



Special Collections

Michael Cook

Biocritical Essay

by

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I

Michael Cook rapidly built a reputation in the 1970s as a playwright of Newfoundland life. Although not born in the island, he soon became better known than such writers as Al Pittman and Ted Russell. Four full-length plays (*Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*, *The Head*, *Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, *Jacob's Wake* and *The Gayden Chronicles*) and six one-act plays (*Tiln*, *Quiller*, *On the Rim of the Curve*, *Therese's Creed*, *The Fisherman's Revenge* and the unpublished *Not as a Dream*) were staged between 1971 and 1978. But after the workshop presentation of *The Gayden Chronicles* in Connecticut in 1978, no new Cook texts reached the stage. This was not falling silent: Cook continued to write stage plays. This career is most seriously shaped: obscurity to national fame, then abrupt descent to near-obscurity.

Cook, however, does not write only for the stage. He is the outstanding Canadian radio dramatist of his generation, with over fifty plays. Thirdly, Cook is an essayist: his best columns for the *St John's Evening Telegram* enhance his interpretation of what defines Newfoundland and examine big issues of Canadian culture. Finally, his efforts at fiction--all unpublished but for an opening chapter¹ includes a youthful autobiographical novel and a children's story (accompanied, in the University of Calgary collection, by rejection slips).

The collection at Calgary provides the expected papers for researchers--several drafts of some of the plays, often in an almost illegible hand, and varied supporting materials (reviews, programmes, letters to directors, unreadable photo-copies of Admiralty papers which provided background for *The Gayden Chronicles*). The rest of the material probably matters more to anyone fascinated by Cook (and by Newfoundland): the unperformed plays, the radio scripts, and hundreds of columns which appeared in the *Telegram*.

Michael cook was born in London, England, of Anglo-Irish descent in 1933. Expelled from school at 15, within a year he had signed on in the army, although too young to join. He stayed 12 years with the army, serving in the Korean War and also being stationed in Germany, Japan and Singapore. Increasingly he was involved in acting, writing and directing, notably a production of John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (this clearly influenced *Colour the Flesh*). Leaving the army in 1961, he took teacher-training in Nottingham, specializing in Drama, teaching for Fall 1965. At Christmas he abandoned job, wife, children and books to fly to Canada, intending to go to Toronto. Stopping at Gander, he experienced being "born-again," finding a new, truer, identity as a Newfoundlander. Working hard, he quickly became known in St John's as journalist and radio and television personality as well as continuing to act, write and direct. After first working for the Extension Service of Memorial University, he joined the English Department in 1969, continuing with this work with a number of leaves of absence. He lived on Random Island and later on Fogo Island, both of which provided seclusion for writing. In the early 1980s he started to spend his summers in Stratford, Ontario, hoping that being closer to Toronto theatres would increase the chance of having plays performed.

The early *Tiln*, originally written for radio, is short, enigmatic and heavily influenced by the plays of Samuel Beckett. Cook has outlined the facts of the turn-of-the century death of a lighthouse keeper which prompted this curious piece, but refuses to discuss its 'meaning.'²

The major performed plays divide into the three histories (*Colour the Flesh*), *On the Rim of the Curve*, *The Gayden Chronicles*) and the six studies of contemporary Newfoundland life (*The Head, Guts and Sound Bone Dance, Jacob's Wake, Quiller, Therese's Creed, The Fisherman's Revenge, Not as a Dream*).

II

Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust is an ambitious play on an epic scale. The cast-list is 14, plus three urchins, two fishermen, two French officers, extras for a crowd scene and other soldiers. The Neptune, Halifax, production in 1972 used 22 actors, while that of the Toronto Arts two years later had as many as thirty.

Murray Laufer's set at the Toronto Arts was "a thing of planks and barrels, packing cases and fishermen's paraphernalia," "an artful clutter arranged to suggest a wharf and a wall, a shop, a cottage interior and a village square. Looked at as a whole it has the aimless configuration of a rocky landscape, an impression heightened by its isolation. It stands like an island amid the desolation of the cavernous playing area of the St Lawrence Centre, stripped bare of all other adornment for this occasion."³

The drama in performance is well caught by McKenzie Porter: [Keith Turnbull, the director] uses an enormous amount of stage and employs techniques that impart to the production spectacular effects we normally associate with movies. When the action moves from one group of characters to another a subtle change of lighting directs our eyes to a different corner of the setting. As the illuminated actors go into speech and mime all others on the stage 'freeze' to avoid becoming a distraction. If one does happen to glance at the 'frozen' characters one realizes they are enriching

the atmosphere with qualities suggesting those of an oil painting. From time to time an intimate scene between three or four actors explodes into a brilliant vista of a dock, street or hillside filled with people. Suddenly the people start singing a lusty or sardonic song or break into the wild jigs of Irish and Scottish ancestors, strengthening the illusion of primitive atavistic passions on the brink of eruption. A scene in which the Irish settlers cunningly encourage an English soldier to join in a friendly jig, then jostle him with grim smiles into the centre of a human ring, there to be set upon, hideously mutilated, and ripped apart like a fox under a pack of hounds, is chilling in its barbarity. Harsh but gripping music by Lenny Solomon accompanies this crafty cruelty. A solo sung as a threnody by the dead soldier's pal is another of many appropriate compositions in a wide variety of moods.... Robert Doyle illustrates the threadbare, grubby, heavy clothing of the settlers, and the patched and soiled splendour of the soldiers' uniforms.⁴

The Spokesman in *Colour the Flesh* states: "Historically, this has been a pretty inaccurate play."⁵ Cook told me the intent of this was ironic--this is the way it probably was, for history texts leave out the role of the common people. The French occupation of St John's in 1762 lasted three months, not six. Other facts are correct: the fishermen did offer to fight against the French. The Captain was called Ross and had been in St John's for 23 years. The Lieutenant in fact survived, and he and the Captain were court-martialled. The Lieutenant was exonerated, but never promoted. Cook himself is now vague about his use of fact. He wrote to Robert Sherrin, director of the piece at the Neptune: "My own sources, to my fury and frustration, have disappeared--in particular an account written by David Webber, one time Museologist for the Provincial Government, of the circumstances leading up to the Battle itself." Cook adds, however, that accuracy is not the point, because it is "an imaginative reconstruction, and it's rather like chasing a will o'wisp to track down anything concrete."⁶ Cook's main subject is to write of forgotten ordinary people, not the officers and the ruling class: "There are a lot of dramatic truths to be discovered here. Canadians have never bothered to explore their own history as have dramatists in other countries. We tend to focus on great historical figures like Louis Riel ... grand imperial achievements like the CPR, and say, 'This is big stuff'--but in actual fact, 'big stuff' is small people.... The essence is in the lives of people whom history does not bother to record."⁷

As usual in Cook's work, *Colour the Flesh* is about the challenge of survival in Newfoundland. The Lieutenant is perceptive about this: "We are stranded on some island at the edge of time. There's the sea. And the fog. And occasional sunshine. But nothing grows without the consent of nature. We're captive in a peculiar zoo" (19). He has even considered settling, "moving out around the shore" (42), but fears this. Captain Gross is well aware that he has been defeated by the place: "This rock now--something in it defeats the spirit" (35). The landscape overwhelms puny human efforts: "People build. Then fire. Or drowning. Or famine. Or disease. Or just--failure of the spirit--Somebody else comes and carts the house away--for timber or firewood. Then thin scrub marches back across the cleared land--The flake rots into the sea--I have seen places" (36). Yet, despite war, murder, starvation, people will continue in this inhospitable place. While the biggest distinction among the character is social class, almost equally important is the difference between the locals on the island for a lifetime, and soldiers from both England and France who can anticipate leaving, however far away relief is.

The characters divide into six groups. The values of the townspeople are stated within almost excessive

clarity by the Spokesman: "We proceed with the pain and the knowledge and the denial of our responsibilities--kids starving, women whoring with your soldiers for a penny or two, merchants selling us gear against not this year's fish but the next and the next.... Give us a good laugh every now and again--a good drunk--and ye can do what ye like with us--we're like cattle--No leaders, ye see--but lots of humour" (18). The poor are exploited and oppressed, impulsively violent Hogarthian figures, indifferent to whether the occupation force is English or French. The honest fishermen, willing to risk their lives against the Papist French, are different, coming from the coast rather than the city of St John's. But the fishermen are onstage for only a few minutes, with only six speeches, so are not developed as a contrasting attitude among the poor. The ruling class, represented by the stereotype Magistrate and Merchant, are equally indifferent to whether English or French rule, as long as the profits continue to roll in. They are corrupt, selfish, unprincipled.

The common soldiers are perhaps more demoralized than the townspeople, different only in their hope of one day leaving. Their officers, one young and hopeful, the other middle-aged and crushed, may differ most in the length of time they have been forced to stay on the rock. Finally, though the take-over by the French army is important visually, the officer is seen only in his military capacity, accepting the surrender and making only two significant speeches. Though Urjo Kareda complained that "we get so little feeling for the town as an entity,"⁸ Cook has carefully displayed something of the poor and the affluent and of the army, both apart and involved.

The several themes of the play come together around violence and the avoidance of violence. Marie survives and is pregnant at the end; Cook observes that the women "understand what life is about ... understand the value of passion and tear the guts out of immediate experience in order to go on living."⁹ Survival matters more than abstractions of King-and-Country, of duty and honour. For the poor, this is staying alive; for the middle-class pair, continued profit. Captain Gross also chooses survival. Realistically, with only 86 troops, defeat is almost certain. So he claims to be acting from duty: "I have a duty, Lieutenant. I have a duty. And it is not to you.... Honour is an expensive luxury, reserved for naval battles and campaigns mounted for Imperial gain" (22). May it nevertheless be their duty as British officers to fight even in a hopeless cause, or is Gross in part truly concerned for the safety of civilians? The Spokesman knows the poor have no time for abstractions: "Honour's a fine word with gentlemen; but with us, ye see, it doesn't hold too much water.... We don't have no honour" (17-18).

Herbert Whittaker, writing of the revival, found the major problem with *Colour the Flesh* was that the colour was grey: "Cook has colored the history of Newfoundland the color of resentment, brutality, cynicism and general moroseness, which comes out grey indeed. The dramatist is unbending in his grim fervor.... It is indeed a fearsome and joyless landscape."¹⁰ Cook, writing in 1977, had "become confused" himself about the play, though "it contains some of the best lines I've ever written." He notes three reasons why critics and audiences had problems: "it deliberately mixes caricature with character;" episodic structures do not go "down too well anymore;" the selective use of historical fact causes problems.¹¹

Colour the Flesh is huge, rich and ambitious. The reader, able to take it slowly, has an advantage over the spectator. Cook asks us to engage in turn with what the Spokesman reveals about the common people, with the evolving courtship of Marie and the Lieutenant, with the decline of the unfortunate Gross, with the rough comedy of the Merchant and his boy, with the Establishment types, Merchant and Magistrate. The drama is to

be relished for the portraits of its three main characters; for some powerful writing; for much visual excitement and originality. *Colour the Flesh* rescues a forgotten moment of Canadian history and is yet another demonstration of the power and the horror of Newfoundland.

Dorothy Livesay once wrote: "Bit by bit and almost without being aware of it, the Canadian writer has had to find himself by finding the Indian."¹² Any Newfoundlander sensitive to the past muses on the Beothuk Indians, feels guilt at the genocide, attempts somehow to bridge the years and attempt contact. Al Pittman's way was to fall in love with Shanadithit, the last one, who died in 1829 aged 29:

What I know of you is only
what my grade seven history book
told me.
That you were young when they caught you.
That your people lived in deerhide houses.
That they changed your name to Nancy.
That you died soon after.
That you were the last of the Beothuks.¹³

Al Purdy in "Beothuk Indian Skeleton in Glass Cage" and Sid Stephen in *Beothuk Poems* (1976) make other poetic responses; Peter Such's novel, *Riverrun* (1973) is a lyrical elegy. In drama, Cook was followed by Geoffrey Ursell, who makes relations with Indians one of the subjects of his *Running of the Deer* (1981) and by Tom Cahill in his unpublished *Shananditti*.¹⁴

Cook presumes his audience know the basic facts behind *On the Rim of the Curve*. Three Beothuks and three historical Britons appear: Sir Humphrey Gilbert (in defiance of chronology, he does not enter till the middle of the drama), the humane Lieutenant Buchans and the bloodthirsty planter Peyton.

On the Rim of the Curve seems to have been seen primarily as a radio work, a tone poem. CBC "Tuesday Night," in its final season, presented it in October 1976, with Cook playing Peyton. Six months later the Avion Players performed it at the Drama Festival at Gander. The play is in some twenty episodes. The "Author," in a prologue, speaks honestly of the difficulty of his subject: "How d'you write of a vanished people? Out of a bone? A book? A lock of hair? A litany of lies? Or simply honest confusion.... It seemed that even those who made contact with them, the Beothuks, the Red Men and Women, once the tribe had died, had slipped back into woods and leaf mould.... I want you to help me piece the skeleton together, match bone to bone, let the dark flesh it out."¹⁵

Cook uses the few known facts from a white perspective but does not attempt to have his white actors go far into presenting the Indians as they are before contact with whites. The play embodies guilt that his ancestors exterminated a race. As a writer, he faces the challenge of writing of a people of whom so little is known. *The Rim of the Curve* also continues his efforts to capture and understand the spirit of the island, however difficult this is: the truest Newfoundland may be pre-European.

Cook tries to assign meaning to the Indians, and to their vanishing. Knowing so little, he offers a farewell from the sensitive, reminding us also of the callous indifference of many. As Tom Dawe puts it, at the end the

Indians retreat to a realm of the mind where they serve as a kind of stay against the circus of progress.¹⁶ The Beothuks have slipped off the rim. They choose to keep their secrets, the best outcome.

The Gayden Chronicles is explained in Cook's "Preamble" to its first publication:

In the Fall of 1812, William Gayden, variously described as a seaman, or a quartermaster, of H.M. Ship *Pomone*, was hung at St John's, Newfoundland, for murder, mutiny, desertion and other offences, all detailed in a diary of his own keeping which was found amongst his belongings when he was thrown in irons after being discovered drunk on watch while cruising off the coast of Newfoundland. The remnants of the diary remain in the Admiralty Records Office, Whitehall. Nobody knows where the remnants of Gayden are.¹⁷

Cook came across this diary about 1970 and acquired other documents from the Records Office.

He drafted the drama while living at Summerland, B.C., in Winter 1975-76, and revised it after a workshop at Lenoxville Festival the next Summer: this text was published in *Canadian Theatre Review*. The *Chronicles* was workshopped two years later at the Eugene O'Neill Centre at Waterford, Connecticut, which led to the script presented by the Avion Players in Newfoundland in March 1979 and published by Playwrights Canada late that year. This second text adds a scene with William Blake, twice changes the order of scenes, has numerous minor changes, cuts and additions, and a tendency to remove specifics of names and places. The Admiral, merely authority in the early version, develops as foil to the Lieutenant and to Gayden, and the Messenger of Death is only in the second text. The closing moments differ, and may be more powerful in the first text. The script was revised again for subsequent productions: CAST Theatre, Hollywood, March 1980; Globe, Regina, February 1981; Theatre Plus, Toronto, May 1982; Rising Tide, St John's Fall 1985.¹⁸

Cook's language is at its richest in the *Chronicles*, as almost any page shows. Rowena dreams of "a hot, foaming, scented bath. And silver brushes wi' long handles to scrub me back, and white lamb's wool to trend when I get out, smelling of lavender.... My first boy ... he promised me once, walking up over the head to look at the water, the sky full of larks."¹⁹ The Toronto critics all faulted the language. Mark Czarnecki noted: "Without iron in its dramatic soul, poetic drama inevitably separates into gossamer and syrup."²⁰ Cook, Ray Conlogue believes, "squanders and indulges his lyrical gift, endowing all his characters with multi-level metaphors and an identical inclination to build them around waves, hillsides and cornfields."²¹ Gina Mallett mocked: "The play is written in barnacular, barnacled prose of a meaningless pretension.... His French wife reveals to him that, whoops, 'The sea is your mistress.' The admiral who hangs him says portentously, 'Death always interrupts the best dialogues.'"²² Cook defended in a letter: "There is an awful trend developing in contemporary theatre and it is a fear, if not loathing, of the magnificence of language."²³ Cook's real problem may be that there has been no audience to enjoy eloquence since the heyday of Christopher Fry forty years ago.

Cook emphasizes the pessimism of the work: "*Gayden* is probably one of the bleakest things I've ever written because, at the end of it, in the moment of contact between the world of order and civilization, the animal, passionate sensibility that is Gayden's is killed. Everyone loses in that play. All the people that you want to

identify with, all the humane things that we recognize, go under; the only thing that triumphs is lethal and destructive.... When I talk about a bleak ending, I mean it is incredibly dark socially.... I have not given up on the human spirit.... I guess that's what *Gayden* actually is--a quite conscious attempt to allow the human spirit to triumph."

Cook remarks in the same interview that "I've always considered it ... a contemporary play."²⁴ Don Rubin picked up on this when he asked: "Is Michael Cook's *Gayden* really an eighteenth century seaman trying to keep out of a noose in St John's or is he not all of us struggling in this country, in this world to simply stay alive and live as we wish to live, to walk--as Canadians, yes, but even more as human beings--with our heads high, our arms around someone we love, our minds free to roam where they will and where they must."²⁵ Jamie Portman also looked for meaning in our time: "Cook himself is certainly delivering a forceful political and social message--and implying some direct parallels with contemporary times--in what he has to say about the plight of the socially dispossessed, the inequities of the System and what he considers a continuing master-slave situation in today's society."²⁶ Cook sympathetically identifies problems and human suffering and then decides, regrettably and reluctantly, that nothing can be done. Though *Gayden* appears to be fighting for a hopeless cause, from external knowledge of history we know that the navy is now less brutal and that some of the Rights of Man have been heeded.

Of the major characters, Douell is the ordinary, straightforward, kindly, well-meaning man, stronger than Thomas, who will take no risks in the mutiny. *Colour the Flesh* displayed a high-minded Lieutenant and a cynical Captain. The *Chronicles* reverses this, Cook points out the contrast: "The Admiral goes under because he has offered the compromise. The Lieutenant at the end of the play is the one who triumphs. He is like the Lieutenant Calley's of this world, the Haigs who have no humanity, no soul, no moral or social conscience whatsoever."²⁷ The Admiral changes; as he reads the diary and talks to *Gayden*, he comes to respect and admire him.

Gayden, though, is the really intriguing character. Cook's explanation is that "*Gayden* goes under by choice, because the political alternatives he is offered would reduce everything he's ever been or done, good or bad, to nothing.... He moved himself towards his final position because he could not change the nature of the people he was fighting for."²⁸ This is scarcely in the text: on the contrary, the challenge of *Gayden* to audiences is precisely in unanswered questions. Why does he sail to St Helena to get caught after the successful mutiny? Why does he abandon the peace of France and a loving wife? Why does he refuse the Admiral's offer of freedom and promotion? He has, as the Admiral says, "passion" (44). He expresses his philosophy to Thomas: "That's all yer given on this earth, a bit o' time, and if ye doesn't take it fer yerself, then sure as hell none o' they aloft will give it to ye" (49). He seeks a full, varied life while, in the words of the Admiral, "most of us after all crave a dull life" (43). Hence the restlessness. He is unfortunate: unfortunate to be found with Rowena by the soldier in the inn (I.4) and to be pressganged immediately after discharge (II.1). Though he would like to put himself first, as he does in abandoning the Cooper's daughter, he is often more concerned with the common good of his fellow sailors, as in his protest in the Prologue and again in the third scene of Act 2. *Gayden* is tough, like Jacob and Skipper Pete: he feels for the sea (61) like a Newfoundlander. In contrast to Skipper Pete and Quiller, *Gayden* looks forward. He is remarkable and unpredictable, and also a misfit ("I discovered that I did not belong. Anywhere" 74) and a rebel. I am reminded of Albert Camus of *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*: *Gayden*, like Sisyphus, has a dignified acceptance of absurdity, of his own immediate situation and probably also of the human condition. Writing of

the play, Robert Wallace tentatively faults Gayden, for his "death can be interpreted as an abjuration of life's responsibilities as well as a criticism of its inequities.... The possibility that Gayden uses his ideals to justify an immature response to life humanizes his position even as it weakens his complaints."²⁹ Possibly, for this is the significance of the Messenger. Not only is Death "the only certainty" (65), his relationship with the Messenger/Rowena is the most meaningful one he is ever able to establish.

Apart from the portrait of Gayden, rescued by Cook from obscurity, the *Chronicles* fails to deliver on the other issues raised. Several scenes focus on the private life of the rebel, the friendship with Douell and the three women in Gayden's life--but this does not emerge as the true subject. The period, soon after the French Revolution, and the writers--Blake onstage and mentions of Tom Paine--suggest the subject is the beginnings of democracy and a quest for greater equality and social justice. The *Chronicles* starts to be a hymn to Freedom, to the rise of the masses to oppose arbitrary class-ridden authority, then Cook complicates Gayden and checks our admiration for his defiance. Cook has ideas about the man, his times and our times, but they are not clearly expressed.

Colour the Flesh is a true history play, rediscovering a forgotten quite colourful episode in Newfoundland's past, then showing what it really meant, for soldiers, top people and common people. Place is unimportant in *Gayden Chronicles*, beyond the fact that scenes are set in England and France, and St John's and St Helena are mentioned. The emphasis is on Gayden's defeat. *On the Rim of the Curve* is less history than an outcry at genocide, a lament at what man has done to man. Also the drama expresses confusion, the problems of piecing together any knowledge of the mysterious vanished race. Only *Colour the Flesh* is part of the movement of history plays in Canada since the beginning of the 70s; indeed--but for John Coulter's Louis Riel plays--this is one of the earliest examples.

III

The six stage plays about Newfoundland in the seventies represent most of Cook's best-known work.

The Head, Guts and Sound Bone Dance, first staged in March 1973, has a deliberately puzzling title. The reference is to a fish--the parts vital for the fish, but also the parts discarded by humans; the second half of the play includes a rather grotesque dance by old men. The second act includes a ritual fish-gutting, a silent scene which Cook likes to last for about ten minutes. He emphasizes that he is forcing the audience to concentrate on men concentrating on work they have done for a lifetime, and do well "I'm fascinated by what people do with their hands. The way they move. I wanted to incorporate many of the fisherman's basic activities into a play, net-mending, splitting fish, making a killick.... I reasoned that these things, dying things, would be as fascinating to the audience to whom they were relevant as they would to those not familiar with them."³⁰

The play ends with Uncle John grasping his guilt in the death of the child and leaving with the killick tied to his leg, with Pete alone, eating fish, as night falls. Cook explains: "I am more sorry for Pete in the play than I am for the boy because he loses everything. When he shuts the door at the end of that play, he shuts out the world, and he shuts himself in forever. That defiant song that rises from his mouth is meant to be tragic. He has failed to adapt and he is dead as a dodo.... The Skipper Petes of this world are unable to change. But Uncle John, at least, leaves. He makes a moral decision which is very profound for him--he abandons ship knowing damn well the values no longer apply. John is the future."³¹

The drama has been seen in four cities outside Newfoundland (Montreal, Fredericton, Edmonton and Regina) and on television, an unusually good record for a Canadian play--yet the last production was in 1977.

That two adults ignore a drowning child is the chief problem presented. The context is apparently present-day reality. The men may be old and deaf, but on some level they are aware of the child's plight. They live partly in the past, partly in a make-believe world in which making nets is still worth doing. They may live so much in the past that they cannot see what is before their eyes. Cook seems to expect us to believe that this could happen, and mentions fishermen drowning on the ice in 1914 because other captains would not take them on board. The drowning of the child, however, is more easily accepted if seen as a change of style, like the far more jarring one at the end of *Jacob's Wake*. The drowning is then a sacrifice to the sea, all-important in their lives, an attempt to make the fish return. The ocean returns the body, rejecting the sacrifice. More significant, the death is of a child, of the future of the outports' way of life.

The television showing prompted an outpouring of rage in letters to the *St John's Evening Telegram*. "When are we Newfoundlanders going to wake up and stop nitwits from other countries coming in and portraying us as an ignorant and downtrodden race? ... I was never so embarrassed nor so hopping mad as when viewing that filthy, stupid *Head, Guts and Sound Bone Dance*.... Of course, I realize it would have to be stupid to be accepted by the CBC." "The recent showing on CBC-television of the garbage portrayed under the banner of *Head, Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, must have been spawned in the mind of a sick man. To produce such a work under the name of art is an insult to human dignity and to all men of decent morals." "Should we allow a play such as this, its writer, producer and CBC network degrade our Newfoundland life-style by displaying on our TV service a false and immoral image of our forefathers?" Apart from the way Pete and John do not save the drowning boy, the play is specifically denounced as "lacking in respect for the holy name" and because "most--repeat, most--outport people are not given to discussing their private affairs in public."³²

The play touched a sensitive nerve among Newfoundlanders. Is the critic's response to assert that Cook is creating art, not a documentary? Skipper Pete is a tyrant, as some old captains surely were, and Cook has sketched in that such methods were necessary for survival in the harsh environment. He has also shown the consequences, death, retardation, spoiled lives. For Pete is not presented as any kind of hero, though he has strengths lacking in the younger generation.

Such conflict as the drama has comes from Uncle John's misgivings about Pete's ways, indeed a love-hate relationship, yet John is made ineffectual by a lifetime of subservience, so his final rejection is a shock. The *Dance* focuses on Pete, who stands for "the old way. The only way. The proper way to do things."³³ "You've got to have order. Decency. There 'as to be a way of doing things. A man's way. That's why we're here, isn't it? They's only we left" (59). When Uncle John's father drowned, there was no order, with a drunken crew killing pigs by dropping them in a barrel from the mast. "Driving snow an' a sea raging like a barren woman. She got fed that night. (Grim satisfaction) Not a body ever found" (60). When John accuses, "Ye didn't give a damn for none of it, but for yer own pride," Pete retorts, "I saved you" (60). Yet Pete's kind of saving breaks men, forcing them to crawl.

The strength of this work is in its portrait of the kind of man the outports used to produce. Cook has argued for seeing it more broadly than as a picture of an old man left behind by time: "It is a mosaic of statements,

intuitions, song, dance, poetry and ritual created on the theme of people relating to people and to their environment.... The whole play ... becomes a ritual dance, raising the localized, particular details to the level of general human significance."³⁴ Like any worthwhile piece, the *Dance* transcends regionalism. Walter Learning's programme note for his Theatre New Brunswick production in October 1974 expressed the broader implications neatly: Cook "has had the insight to graft something much more universal on to a seemingly parochial incident. The play is about what can happen to anyone who outlives his/her essential function. Some people can change with the time, some cannot. Those who can are blessed; the others are cursed.... The story is not the important element. The play is a mood piece which contains the seeds of a hundred dimly seen ideas which can nag and blossom long after you have left the theatre. It is not an 'action' play. It takes its own time."

The play takes up the survival issue, so well-known in Canadian literature, and Richard Perkyns finds Cook's work analogous to "the hardships of prairie life in the tales of Sinclair Ross, Gwen Ringwood's *Dark Harvest* or Sharon Pollock's *Generations*."³⁵ More broadly, one perceives themes of the dangers of fantasy taking over from reality, and of clinging to the past because the world has changed or because there is no future.

Cook's exploration of dedication to solitary strength, and regret at change in Newfoundland, continue in *Quiller*, the monologue--mostly addressed to God, of a lonely old man, first performed by Clyde Rose at Memorial University in April 1975.

Quiller aspires a little awkwardly to a symbolic, philosophical dimension. This element has been placed by Pat Treacher thus: "There is true fantasy in the play, and I so wanted the author to let his Celtic imagination run away with him, for when man dreams of his death, he dreams of dark greenness, deep unfathomable pools, and wonders that will set the sea aflame and his soul ablaze. Quiller was a prosaic fantasist, and he deserves more. It is all there in the play, but it was not exploited."³⁶ Quiller is not a fanatic, rather a Protestant whose praying and brooding in loneliness have given him no answers to the purpose of his life, nor an understanding of death. He pleads: "Lord. Fer the love of Jesus, will ye tell me what's going on? I'm waiting, Lord.... Now I'm confused, Lord."³⁷ And he is granted a vision. The stage is washed with scarlet light and flames crackle. Years before Amos had eaten a "last supper" (73) and died in a burning boat. Thus Quiller's end, he sees, will be a fulfilling one of fire and water, not one of dust. The Memorial student newspaper took this too literally: "It is never quite clear how suicide by fire takes the sting out of death and ushers in life glorified in which the missed opportunities, the cruelties and pain of earthly existence do not hurt any more."³⁸ Quiller is reassured by this experience, though he is disintegrating mentally.

The strength of *Quiller* is the human portrait as we follow the rambling mind across many topics. Quiller gossips and reminisces, shares earthy humour and simple philosophy. He is torn between love and alienation, between religion and lust: "Ye made me whole, Lord, and all de parts were meant to be used" (58). In turn he is amusing and randy, regretful and religious. He is haunted by the past, angry at the passage of time. *Quiller* takes us, in a way both absorbing and disturbing, into the mind of a lonely and confused old man, showing especially how his religious faith has both helped and warped him.

The companion monologue, *Therese's Creed*, is a portrait of a woman. Sometimes she talks to the audience, sometimes as to a guest in her kitchen, twice on the phone. She spends her day washing, effortfully pouring in ten-gallon buckets of water, wringing clothes, putting on a second load, hanging washing on a rack

lowered from the ceiling. We watch a housewife at her daily round, counting her blessings: "Dat nylon's a wonderful t'ing. Washes out like new every time.... The wash don't take no time now, thanks be to God."³⁹ During the play she hums, sings, laughs, dreams, twice sheds a tear when she remembers her dead husband--and carries on working. The audience pieces together much of her life story, and sees that continuing despite stress and disappointment matters more than establishing all the facts. Her life is one of anxiety about growing old and being alone, hence she dwells on the past, "all dat's left is memories" (102). Her life is full of work: "The round o' cooking and washing and making fish and cutting wood an' berry picking in the fall" (87). The surroundings are sketched in: "Tis some nice on a good day when ye stops fer lunch, the kittle going on a few sticks, and ye looking down over the hill at the water, the men at the hand lines den, and the spire o' the old church on Duck Island sticking up whiter 'n whalebone" (109).

Her main subject is change. In the past, "we nivir had no choice. If ye was a boy ye got thrown into manhood afore ye was wet behind the ears, no matter how hard the mothers prayed fer 'em to be something other than fishermen" (85-86). "Dey had it different from us. Dey nivir asked no questions of no one. If dere men died, 'twas the will o' God. If dey was no fish, 'twas the will o' God" (106). Now, "nobody sings no more. Nobody comes to visit since Pat's been gone. All the youngsters wants is skiddos and cars and I can't say as 'ow I blame 'em" (102). Because "times change and day ain't nothing anyone can do about dat.... I suppose dey don't care who's who or what's what and dat's a good thing in some ways" (90). Therese tentatively approves changing ways. She is both questioning and accepting her Irish Roman Catholic tradition. Her daughter's boy friend is Protestant, unthinkable in Therese's youth. The priests have "always taken too much to my mind from dem dat can least afford it" (105). Near the end she recalls as one of the good times the open-air mass, followed by a picnic and a beer. She recites a line of the creed; the whole play, in fact, embodies her creed.

Cook's "Dedicated to Mary Frances Decker because the play is her, I guess" shows Therese has a real-life model. (This line is only in the Breakwater Books edition, not the Talon). This Newfoundland woman is an anglophone counterpart of Antonine Maillet's Acadian creation, *La Sagouine*. Maillet's old woman may be more spirited and individualized; poverty and the loss of her husband have brought Therese closer to defeat.

Audrey Ashley faulted *Therese's Creed* as better suited to radio, and Robert Wallace found it "static" and "'literary.'"⁴⁰ Julia Maskoulis was impressed by Donna Butt in the role at the Centaur Theatre, Montreal: her "portrayal succinctly captures the raw earthiness of this woman trapped in a web of reality that she knows she has woven herself. It is a touching portrayal of protective, nagging motherliness, of primal instincts--but not without the hint of a dreamer and a romantic."⁴¹

Cook makes his audience care about a simple, ordinary woman and her unexciting life. He convinces that this is the truth, whether or not we start with much interest in outport housewives and their way of life. We gradually respond to the life-story and philosophy of Therese, respect her acceptance of the continuing battle to keep going. Therese endures, as Cook's characters usually do. Also, she adjusts to change, not only to widowhood and children leaving home, but to change in her world. The strengths of Skipper in *Jacobs Wake* and of Skipper Pete are almost outweighed by their faults: here Cook presents an admirable strong outporter.

Jacob's Wake, the most ambitious of these six Newfoundland plays, has seven characters, of three generations, all of them important. Simplified, the old generation is yet another tough Skipper; the second generation a teacher, a dutiful housewife and a man, Winston, "trapped in the middle"⁴² and defeated by

change; the young generation representing politics, religion and life on welfare.

While family members squabble, attempt to reconnect and revive old quarrels, the key revelations from the past emerge. Apart from Brad's responsibility for the death of the pregnant Mildred, three events thirty years earlier have shaped them all. The only daughter of Winston and Rosie died, and Winston still mourns: "I thinks of the one that might have been different.... She might have had a chanct."⁴³ About the same time Skipper's other son, Jacob, died. Jacob had gone seal-hunting with his father and been ordered off the ship on to the ice as a storm built. Further, Skipper has been bed-ridden for thirty years, so took to his bed after Jacob's death.

The title thus has several allusions. The Irish 'wake' suggests celebration as well as mourning. The fate of all the characters is still determined by Jacob's death. Skipper would have had a worthy descendant had he lived, so he would not have given up in his prime, while the three young men would have had a fine example. Skipper dies as the storm reaches its height, on Good Friday at the time at which Christ died. Skipper now thinks Winston is Jacob (81, 120), making the play Winston's wake too. The subject of the play can also be seen as survival in the wake of Jacob, in his shadow.

Skipper at first seems only a dying, hallucinating, drunken old man. Yet he is the one with enough vision and depth to know what the issues are, to ask vital questions of his universe. Cook insists that Skipper "is struggling to come to grips with his soul, with the nature of being; ultimately they will all come up with a bleak and absurdist conclusion.... They all ask Why?, like Job.... Skipper Blackburn, when his son dies, wants to ask why, why, why? That's the only question and there's no answer."⁴⁴

A storm grows throughout the play, a literal storm in which "snow and ice and hurricane combine to create a world in which nothing can live" and a metaphorical storm, "a living thing, a character whose presence is always felt, if not actually heard" (139). Cook demands of the sound technicians "the quality of an inhuman voice in the sound, an intense and strange fury" (120). A few minutes from the end fading lights suggest Skipper has died. A strange leap into unreality follows. With the corpse still in the upstairs room, Skipper (or his ghost) strides in wearing his Master's uniform, demands rum, orders Winston to the wheel and the two women below. A seal barks, and Skipper speaks the final lines: "Blood and fire and ice.... The swiles [seals] is back. Newfoundland is alive and well and roaring down the ice pack. A swile. A swile" (138). Then "a blackout and the sound of a cosmic disaster, a ripping and rending and smashing," followed by a flash to reveal an empty stage: the house-ship has been swept away by the storm. At Lennoxville Festival in 1975, all Jack Kapica could make of this conclusion was that "the play comes to an abrupt end with several characters waving their arms about in a mocking parody of pulling ropes and steering an over-sized wheel."⁴⁵

Twice in these last minutes Cook startles the audience. First, Skipper returns and takes charge, too late to save the ship. Cook comments: "It bugs me that people have difficulty relating to ghosts. We have no trouble relating to ghosts in Newfoundland at all because everyone knows that they exist. Why can't I use that dimension, it's a genuine theatrical dimension. To say no, we can't have that because it isn't realistic, is ludicrous; it denies the writer enormous possibilities."⁴⁶ Skipper entering through the door downstairs with his corpse still visible above must shock. If the audience is held by the tensions, has picked up that the context is more than one outport family and is aware that the storm is growing ever stronger, disbelief can surely be suspended.

The storm finally sweeps away all these people. Cook observes that this is "pure melodrama, the universe collapsing around the characters like that.... What I'm doing is moving a very real base towards its ultimate absurdity. I like mixing forms."⁴⁷ The storm, he explains, is nature hitting back: "Nature is angry, she's had it, she's fed up. 'I'm going to knock you all down,' she seems to be saying.... There's something in an urban sensibility that doesn't want to think about things like that. It's a sensibility that wants to turn its back upon the environment. This is a recurring theme in a great deal of Canadian literature. But you have to live in the environment to understand what it is all about. Every Maritimer knows that."⁴⁸ This intuition that what mankind does to the environment may destroy the world is widely shared in the 1980s: Cook was ahead of his time in suggesting it in 1974. The implications of the conclusion thus ranges from the end of the Newfoundland outports' values and way of life, through decadent modern society, unworthy of its ancestors, to Nature strikes back at all who abuse her.

Jacob's Wake was produced in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1980. Cook remarks: "It has a northern sensibility, it is a northern play, there's something of Sibelius in its music and then again there's the bleakness and the emotional frustration of the characters, and their plight is something that the Swedish audiences can understand very readily."⁴⁹ In notes written for the Swedish director, Cook made the most explicit statement of his pessimism: "What should we do, seafaring Northmen with more in common with Leif Erikson and Thorfinn Karsefni, the first Europeans to touch this shore, than those who would--who have--dragged us into the glittering nightmare of the 20th Century? Rage and die? Adapt? See our language and mythology mocked, assaulted, neglected, and scurry to learn the mass modes of communication?.... Within the past fifteen years I have seen one nation die, and my plays, of which *Jacob's Wake* is perhaps the clearest testament, speak to that death.... I grieve for the loss of the once binding relationship that existed between the hunter and the hunted, between man and nature herself."⁵⁰

Jacob's Wake has a Biblical framework. Jacob fathered the twelve sons who established the tribes of Israel: Jacob's death is the loss of hope for the future. Mary, Brad, Alonzo and Wayne are all childless and Brad's illegitimate child died at birth. Brad reads his Bible and twice launches into incoherent sermons (73, 109). Hymns come from the radio, "Amazing grace," "There is a green hill far away" and "Eternal Father strong to save." Brad and Wayne return as some version of prodigal sons. The events of Good Friday are paralleled: betrayal of the old man; a Judas kiss (74-76); darkness just before the clock strikes 3:00 in the afternoon. Skipper bringing about the death of his son is the action of a God. When he has his last view of Jacob's party on the ice, they looked like a cross (86). Moments before Skipper dies, he stares out and says intensely to Winston: "Tis the shape of death, boy. I kin see'n jest like that first time, rising out of the drift, moving across the ice widout a sound, like a cross growing up into the sky" (119).

Cook notes two literary sources, the poems of E.J. Pratt⁵¹ and, more central: "I was writing a kind of Maritime *Heartbreak House*. Like Captain Shotover, the old skipper up there is the last representative of his type."⁵² As in Bernard Shaw's play, the house is also a ship, and it drifts to disaster. The need to steer is still with us, and the fear that it may well be too late--perhaps especially in Newfoundland. Only a very old man, dependent on rum, understands this. Shaw's piece may be seen as dreamed by Ellie; Cook's, as Skipper's dream. The younger generation in both plays is unworthy of their ancestors, either idle, like Winston and Alonzo, or weak and empty administrators, like Wayne. *Heartbreak House* has no Jacob, though Shotover has failed in not having sons, and perhaps in abandoning the black wife in the West Indies. For Shaw

Beethoven at least will survive the destruction of the house, while in Cook's world nothing survives. The links between the two pieces are close enough to make the later a comment on the earlier, as Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* alters the way in which we read *Jane Eyre*. Cook changes our response to *Heartbreak House* by moving it to Newfoundland in the present, in a way quite different from the effect of literary criticism on the admirer of Shaw.

This is a play of family conflict on the surface, and Geraldine Anthony was the first to link Cook's work with Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*.⁵³ *Jacob's Wake* is full of tensions and quarrels, old mistrust and suspicion, the occasional building of an alliance, as when Mary and Wayne achieve "complete sympathy" (89). Yet Cook's purpose is not to examine the stresses as his characters go through the motions of uniting as a family for a holiday weekend. He writes of the past of Newfoundland and different ways of dealing with the present. Skipper has only the past, the years of his youth and the seal-hunt. Rosie too stays with the past. Brad and Mary have retreated to religion while Alonzo and Wayne exploit their apathetic, decadent era. With these young men as the present, society is spiritually bankrupt. Each generation is more alienated from nature than its predecessor.

Winston articulates this bleak view of the province: "Seems as the times was wrong. Everything changed afore I knew what to do. The old ones are so damned sure ... And they ... So certain. Though what about, the Lord knows. And us, Rosie, us ... Like rats in a trap, with the Welfare as bait. I didn't know what to do, so I didn't try. There didn't seem any p'int" (125). Cook expresses this theme: "It is a play forecasting the doom of that society, in essence.... I was virtually forecasting the end of Newfoundland culture as I knew it."⁵⁴ When Skipper asks his son what he wants, Winston answers: "Nothing, Skipper.... A place to come and have a quiet drink, away from the women, and look out at the sea" (58). The best of the men is indicted for passivity, as damaging as the overt corruption of Wayne and Alonzo.

Jacob's Wake is "by turns raucously funny, bitter, maudlin," writes Jerry Wasserman.⁵⁵ Yet fundamentally Cook is furious and close to despair. His people are destroyed internally (except perhaps Rosie) before the storm destroys their house. Because these people are either evil or purposeless, cosmic doom and disaster will come. While the storm dwarfs all human activity, these people deserve their fate--a sad epitaph on a once-great race.

The Fisherman's Revenge was commissioned for a schools' tour by the Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company. Cook accepted the commission believing "that it would be possible to take something indigenous to the students' experience, yet recreated in an energetic and open theatrical manner."⁵⁶ The piece includes the game, piddly, apparently of Elizabeth origin; a tale of a poor, honest Fisherman, with long-standing debts to Black Fred, the Merchant, and with a beautiful daughter; and the actors talking as actors, in verse: "We like to think we are kin to our forefathers, the schooner men."⁵⁷

This little piece has three problems. First, cardboard characters cannot sustain a play of this length. Second, the woman-as-termagant figure is disturbing at a time when negative stereotypes of women are being challenged. And, third, Cook appears to be forcing himself to work outside his range: a relaxed, playful Cook proves slightly embarrassing, even if he finds some life in very well-worn material. Apart from strong emotion about the loss of the old way of life in the intermission dialogue, the poor Englishman is not in the same world as Quiller and Skipper Pete. The theatricality, on the other hand, succeeds: the actors changing

back into actors at the break, the Fisherman putting on a mask to play the Merchant's friend, the Merchant's Wife in view as she straps on a false stomach, the actors freezing when the Stage Manager rings a bell.

The Fisherman's Revenge is designed to have the simplicity and directness of a ballad or folk-tale, with stereotypes as old as the Mrs Noah of miracle plays, the world of Punch and Judy. This sets up knockabout vaudeville fun and makes the true love of the young couple and the touch of pathos of the Fisherman only minor elements.

The unpublished *Not as a Dream*, staged at Dalhousie University in 1976, is an adaptation of a radio script, *Ireland's Eye* (CBC, 13 June 1976), the location changed from Newfoundland to Nova Scotia to fit with the place of performance. An old man returns with his daughter and son-in-law to the place in which he grew up, long abandoned, and sits to rest in the graveyard. The Ghost, the spirit of the place, states the importance of place, of roots, of staying where your forefathers were. The old man deals brusquely with three crass Americans who have bought the land, stepdances with his daughter, and dies. The Ghost speaks, elegiacally:

[The land was] accepted by the inheritors, all with a common sense of purpose, of place and worth and community, and an awareness of the fullness of time. It's all here. And yet it's no longer here. It's adrift on the tide. It's alive in the screaming of gulls. It's rooted deep in the topsoil, nourished with the sweat of silent men for centuries. It's part of the boats that were part of the woods that were part of the place. There isn't anything left to show for it but it's all there. The sense and sadness of it. The rhythm of days.⁵⁸

These six plays together present a great deal of outports' life, with emphasis on its harshness, with *Jacob's Wake* and *Not as a Dream* also sadly scrutinizing some characteristics of fallen Newfoundland after its heroic years. *Therese's Creed* is wholly realistic, as is *Head, Guts and Sound Bone Dance*--except that the way the drowning boy is ignored is most easily accepted on the level of symbol. *The Fisherman's Revenge*, at best a *jeu d'esprit*, differs in being within the conventions of folk-tale. *Quiller* strives for a wider dimension, in the words about religion and when flames from a fire twenty years earlier are presented onstage. Most audaciously, *Jacob's Wake* ends not merely with a ghost but with cosmic catastrophe.

IV

Unperformed plays have a sad, shadowy existence. The Calgary collection contains four. Two continue the preoccupation with Newfoundland. *A Special Providence*, a wild satire on the island, has a first draft dated November 1975. This was broadcast in 1987, revised and re-titled *The Moribundia Memorandum*. *The Painful Education of Patrick Brown*, commissioned in 1982 by Rising Tide (but not performed), presents an anthropology professor sucked into his vision of island life, including half-comic neighbours in the present and men from the past like Banks and Cartwright. In the other two Cook attempts to extend his range, with kinds of black comedy. These are *The End of the Road*,⁵⁹ also entitled *All the Funny People are Dead*, workshopped at Banff in 1977, and *The Apocalypse Sonata*, workshopped at Regina in 1980. As Writer-in-Residence at Stratford Festival in 1987, Cook drafted *The Great Harvest Excursion*--events on a slow train carrying farm workers to the Prairies in the Edwardian period.

Cook once described his radio work to me as made up of "potboilers, mediocre plays and excellent plays." He thinks highly of two strange 30-minute marriage plays, "Love Is a Walnut" (1975), a dialogue about walnuts and World War 2, and "Knight of Shadows, Lady of Silence" ("Tuesday Night," 4 May 1976), where ownership of a cat leads to the husband's sudden inability to get up to go to work. Of over fifty radio plays, two where the subject is yet again Newfoundland may be the finest. "Apostles for the Burning" ("Tuesday Night," 4 Dec. 1973) has Skipper Pete and four Devonshire men named after the evangelists settling an island off the Newfoundland coast. When two of the men bring a woman, Magdalen, conflict starts and eventually the island burns. "This Damned Inheritance" (Sunday Matinee," 6,13, 20 January 1985) may be the final definitive statement about the appeal and the terror of Newfoundland, past and present. In the 80s Cook has written docudramas about Matthew Begbie, British Columbia's 19th century "hanging judge" and the 1982 capsizing of the oil rig *Ocean Ranger*, together with interpretations of James Joyce, Pablo Picasso and the American composer, Charles Ives. While recognizing how rarely radio scripts are published in Canada, several of Cooks cry out for this kind of attention.^{[60](#)}

Cook's numerous columns in the *St John's Evening Telegram* include much that is informative and strikingly well-written. He reviewed films, books, television and theatre. He wrote in the manner of Erma Bombeck on the trials of family life: his small son "thinks toothpaste is floor polisher, soap a cookie." He frequently examined the value of Art and the state of Canadian culture. Many times he attempted to understand and to appreciate Newfoundland. Random Island, "lyrical, sheltered, fertile and gentle," is contrasted with Fogo Island, "wildly lamenting, wind torn, barren, storm laden, and beautiful."^{[61](#)} He was eloquent describing leaving for St John's:

I grieve at leaving, though it's not for long. And I grieve for my children. For nothing I or the city can give them can compensate for their freedom, and the loss of space, and of identity, of belonging. As I write, the Northern Lights sound in the sky. And the tide at the full, whispers on the shale beach. The empty headlands gloom away towards the Atlantic. And all around me are the lights against the night, each one known, personal, familiar. My lights will go out for a brief time. I will carry theirs with me."^{[62](#)}

Can we hope for a book with a selection of Cook's best journalism?

Cook's Newfoundland outposts are as real as Ted Russell's Pigeon Inlet and David French's Coley's Point. But Cook wants more than comedy, anecdotes, young lovers. His Newfoundland is tragic and unique. He grieves the loss of independence in 1949, laments even more the resettlement programme that moved so many from the outposts. The seal-hunt no longer provides a way of proving manhood. Religion gives little comfort to Therese and Quiller, and is declining: the bishop no longer visits by boat in *Head, Guts and Sound Bone Dance*, and only two go to church on Good Friday in *Jacob's Wake*. The changes of the 20th century--better transport, telephones, television--have made Newfoundland like anywhere else.

Cook celebrates the values which the climate and the old way of life promoted--in men (the woman's role is domestic, caring for menfolk). Cook wants physical work integrated with the rest of daily life. He values individuality, ordinary people, community. He especially admires independence, fierce pride, rising danger,

decisiveness to the point of pigheadedness, absolute conviction of the rightness of one's moral values. Cook and the men he has created welcome challenge, shouting, with Charles Kingsley, "Welcome, black Northeaster." The people Cook cares most for endured, but have been replaced by vacuity. Cook hates what's soft and praises what's tough: passionately hates the present as he sees it.

NOTES

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