Dispatch from the North (III)

September 30, 2007

Territorial Democracy in Action

Old-Time Attractions

Welcome to my third dispatch from Yellowknife. As I mentioned, I'll be back here for the northern lights season, but for now it's a quick jaunt south, then on to Iqaluit.

No impression of Yellowknife would be complete without describing several spots I'd previously missed. The first is the territorial museum, the Prince of Wales Northern Historical Centre. It's a quiet place at this time of year, with just a few visitors wandering the native craft exhibits and bush pilot memorabilia. But amid the mukluks and antique propellers I found one sight that stopped me cold.

Hanging in the central atrium is a portrait of the museum's namesake. It's from a far-off time, 1978 to be exact, when it was still possible to depict Charles as the dashing dandy with nothing better to do than gambol about his Cornish estates, dressed for the War of 1812. Beneath a huge oak tree he stands garbed in the red and black Welsh Guards uniform. The reins of a horse are in his hand, and a sword is manfully planted in the ground before him. The horse is an RCMP gift named Centennial – or, as the plaque quaintly spells it, Centenial.

But what's the painting doing here? Knowledgeable locals I ask roll their eyes and clam up in embarrassment. Evidently, this is one of those holdovers from Yellowknife's recent history which most would prefer to forget. As for myself, after several visits to the city's new suburbs – which boast a Wal-Mart, a metropolis-worthy Co-op supermarket and other big-box attractions – I'm gaining a deeper regard for the reminders of this city's more distinctive past, such as this piece of Gainsborough kitsch.

Another such reminder is a onetime squatter's paradise on the edge of Old Town. Ragged Ass Road's name refers to the straitened circumstances of its original inhabitants. Later, the area was taken over by draft dodgers and other counterculture types who washed up on Yellowknife's shores. The shacks that remain may look unkempt, but they show ample signs of compensating pleasures: outdoor items strewn beside each doorway, and even a volleyball net strung up next to the shore. But the old-world feel is fading. Already, middle class homes crowd in on each side, a sign of this area's prime location. Not surprisingly, recent drifters are treated with none of the respect that the more established residents are. Locals say that if this road has

A Bachelor's Pad near Ragged Ass Road

any future, it will be as a period-piece museum. Already it's heavily marketed in visitors' guides, its tourist appeal enhanced by a Tom Cochrane album named in its honour. Its residents, the appearance of their dwellings to the contrary, know they are in a privileged situation.

Even more famous is Yellowknife's municipal dump. Written up in such august papers as *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*, it was one sight I thought I'd have to miss on this visit, given its location a mile or two from the city. But I was able to tag along on a city tour arranged for my magazine colleague, Michael Adams, when he was in town, by his friend Susan Lenard, a Toronto-based strategy consultant who does a good deal of work up here. The dump was on our itinerary.

I'm now in a good position to say that the dump, for all its global lustre, is an acquired taste. It says much for the hardiness of Yellowknifers, especially this town's transient residents, that so many frequent the place, either from environmental principle, bargain basement motives, or just plain curiosity. Reclaiming furniture, toys and games is a frequent pastime. So too is searching for good-as-new outboard motors, TVs, and motorcycles. One enthusiast, whose list of acquisitions appeared in the regular column devoted to the dump in the local paper, even bragged of rescuing a brand new 500-pound weight set.

Part of the pleasure of such finds is imagining their stories – in the last case, some

poor soul's Schwarzenegger dreams mouldering on a mountain of trash. Unfortunately for Yellowknife's claims to celebrity, in the future I may not be alone when pining for such evocative tales. The days of free and easy scrounging for buried treasure, it is said, are numbered. City Council is making noises about closing the dump to day trippers, worried, as councilors have to be, about possible injury and legal suits.

Seeing in Believing

Housewares for the Hardy

Candidates' Free-for-All

Northern Politics 101

Not that all politicians here are killjoys. One of the delights of this territory's political system is its colourful difference from what southern Canadians are used to. Its style of government is known as the consensus model. Party partisanship in territorial elections (but not federally) is outlawed, and candidates all run as independents. I got the perfect chance to see how things work, as I arrived plonk in an election campaign. The electoral forums I attended each included over twenty candidates – all running in the Yellowknife area – which meant marathon evenings of stage-managed questions and rushed answers. But there was no question of boredom. Several candidates were more than willing to air the city's dirty laundry, and I eagerly followed every word, pen in hand.

Some of this laundry isn't pretty. I already had a good idea about the problems caused by the noxious combination of booze and violence that plagues parts of this town, as well as outlying communities. But until these forums I wasn't fully aware of their gravity. Also, I'd been exposed to the terri-

tory's growing drug problem, thanks to an avalanche of news reports. One of the most memorable was an article earlier this week on a police bust involving a wholesale crack dealer who lives in a trailer park near the derelict Con Mine. This character was offloading his inventory, dubbed 'bananas', to retail pushers at a nearby sports bar. What I learned at the forum, however, was much worse. These pushers have made a beeline for the local public high school, with sweet deals for first-time customers, and no one knows quite how to put an end to such shenanigans.

The candidates' candour was remarkable; so too was their care in speaking to all groups in this community – rich and poor, aboriginal and nonaboriginal. I came away greatly heartened by how this territory, with its unique demographic mix, is able to conduct its affairs with what seems to be unerring civility. If the consensus form of government, whatever its drawbacks (the commissioning of ludicrous royal portraits included), can help explain this result, then it is a model worth further study. Detractors argue that an important reason for the calm politics is that the territorial government has few of the powers of a full-fledged province. As long as the feds are reluctant to devolve more powers, most contentious decisions will be made in Ottawa. That's unlikely to change until land claims and revenue-sharing deals have been worked out with the Dene Nation, an umbrella group representing most aboriginals within the territory.

Bill Erasmus, the Dene Nation chief, lives in Yellowknife, and is a constant political presence. Polished and eloquent, he's one leader who knows the value of a good sound bite. In 2002, he caused a stir when he called for the removal of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Beverley McLachlin, when she used the term 'conquered peoples' in reference to this country's First Nations. Erasmus's objection was misdirected (McLachlin was merely quoting a term from British law at the time). But he was historically accurate: the Dene had never been conquered.

Samuel Hearne

A Very Near Country

I can't help but delve a little into the past of the Dene (and borrow a few pictures from the internet while I'm at it), not only because it is still so important today, but because some of its stories so tellingly support Erasmus's contention.

The first European in these parts was an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, Samuel Hearne, who had been charged with trekking across the Barren Lands to a spot on the Arctic Coast where deposits of copper had been reported. To accomplish this, he employed the services of a native chief, whom today's Dene classify as one of their own. (In fact, his mother had been a captured Cree woman.) Thanks to the widely publicized account Hearne later wrote about his trek, this chief, named Matonabbee, gained his own measure of fame.

The two men developed a close friendship. So close, in fact, that years later, when

Matonabbee received a report that Hearne had been captured during a French raid, he promptly committed suicide -- an act of Romeo and Juliet proportions that must have mystified Matonabbee's numerous wives. Hearne was always to maintain that without Matonabbee's aid he would never have survived as an explorer. More tellingly, when reading Hearne's account of his journey, one can't help but conclude it was Matonabbee who was calling the shots. Most notably, he and his entourage of warriors went against Hearne's earnest pleas and murdered an entire Inuit village when they all arrived at the Arctic Coast in 1771.

George Back

Fifty years later, when John Franklin, later Sir John of tragic fame, led an overland expedition that passed through this area, the Dene were again closely involved. On their return south from the Arctic Coast, several of Franklin's men died of starvation, and there was rumoured cannibalism within the expedition, before the party was saved by the local Yellowknives and their chief Akaitcho. This expedition also saw an unusual romantic triangle -- unusual because the expedition was made up of navy men, who in comparison with fur traders were far less likely to engage in sexual liaisons with native women. It's a story that lives on in literature, providing the plot for books such as *A Discovery of Strangers*, by Canadian novelist Rudy Wiebe, and according to some commentators helping to inspire several works of 19th century English literature, including a play written by Wilkie Collins and adapted by Charles Dickens, *The Frozen Deep*.

Two young officers in Franklin's party, George Back and Robert Hood, courted a Yellowknife girl Greenstockings. Her beauty, remarked on repeatedly in the explorers' accounts, led her mother to worry that she might be kidnapped and taken back to the Englishmen's Big Chief (this was 1820, so the Prince Regent had just reached the throne as George IV). But the officers had more self-interested ideas in mind. After an extended contest, Hood won out, fathering Greenstockings' child. Months later, during the worst of the starvation, Hood was murdered by an Iroquois hunter attached to the expedition. George Back went on to be a celebrated Northern explorer in his own right, still moved by the sight of Greenstockings when they again met over a decade later.

If only all the subsequent history of the interaction between the Dene and European outsiders was so diverting. But a typical sequence of events – epidemics, over-trapping due to voracious commercial demand, intertribal conflict, starvation – had the same effect among the Dene as it did in most other parts of the country. Northern historians often identify the year 1900 as a rough dividing line. Before then, the region's aboriginal population was in decline; only in the 20th century did improving standards of health care, as well as pockets of prosperity, begin the resurgence that continues to this day. And it was only during the 1970s, with the Berger enquiry, that political activism really got its start.

A Temporary Farewell

When I return here in the winter, aboriginal politics will be one subject I'll explore further, along with the diamond industry and the way it has managed to incorporate a major role for aboriginal employees and companies. At the moment, I'm preparing to leave a town that has impressed me greatly. When next I hear the usual southern putdowns – that it's remote or inconsequential – I'll know enough to make a passable rebuttal. Yes, it's remote, but that's part of its magic, and it's hard to call a community inconsequential when it boasts a hinterland twice the size of France.

I've also gained a sense of how big-city types are viewed in places like this. Torontonians, not surprisingly, are seen in an especially unflattering light -- a cross between Genghis Khan and Paris Hilton. A recent event I attended illustrates why. It was a banquet at a trade show called Prospects North. The headliner was Toronto-based comedian Sean Cullen, who delivered swipes at Northern customs and politics (including tactless remarks on the slogan 'I get it' used by an aboriginal woman running in the territorial elections) interspersed with patter about ostensibly cosmopolitan life in Toronto. He ended with several ditties of his own composition, including one about an unusual wilderness tryst, 'The Woman and the Chimp', and a rousing closer, 'My Friend, Pornography'.

The applause was tepid, and like others I was distinctly underwhelmed by the condescension. Thankfully a quick-witted woman in the audience bawled out, in an inebriated voice loud enough to echo through the rafters, "You *don't* get it." While I delighted in Cullen's momentary speechlessness, I realized that the woman's comment could just as easily apply closer to home. A mere month spent here during a balmy fall hardly gives me a full sense of this city, and another month in mid-winter will provide but a scintilla of street cred. But I'll have to be content with that. I'll wrap up this dispatch with a few more answers to pertinent questions.

Have you made more discoveries on the culinary front? I've added a few tourist-trap fish restaurants to my list (tasty, though pricey), and visited a local mainstay known as Northern Fancy Meats, a butcher specializing in fresh game. Hunters are welcome to bring in their kill, part of which is then sold on the premises. If ground muskox is your idea of comfort food (it's said to be superb in chili) then this is the place for you. My own carnivorous fancies stopped short of moose sirloin.

Is there any high culture up there to speak of? Yes, in moderate doses. An author's festival is held each summer (this year's guests included Newfoundland novelist Wayne Johnston and native author Drew Hayden Taylor), with the emphasis on mentoring new local writers. A literacy festival is held each fall. As for music, this week one of the periodic concerts of chamber music by a group of local performers is taking place at the Northern Arts and Cultural Centre – a surprisingly swish venue.

What about fiction set in Yellowknife? Wiebe's historical novel, already mentioned, received several warm reviews and won a Governor General's award. But his rather pious outlook on the past, heavily infused with fashionable politics, is not to everyone's taste. (For example, the novel is written in multiple voices, including not just

some of the European and native characters, but also several animals they meet.) I highly recommend Elizabeth Hay's stylish and haunting *Late Nights on Air*, set in the Yellowknife of the 1970s – a time when Hay lived here while working for CBC Radio. It has its own key historical element: the novel's main characters take a canoe trip that follows the route of an early 20th century explorer, John Hornby, who perished on the frozen Barren Lands.

After reading all those cheery stories, are you prepared for winter? Probably not, but at least I'll be fashionably attired. For serious winter outfitting, everyone here depends on the town's longest running business, Weaver and Devore, located in a Quonset hut on the scenic shores of Back Bay. I've kitted myself out with a full range of fur-lined accessories. It's revealing how quickly one's attitudes towards fur are transformed as one contemplates winter nights awaiting the aurora borealis on a frozen lake at 62 degrees latitude. And my shopping spree was none too soon. The season's first snowfall appeared just as I was finishing this dispatch.

A Late September Scene