roman archetype an Alberta twist by blaming the lean years of the Depression followed by the trauma of the war and its aftermath for curdling his character:

And the world changed. The world was a giant, Docket, waiting to crush a man. The thing to do was hide, be small and careful. [...] And yet for all my care, at his own time, the Giant closes his fist on Widger. Since it's so, I'd wish myself a bigger fistful. (326)

Similarly, Ringwood not only translates the Roman pot of money into a prospector's bag of gold nuggets, but also playfully suggests the real hidden "gold" in the Alberta earth lies in its long-dead dinosaurs. Ringgo Dowser, a wandering pedlar who embodies the free natural spirit of the land, offers to find or "divine" water for Widger, but it is oil that springs up instead, this time as a happy *deus ex machina* that salvages a much-chastened Widger's fortunes, and allows the young folks to marry. Still, by suggesting that the fossils on Widger's land ignite the passion of Roselle's geology student suitor as much as Roselle herself, the play remains a cautionary tale about preserving human values and community in the face of a new Giant threatening to fill Alberta with Widgers.

For playwrights toiling in the wilderness of inadequate performance and production opportunities, the Giant had its benign aspect. By the 1950s, both Gowan and Ringwood seemed poised to become the first significant playwrights of the new urban, professional theatre starting to

emerge in Alberta's cities. Instead, they virtually vanished: Ringwood into northern BC in 1953, Gowan into teaching to support herself after her husband's death in 1958. Their stage writing over the 1950s and 1960s, while innovative, paradoxically led them back into the wilderness rather than into the new professional theatre structures. Unlike earlier decades when their respective stage and radio writing drew them in different directions, they gravitated towards writing large, epic community dramas where the community itself was the protagonist, the dramaturgy a mix of song, words and dance—and the land an interactive presence in its multiplicity.

## “The Jasper Story” (1956-60, 1976-79), “Look Behind You, Neighbor!” (1961), “The Road Runs North” (1967)

Gowan had always loved radio's ability to resituate the human action of the play from the confines of the box set to the vast expanse of a Canadian Northwest created through sound and imagination. “Who Builds a City,” featuring a cast of three hundred local actors, dancers, singers, and musicians to tell the story of Edmonton from 1904 to 1954 gave her valuable experience in adapting the same epic technique to live theatre. Writing a script for the Edmonton Gardens arena that required the driving of real vintage cars before a crowd of six thousand (“6000” 24) was good practice for the “total theatre” of “The Jasper Story,” with its use of “all the theatre's resources of dialogue, song, music and spectacle” (Gowan, “History” 8). Since “the basis of history is economics, the saga had three chapters—Fur, Gold and Steel”: the impact of the fur trade on Jasper's human story motivated *The Fur Brigade*—1825, Act One, Scene One (Chapter One); the lure of the gold rush drove *The Overlanders*—1862, Act One, Scene Two (Chapter Two); and the arrival of the railway stoked *The Twentieth Century*—1908, Act Two (Chapter Three).

Aware of the spectacular theatrical success story of another small, rural town in Canada, director/producer/composer Jack McCreath argued that Jasper had arguably produced something even more “unique” (qtd. in Bill 21). In featuring over one hundred members of the Jasper community “in a spectacular Canadian setting” enacting their own story and singing “songs from an all-original Canadian score,” in an “all-Canadian

show”—that is, one that is also written, directed, and produced by Canadians—“The Jasper Story” actually offered a show that was “much more authentically Canadian than the Stratford venture” (McCreath); while Gowan resorted to her old radio technique of using a narrator/guide as a framing device and arranging the historical narrative around the fortunes of several representative families—as dominated by their own share of strong, assertive historical women like Katy O’Hara Schubert and Mary Shaffer—the epic use of cast and environment was strikingly different. Particularly in its 1956-60 manifestation, the “musical Historama” placed cars, horses, and a cast of well over one hundred local performers, singers, dancers, and musicians on a huge “two-hundred foot stage at the foot of the Palisades, with one of the most magnificent ranges of mountains in the Rockies as a backdrop” (“History” 9). At least one reviewer, John Dafoe, considered the combination of Gowan’s text—which had a knack for catching the human element within the historical incident—and the setting, which allowed the human and historical narrative to be shown within the natural environment where the events had actually occurred, gave the show an unusual poignancy:

The production succeeds admirably in telling these stories in human terms, in bringing into vivid relief the everyday problems which faced the men and women on the trail west. [...] Strengthening this added element of depth is the site itself. The events which make up this drama actually happened at or close to this spot. (Dafoe)

Being close to the spot sometimes had its drawbacks; several reviewers (Bill 21; Deacon 5) joined Stephen Franklin in complaining of real trains arriving “50 yards away and 50 years ahead of time as an entirely unwelcome and deafening show-stopper” (Franklin). Still, even Franklin agreed with Dafoe that the presence of the rails added a strong note of authenticity to the 1908 sequence, which was actually staged on the original Swift property, “on almost the exact spot on which the lone homesteader defied the railway to build its line through his property. Behind the stage lies the line the railway finally did build after surrendering to the stubborn man’s defense of his home” (Dafoe).

It is difficult to believe that “The Jasper Story” did not influence nearby Edson’s decision to commission its own 1961 historical musical from Gwen Pharis Ringwood (book) and Victoria’s Chet Lambertson (music) to mark its fiftieth anniversary. Although “Look Behind You, Neighbor!” lacked the natural sweep of the mountains to forestage its action and condensed the historical survey from eighty-three to ten years in favour of concentrating on its two central romances, it resembled the Jasper play in binding history and land together in a three-act human narrative, dominated by strong women. Act One, which begins in 1909 with the arrival of the first settlers, Kathleen Freeman and her family, documents the period from 1909 to 1910, when Edson, chosen as the railroad terminus over Wolf Creek, begins to boom. Ringwood also introduces her first Asian-Canadian character, Johnny Boniface, the “Chinese gentleman” (22) who erected Edson’s first building, a two-storey hotel in 1910. Act Two follows the arrival of the railroad and the beginning of a rocky romance between Kathleen’s sister, Melissa, the new teacher—who acts as a metaphor for the “civilizing” influence of culture, education, temperance, and morality arriving with the women—and Lance Delaney, who is representative of the rollicking male adventure, energy, and anarchy of the frontier. Both forces are needed to build a town, joyously incorporated in 1911. Act Three, which documents the hardship of the war years, ends happily with Delaney, now a wounded veteran, returning to start life—and the cycle of fertility and regeneration—afew with Melissa on their own farm.

Calling on Edson’s citizenry to contribute everything from newspaper research, oral history, period costumes, hats and props to a quickly-formed town band (“More” 9; “Period Costumes” 1; “Period Items” 6; “Once” 12), and a cast of seventy-five, ranging in age from seven to seventy, “Neighbor,” not surprisingly, sold-out locally (“Warm” 9; “Finale” 1). However, as was the case with “The Jasper Story,” the all-Canadian aspect of the show, a quality still missing from the Stratford success story, also contributed to “Neighbor” attracting a surprising amount of national and even international attention. Condensed versions were broadcast over CFRN-TV, Edmonton (“Warm” 9) and CBC Radio as a “genuine piece of Canadiana [...] a marvelous example of how a group of people in a small town can rise to great heights” (“CBC” 5). Additionally, in the spring of 1962, “Neighbor” toured to Edmonton for the Duke of Edinburgh Second Commonwealth Study Conference to serve as a “typical representation of how a

community in Western Canada developed during the push of the railway West just after the turn of the century” while demonstrating “what local talent, combined with competent music and writing can do toward putting history in a palatable form” (“Pageant Cast” 1; “Pageant Being” 16). Gordon C. Garbutt, one of the conference coordinators, wrote that despite weary “days of travel across Canada and a series of tightly packed programmes” that left most of the three hundred delegates on the twenty-day cross-country event dreading the prospect of two hours of amateur drama, “I wish I could put into words just how moved we were.” Few items “succeeded as well in establishing cordial understanding among people from 35 countries, of many races, of many tongues” or at conveying “the Conference theme: The human consequences of the changing industrial environment” (“Edson Story” 16).

Arguably, the “human consequences of the changing industrial environment” had become a pressing concern in Ringwood’s drama as early as *Egg* (1950), then *Widger* (1952) where a bag of miners’ gold fuels greed and murder. She developed the theme at greater depth in her next historical musical “The Road Runs North,” written with composer Art Roshomon, to celebrate the Canadian Centennial year (1967) and the establishment of Barkerville and the Gold Rush era (1861-64). Drawing on almost one hundred members of the Williams Lake community working onstage and behind the scenes, “Road” relied on many of the same dynamics of strong local involvement as “Neighbor.” However, in Anthony’s estimation, Ringwood’s experience “with the Edson musical aided her in writing [...] [a] new musical [that] was more mature and had greater sweep and depth” (102-03).

While the same war of the sexes continues into “Road” with two feisty chorus girls landing their men on the frontier, the racial relationships are more complex. Unlike Johnny Boniface (“Neighbor”), the nineteenth-century Chinese prospector Lo Chen (“Road”) faces deep-rooted personal and systemic prejudice. Reflecting the larger aboriginal population of Williams Lake, Ringwood, who also directed the play, incorporated a sympathetic romance between Hilt Ryland, a young man from Ontario, and Mayla, a young aboriginal woman whose family saves his life. In addition to indicating that actual dance, song, and drumming by aboriginal performers be incorporated into the play, Ringwood also specifies that Mayla’s father (51-57) speak only in his own aboriginal tongue. In the scene

where Hilt, now healed, leaves again, Mayla, who, along with her brothers, has been learning English from Hilt, serves as translator, both literally and metaphorically, between worlds. In a similar translation between worlds in “The Jasper Story,” Gowan’s Overlanders seeking Cariboo gold in 1862 are saved from starvation only by native-speaking Shuswap and the ability of the pregnant Katie Schubert, the only woman in the party, to move beyond the mercantilism and territorialism of her fellow travellers to negotiate successfully for food (29).

However, where Gowan wryly contrasts the absurdity of the little party’s grandiose dreams with the reality of quiet female and indigenous resourcefulness and the immensity of the wilderness, Ringwood more clearly aims at juxtaposing the option of a life lived close to the land, with the capitalistic pillaging of it represented by the Gold Rush. While the impulsive, good-natured Barker eschews the cruelty and greed of many who follow him, the life and marriage he builds on his own idiosyncratic “strike” prove as ephemeral as Barkerville itself. As his wife sneers upon her leave-taking, only “a fool” would expect that luck twice, especially by 1864 when only “the big outfits with machinery” are “taking out gold now” (100). It is the outsider, Lo Chen, who first talks to Hilt about the importance of “having place.” For him, it is his wife and child in China; Hilt has to find his own: “You get wife, have son. You feel part of earth then. Like tree with roots. You have place” (33). For Hilt, “having place” means buying a ranch to live close to the land (a choice similar to Delaney’s in “Neighbor” and John Ware’s in *Stampede*) and marriage and children with Mayla; since he has no other family (32-33), hers will also become his, and their descendants the true treasure embedded in the land.

## *The Lodge* (1977), *Mirage* (1979), and “A Treaty for the Plains” (1977)

Forty years after Gowan and Morley’s confrontation, the kitchen stove and the creaking rocking chair may have been less in evidence, but Alberta’s “wide open spaces” had never been more the site of heated debate, both in life and art. Physically, socially, economically, politically, ethically, spiritually, mythologically, and artistically, “Land” continued to be a locus of physical and human commonality striking community out of a growing

diversity of genders, races, ethnicities, classes, times, and spaces. While remaining on the margins of the new professional arts, theatre, literature, and dance scene, the 1970s work of both women was the richest and most multi-dimensional in its treatment of an increasingly complex regional voice, employing song, dance, and music.

Ringwood's 1977 comedy, *The Lodge*, focuses on a family reunion organized by Jasmine Daravalle, the family's beloved matriarch, at Wilderness Lodge to celebrate what she has mysteriously heralded as "her last birthday" (453). It soon becomes apparent that Jasmine means this in the apocalyptic sense of a Day of Judgement, marking the passing away of old lives and selves, and the coming into being of new ones. Again, land and community and "having place" are central to that process of revelation and transformation. Ringwood again returns to Greek myth to ground the surface realism of the action in archetypal structure. She transforms Shelley, her young *alter ego* as an artist, into a Persephone figure descending from the airy realm of youth and artistic freedom to the underworld of marriage, pregnancy, and increasing responsibility. Shelley must judge whether her husband, Allan, has dragged her Hades-like into a dark, unnatural spiritual realm and physical wilderness from which she must escape or eventually smother; or whether the earth, to which both her marriage and co-ownership of the land bind her, is a source of deep hidden riches that will allow her to become a "tree with roots [...] and have place" ("Road" 33).

Jasmine, Ringwood's aging *alter ego*, by contrast, is re-ascending from the world of experience, back to that of light and freedom to pursue her Muse; however, transformed by her own journey through the earth, she emerges not into spring in her younger guise as Persephone, but into the cooler autumnal light of Indian summer as Demeter, the older nurturing maternal figure associated with the fertility of the earth and the fulfillment of the harvest. As an artist, she is closely connected to the spiritual force of the land, eager to sketch the beauty and colour of the autumn woods. She also shares, with the aboriginal Lashaway family, an intuitive sense of the restorative nature of the waters of the Soda Spring on the property, and their power as a site of visions.

However, as in the case of "Neighbor" and "Road," it is a view of land complicated by the forces of industrialization, urbanization, commercialization (including logging and entertainment), and economic self-interest.

When Jasmine's son-in-law Eardley looks at the Soda Spring, all he sees is "Sasquatch Hot Springs" (479), part of a "Canadian Disneyland"—"an empire devoted to recreation, stretching from this lodge right up to that spring" (481). It is one of the reasons that Jasmine has decided to turn her birthday into a day of reckoning, and to dispose of her own property and person on her own terms while she still can. She informs her surprised family that she will be moving, not to assisted living, but to the Antipodes "to teach and study Maori art" (486). She also advises them that the two family properties she has held in trust for many years will also be moving out of their grasp: the High Valley Ranch has already been sold to the government as a heritage site, and the money spent endowing a school in Africa, and the soda spring will be returned to aboriginal ownership, "providing it is left as it is now for a hundred years" (488). In a resolution that mirrors both the ending of "Road" and the beginning of *Mirage*, the true inheritors of the earth are Jasmine's heirs, Shelley and Allan, the now-owners of the lodge, who strive to "live off the land" while building and sustaining it for future generations, and the aboriginal Lashaway family, long-time friends of the Daravalleys, who will similarly serve as the stewards of the Soda Spring.

*Mirage* (1979) resembles Gowan's *Building of Canada* series and "The Jasper Story" in using music, song, text, and a protean ensemble of actors to tell an epic tale of the building of Saskatchewan between 1910 and 1980, through the interrelated fortunes of three generations of family and neighbours in rural Saskatchewan. While divided over the effectiveness of the play's chronicling almost seventy years of Saskatchewan history in two acts, both the Saskatoon and Edmonton critics, aware of Ringwood's reputation as a regional writer with a strong lyrical, poetic sensibility, tended to praise the aspects of the play and production that conformed most to that image (Ashwell C9; Perkins 37).

However, re-examining the play in 1998, Anne Nothof suggests that their very familiarity with Ringwood's early work may have led some critics to underestimate the complexity and nuances of Ringwood's dramatic treatment of land. As Anthony (107) and Nothof ("Gendered" 131-33) both indicate, Ringwood not only uses the families to connect the narrative internally, but she also draws upon characters and motifs from earlier plays to interconnect the narrative of *Mirage* to her larger body of writing. Shelley and Jasmine from *The Lodge* find an echo in Laura Ryland who makes

art, “place,” and a living from the rich clay of Saskatchewan as a potter and artist. Jasmine’s mercenary, self-interested relatives re-emerge most memorably in the Burns family and Marj Blair.

However, the larger link made in both *Lodge* and “Road” between a self-perpetuating cycle of violence to land and to humans, also emerges poignantly in an unusually personal scene in *Mirage*. In one of the very few times in her own drama when Ringwood references the devastating personal loss of her brothers in the Second World War, Jeanne, amidst autumn and harvest, receives the news that her son, Mark, has been killed at sea. Where the response of Gowan’s Miranda in *Caveman* to the terrifying human cost of war is passionate, dialectical, and ultimately political, Ringwood’s Jeanne’s expresses a deep personal pain bearable only by grounding it in the land. Although part of her “lies in the deep ocean with Mark” (530), only the earth can give an answer to the unanswerable question of when the carnage will end:

DOWSER: I don’t know, Jeannie. We plough up our land until it blows away into dust. We hurl bombs on our cities until the children blow away in the dust. I don’t know. (530)

Acknowledging that “the four winds are heavy with the children that have been blown away, all the wasted children” (530), Ringwood then evokes an image from *Pasque Flower* as possibly the only life-giving response to so profound a grief. Her stage directions indicate that “[Jeanne] moves forward and slowly begins to plant the tulip bulbs” (530), a sign of spring and of rebirth and regeneration to come in another season.

From *Widger’s Way*, Ringwood borrows the mystical water diviner, Dowser, as a symbol of the ability of the “dreamer” to draw spirit, life, and vision—mirages—out of land that seems empty, dry, or purely material. His vision of the “mystery” that must not be spoiled or defiled lest the land “become your enemy” (*Lodge* 488) frames the action of the play:

No easy gods, and yet they challenge, crying “hunt us down,  
Uncover us from beneath your monuments of wood and stone,  
Come, dance and sing with us,  
For without us you are homeless,  
Hunt us down for without us you are forever homeless.” (490)

As he does in *Widger*, *Mirage*'s Dowser evokes the remains of the dinosaurs (499), both as a reminder of other giants who have had their day and passed into the earth, and as a source of hidden mineral treasures that again will change the meaning of land for a later generation. But the effect is rendered disturbing rather than comic by his simultaneous summoning of the spirit of the buffalo bones and prairie grass (499, 506), talismans of a self-sustaining way of life destroyed to make way for farming, even as farming itself may one day be swept away to make place for something else. Curiously, neither the Edmonton nor Saskatoon reviewers commented much on *Mirage*'s aboriginal characters, possibly, to judge from Ashwell's comments, because the white ensemble cast had trouble bringing the same authenticity to their aboriginal as to their white roles (C9). Yet it is clear that Ringwood intended to establish the same kind of relationship between the Rylands and the neighbouring aboriginal family as she did in both *Lodge* and "Road." It is significant, in fact, that both families again are borrowed from earlier plays, which sends their representatives into *Mirage* already carrying deeper resonances.

The White Calf family comes from *Stampede* (1946), one of Ringwood's first explorations of the contrast between a more natural ranching world that equitably encompasses "outsiders"—like the rodeo bronco, Midnight, turned "outlaw" by bad treatment; the maverick Shorthorn, haunted by his violent American past; and early Afro-Canadian rancher, John Ware—and the more exploitive, materialistic forces arriving with the railway and the commercialized form of the Calgary Stampede. The White Calf we see exploited in 1912 as a sideshow at the Calgary Stampede, speaking a few words of "real Indian" (239) while the carnie urges the audience to "Step right up, folks, shake hands with a genuine vanished American [...] Last chance for a souvenir of the old West, folks. Last chance" (253), is almost certainly kin to the aboriginal family we meet in 1911 Saskatchewan. Besides a name, they also share a rapidly changing prairie that sees common hunting grounds being broken into individual property by fences, treaties, and land titles, and inconvenient animals, foliage, and people eliminated or confined (*Mirage* 495-97). From "The Road Runs North," Ringwood borrows the Rylands. While the John Ryland who arrives in 1911 Saskatchewan with his Scottish wife, Jeanne, never refers to his own background, the fact that his grandson is named Hilt suggests he is descended from the

same Hilt and Mayla of 1861, and may be linked even distantly by blood as well as land to his aboriginal neighbours.

These older connections give a deeper resonance to the opening and closing scenes set in 1980, in which another Hilt Ryland and a second Jeanne, this time, Jeanne White Calf named affectionately after his grandmother, wrestle with “having place.” For Hilt, the family farm may still be a place he can feel rooted in the earth, but the new engineering jobs are luring him northwards at a time when American agribusiness is pressuring him to sell. Jeanne confesses to a similar feeling about the recovery of her language and the Sun Dance at a time when she is spending less and less time on the reserve and becoming immersed in the “Indian Rights” movement: “We didn’t even say we owned the land then . . . we lived on it. A person could carry what he owned on his back or on a horse. At that Sun Dance I almost wished I didn’t live now . . . But it’s too late for that . . . I’ve got to find some other way to hold myself together now” (493). The play ends with the bittersweet possibility of a wiser and more equitable joint stewardship of the land being forged between most recent descendants of White Calf and Hilt Ryland.

Intriguingly, Gowan wrote what she considered her final and best work about the importance of a joint stewardship and responsibility towards the land at almost the same time. It was a theme that she had explored in the context of historical Aboriginal and Métis land rights as early as 1937. However, an Aboriginal voice that still remains relatively muted in the *Building of Canada* moves closer to the forefront in “The Jasper Story” where Gowan’s strong women who protect land and people through marriage and children tend to be Aboriginal or Métis, or, like Katie Schubert, have a strong affinity to them. Babette, in 1825, suggests that her mixed heritage—“My father is Irish, my mother of the Cree people. I am proud of them both and proud to be what I am” (9)—allows her to negotiate more effectively between the cultural tensions of the fur trade war. Similarly, Suzette Swift, in 1908, herself of mixed blood, perpetuates the final scene by reminding the guide that any “dream of the future” requires acknowledgment of those, like the Haida, who first “made place” on the Pacific coast (50).

This was simply a prelude to “A Treaty for the Plains” written in 1977 to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the signing of Treaty 6 in Alberta. As with “The Jasper Story,” the outdoor setting was resonant with layers of

human and historical meaning. Dried Meat Hill in south-east Alberta had served first as a traditional site for pemmican-making by both the Blackfoot and Cree, then, after 1893, as a popular site for picnicking by European immigrants, and with the building of Wabel Hall, a social and dance centre for “hundreds of early settlers” (“Expect” 1). Unfortunately, after the hall’s demolition in 1915, the hill itself fell victim to industrialization. With its very existence now threatened by extensive “gravel dredging” for road building, the Battle River Heritage group hoped that the pageant and the site repairs needed to stage it, would help get the hill declared a historic site for both cultures (Hartman 1; “Heritage Group” 14; Bartlett 21).

Gowan was commissioned to write the sixty-minute re-enactment of the signing, at least in part, because she “was a former resident of the area” (“I can” 1). Ironically, while her parents (1931-46) were longtime residents of Bawlf (“Party” 19), Gowan portrayed the town negatively as a provincial, materialistic backwater in *The Hungry Spirit*. In hindsight, Gowan felt the 1935 autobiographical play said more about her youthful callowness than the land and community: “today I would recognize the fact that it had been pioneered only ten years before and that these Scandinavian people with whom I felt nothing in common were really giants in the earth” (Day, *Hungry* 70).

“A Treaty for the Plains” gave her an unprecedented opportunity to travel back in historical time to the treaty agreement that had made even the Scandinavian farms possible. Over July, every effort was made to ensure that as many descendants and representatives of the 1877 signing as possible were present. The aboriginal planners, represented mostly by the four bands at Hobbema, committed themselves to erecting “a complete Indian village” on-site and supplying band members in costume to participate in the pageant and perform a program of dances (“Expect” 1). For Gowan, who had spent weeks doing historical research and interviewing old-timers as part of the project (“Treaty” 1), the day of the pageant itself was an electrifying experience. A crowd of over four thousand witnessed First Nations, Mounted policemen, interpreters, trappers, settlers, and government men represented “in the hour-long pageant ... dramatically portrayed on the hill where Indians used to make pemmican many years ago” (“5000” 1). Gowan (as reported in both “5,000” 1; Bartlett 21) herself received the most moving review she had ever had:

Tall and erect, Alberta's Lieutenant Governor Ralph Steinhauer strode over and gently kissed Elsie Park Gowan at the conclusion of the pageant. [...] A full Indian chief himself, the Hon. Mr. Steinhauer was expressing the feeling of hundreds, Indian and white alike, as they pondered the closing words of her pageant: "The chiefs have kept their word. Has the white man kept faith with the Indians? Now in 1977, do they live among you in dignity and equality, with equal rights in the Canada that once was theirs?"

"Look into your hearts.

"Think of these things as you watch the treaty signed. ..."

While the answer, sadly, was no, noted aboriginal leader, Joe Dion, the very act of coming together to remember and re-enact the past, with a mutual awareness of what still remained unfulfilled now, represented the best hope for further action together; "if the peoples of the province" were to stand together "in the future, as they stood together on Monday [...] we can build one of the greatest nations of the earth ("5,000" 1; Bartlett 21). Reminiscing from the distance of 1992, Gowan commented, "I think that day at Dried Meat Lake was the top of my life as a playwright" (Day, *Hungry* 261-62).

## Conclusion

By the time Ringwood passed away in 1984 and Gowan in 1999, they were aware of the extent to which the twentieth century had not fulfilled all that it had promised them either as women or as playwrights. They had come of age when first-wave feminism, western utopianism, and the native Art Theatre movement had suggested that the weight of patriarchal and colonial oppression implicit both in Hamlet's statement and the established gender, class, and racial order that upheld Shakespeare as the measure of all things theatrical, could be successfully challenged, and it was possible to at last be female, Canadian, western Canadian, and a playwright without contradiction or inequity.

It was a dream left unrealized on a number of accounts. In thoughtful letters to Geraldine Anthony (1978) and Anton Wagner (1974), Ringwood

suggested that contrary to the feminist rhetoric of her time, women had still remained far more constricted and confined by their sexual, family, and community roles and fragmented in their writing lives, especially after marriage. Gowan, while also happily married, had similar complaints. The Marian of *The Hungry Spirit*, who triumphantly leaves the restrictive domestic world of her mother in 1935 to pursue a university education and career, was ironically apt to find herself by 1952 in the situation of Frances in *The High Green Gate*: forced back into her mother's world once she had married and had children, unless she could snag one of the very few subsidized daycare spots available to working mothers.

Beyond that, both writers expressed insecurities about the playwriting itself and the efficacy of the conventional forms they often wrote in. In her autobiographical short story, "An Appetite for People," Ringwood suggests that she first became a writer because of an insatiable desire to embrace the entirety of the world in all its multifariousness. But her comment in "The Sense of Place," that "[i]n a way it seems that artistic experience is often a search for somewhere where it doesn't hurt so much" (12), was perhaps a tacit admission that there were forms of horror, darkness, chaos, and pain in both the internal and external world that she could not express in life or writing and survive. Of her radio work, Gowan commented, "I often think it was all written on air. As Keats said, 'My name is one—whose name was writ in water.' My name was writ on the air and 'its substantial pageant faded'" (Day, *Hungry* 30-31). Their pioneering efforts paved the way for a professional Canadian and western Canadian theatre that neither playwright was fated to enter.

Land and their work based on land were the only places where their art and vision never ceased to grow. In *Mirage*, Ryan Ryland says, "Those who come after won't know how a man can carry a map of every acre of his farm inside him" (544). The ultimate measure of both Gwen Pharis Ringwood and Elsie Park Gowan as writers is that they not only wrote the land, they "made place" and, in doing so, made us all immeasurably richer by sharing with those who will "come after," the ever richer "map of every acre" of Alberta and the prairies that they created within themselves for over fifty years.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Laurier's famous assertion, more popularly paraphrased as "The Twentieth Century belongs to Canada," was apparently delivered as part of a speech to the Canadian Club of Ottawa on 18 January 1904. While frequently quoted in many sources, this is taken from *First Among Equals*.
- 2 Editorial ellipses have been marked [...] to avoid confusion with ellipses actually used by the authors themselves as part of their text. The latter are marked with simple suspension points.
- 3 While current usage tends to favour "Resistance" over "Uprising" or "Rebellion" as having less colonial overtones, it is not a term that would have been familiar to historians or playwrights of Gowan's era. One suspects that many of them would likely have seen the more passive word "Resistance" as an odd way to describe a conflict where people on both sides had died fighting for a cause they believed in strongly. It is also clear from the justification that Irish-Canadian playwright, John Coulter, gave for writing three influential plays on Riel in the mid-twentieth century, that at least some playwrights of Gowan's generation regarded the term "rebel" as a badge of honour, rather than otherwise, if the "rebellion" or "uprising" was justified by tyranny or oppression: "I see the Metis leader and the rebellions which he led as precursors of later and present uprisings all over the world, particularly the so-called Third World—armed resistance by small nations against forcible take-over by some powerful neighbor [...] in order to be free [...] free to develop in their own way from their own roots"(i).
- 4 I would like to thank the archivists of University of the Calgary and University of Alberta Special Collections for helping me locate and acquire copies of Gowan and Ringwood's unpublished scripts, some of them on short notice. My thanks as well to editors like Diane Bessai and Enid Delgatty Rutland who have made many of Gowan's and Ringwood's scripts publicly accessible again. In addition, I would also like to credit the very fine previous scholarship of Geraldine Anthony, Anton Wagner, and Anne Nothof that this article builds on.

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