

The Sins of Settlement: Confession and the Postcolonial Cartwright

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The Afterlife of George Cartwright (1992), the first novel of Canadian poet John Steffler, examines the “life and times” of one of Canada’s early explorer-settlers through the imagined thoughts and recollections of this explorer after his death. George Cartwright, an eighteenth-century European adventurer and the protagonist of Steffler’s narrative, left his home in England in 1765 to travel to Labrador with hopes of making his fortune there. From 1770 to 1786, Cartwright ran a settlement and trading operation on the Labrador coast. Initially, he lived closely with the nearby Inuit community and even brought an Inuit family to England in 1772, with the hope that their presence would help him raise funds for future endeavours in North America. On the ship back to Labrador, however, the Inuit family contracted smallpox, all of them dying but one. Years later, Cartwright learnt that the entire community of Inuit had died, and he suspected that they had also contracted smallpox from the one survivor of the trip to England. All the details of Cartwright’s time in Labrador are recorded in his diaries – published as *A Journal of Transactions and Events* (1792).¹ Cartwright’s *Journal* used to be required reading on the Newfoundland school curricula, which is how Steffler, a Newfoundland-based writer, came upon them. Steffler knew immediately upon reading Cartwright’s “fascinating, appalling Labrador journal” that he “wanted to do something with it, and with the life of this person of my past.”² What Steffler did with the “journal” of the historical Cartwright was revisit it through fiction and reimagine it as a vehicle of atonement for both Cartwright and the period of Canada’s past that he represents.

In its fictional revision of an historical figure and his journal, *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* belongs to one of Canada's most prevalent postmodern traditions, a genre that Linda Hutcheon, in her 1988 study *The Canadian Postmodern*, labeled "historiographic metafiction."³ Historiographic metafiction troubles historical narrative(s) by underlining the very fact that they are narratives, that is, that histories are meaning-making discourses. By focusing on "collecting and attempt[ing] to make narrative order" of historical data, this genre highlights the "paradox of the *reality* of the past" and its relative inaccessibility to the present, except through textuality or discourse.⁴ In other words, historiographic metafiction produces and is produced by the conflict between the desire to draw the past and present together and the simultaneous desire to revise the past in the present, in part through a recognition of history's written-ness. Steffler's novel belongs to a sub-genre of Canadian historiographic metafiction, one that incorporates, challenges, and relies upon historical documents in its simultaneously deconstructive and affirmative biographies of important figures from the nation's past. Examples of this particular type of historiographic metafiction include Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), George Bowering's *Burning Water* (1980), and Heather Robertson's *Willie: A Romance* (1983). That an investment in the re-visioned historical biography is pervasive in a colonial country such as Canada is unsurprising given the assimilation and annihilation that contributed to its founding. Through reconfiguring the lives of the nation's colonizers, Canadian writers such as Steffler are in some ways attempting to reconfigure their own historical legacy through atoning for the original sin of the country's birth.

Steffler's novel is set primarily in the English countryside, where Cartwright is spending his afterlife with only the company of his pet hawk, Kaumalak. Relying on Cartwright's Labrador journals, Steffler constructs, through flashbacks, Cartwright's life, from his boyhood in England, through

his time in the military, to his death in a room in Turk's Head Inn. The novel contains a third-person narrative that oscillates between describing the actions and motives of the historical Cartwright and the ghostly Cartwright. The primary emphasis of the novel is on Cartwright's time in Labrador and his experiences there. Here Steffler reproduces verbatim many of the sections of Cartwright's original journal in the third-person narrative. Partially alerting the reader to the central role Cartwright's *Journal* plays in Steffler's story are excerpts from various entries written by the historical Cartwright, which are generally set off from the body of the text and identified by a date. Steffler also uses the device of an imagined "afterlife" journal, which, along with the original journal entries, is written in first-person (i.e., from Cartwright's perspective), to allow Cartwright to elaborate and reflect on the contents of the historical journal.

A number of critics, including Cynthia Sugars, Robert Stacey and Herb Wylie, have discussed the impact this fictional return to Cartwright's writings and biography has upon the reader's impression of the history that Cartwright represents. I would agree with the concern all three critics raise regarding Steffler's seeming suggestion that, through narrative, Cartwright and the role he (and others like him) played in Canadian history can somehow be redeemed – that the real Cartwright can/should be forgiven for his sins because the fictional Cartwright is recognizing his guilt and accepting responsibility for his errors. In this paper, I would like to build upon these critical concerns about the novel by focusing specifically on the type of dialogue Steffler creates between the real words of the historical Cartwright and the imagined writings of his fictional of Cartwright. The historical excerpts are revised by the invented entries from Cartwright's afterlife journal. Furthermore, I will be arguing that the afterlife entries formulate what becomes a confession and, in so doing, engage the real journals in a process of recognition, penance, and forgiveness. This recontextualizing of the excerpts results in a problematic message since the

novel delineates a dubious process of absolution. It seems as though, for Steffler, Cartwright, his journals, and the history they represent are somehow lacking. By revisiting Cartwright in the afterlife, Steffler is able to make Cartwright the national ancestor he needs him to be – one cognizant of his errors and willing to atone for the sins of settlement. This is Cartwright as he should have been, as Canadians, with our postcolonial guilt, would have wanted him.

Steffler projects this guilt over Canada's past onto Cartwright, punishing him for the damage done to the New World in the name of empire. Instead of admittance to heaven, after his death Cartwright finds himself in a sort of purgatory. Cartwright, the narrator tells us, "sensed the end coming" and, musing on "what lay beyond," imagined "a brief audience with his Maker"⁵ and with old acquaintances, friends, family, believing that "[f]orgiveness and understanding would likely prevail."⁶ When Cartwright actually passes away in his sleep, however, he wakes up to find himself in the same inn where he had been living prior to death. Stuck reliving the same day over and over – May 19, 1819 – Cartwright returns to his journals in hopes of tracing the steps that have brought him to this haunting and haunted existence.

A division is therefore created not just between the contemporary, politically aware reader and the historical Cartwright, but also between the afterlife Cartwright and the Cartwright who actually lived. Steffler alerts us to this division when he has the ghostly Cartwright reflect in an afterlife entry:

It's strange that God allows us to make mistakes and go on living for years in situations created by our mistakes, situations very different from what would have been had our lives taken another course. In effect we become strangers to our real selves . . .⁷

The relationship to the self figures prominently in the avowal of sins. On one hand, the individual is experiencing a fractured identity, a schism

between the self that he/she is now and the self that committed these acts. Paul Ricoeur describes this schism as a “strangeness,” and explains that this “experience of being oneself but alienated from oneself get transcribed” into language and narrative as a means of reorientation.⁸ As what Mikhail Bakhtin labels “self-accounting,” the confession thus represents an attempt by the individual to regain a sort of wholeness through a verbal exorcism of sins, “the only principle that organizes the utterance here is the pure relationship of the *I* to itself.”⁹

Steffler’s removing Cartwright from the world not only symbolizes, but enables, a separation from his historical self, allowing a focus on the troubled relationship of Cartwright to himself. Moreover, because the disconnection between the two Cartwrights is so glaring, the afterlife Cartwright becomes a protagonist in search of reintegration. Like other sinners, Cartwright’s wrongdoing has led him to feel alienated from himself and ostracized from the human community, so he is motivated by the desire for the integration of the various components of his personality and for acceptance back into his community. It is this search for reintegration, wholeness, or harmony that is the hallmark of confession. Cartwright is an outcast from the world and also a man dissembled; it is through realizing, recounting and seeking redemption for his actions that Cartwright is finally admitted into the world that his actions most harmed.

According to Terrence Doody and Peter Brooks, this search for redemption is the essence of confession. As Brooks explains in *Troubling Confessions*, the Roman Catholic Church made confession obligatory in 1215 at the same Lateran Council that “established an inquisition for the extirpation of heresy.”¹⁰ This attachment in Christian dogma between enforced revelation and punishment for things revealed suggests that one motivation behind confession is a sort of “moral cleansing.”¹¹ It is this notion of “cleansing” that informs the preeminence of confession in psychotherapy of any kind. Confession can also act as a sort of moral

policing, which is its usual role within the judicial system. When a criminal admits guilt, the justice system can hand down punishment, not only secure in the fact that the right person is being punished, but also with the sense that this punishment is accepted, even desired.¹² Mainstream Western culture has demonstrated a consistent and thriving investment in the individual's laying bare of his or her soul. As Michel Foucault famously observes in *The History of Sexuality*, "Western man has become a confessing animal."¹³

Ideally, confessing signals a self-recognition, an acknowledgement of culpability for any misdeeds, and, as such, it is an essential step in "rehabilitation" and in "the end to ostracism" both from oneself and from the "human community."¹⁴ In Steffler's novel, the moment of reintegration comes at the end of the novel when the ghostly Cartwright is not only at last able to see Labrador but actually to return there from the English countryside where he has been trapped. Cartwright is then consumed by a white bear, an animal which is connected to Attouick's (Cartwright's Inuit friend) Torngarsoak – animal spirit guide. Earlier in the novel, Attouick relates the story of how he became an angakok (priest). Attouick had to be separated from his village and had to fast until eventually his Torngarsoak came in the shape of a white bear that consumed him: "He came straight to me and ate me slowly, limb by limb. I was only a skeleton lying there."¹⁵ After being consumed by the white bear, Attouick is ready to assume his rightful role as angakok for his village. The end of the novel is also connected to an incident of excessive and unnecessary slaughter in the historical Cartwright's life. In a particularly gruesome hunting expedition recorded in both the historical Cartwright's journals and in the novel, Cartwright kills six white bears, including two cubs. Cartwright and his men are not able to move the heavy bodies of these bears or even turn them over to skin them, so the slaughter is an example of exploitation and waste.¹⁶ When the afterlife Cartwright comes face to face with a bear that then

consumes him, it seems to represent both a confrontation with and punishment for his excessive violence, punishment that leads to his reintegration. This re-casting of the historical Cartwright and his real journals into a confession that then leads to a purification of past sins is troubling. What Steffler's narrative seems to suggest is that the evils of European imperialism and colonization can be wiped away and we can start again, if we are just sorry enough.¹⁷ In *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, the journal excerpts and the past they represent not only become recontextualized, they ultimately de-contextualize the historical moment from which they arise. Read against the afterlife entries, the excerpts become inseparable from the confession with which the novel is consumed and thereby come to seem the words of a repressed, flawed, but redeemable man.

'Seem' is the operative word here, for, as Sissela Bok notes, confession exists on the threshold of "concealment and revelation."¹⁸ While it may be "based on a model of communication," confession is also "exploited" "because it provides room for evasion."¹⁹ The relationship between the confessant (the one speaking) and the community that "he needs to exist in and to confirm him"²⁰ is the principle arena in which this doubleness plays itself out. The community, typically the audience or reader of the confession,²¹ is tempted into listening and believing that the confessant is indeed penitent. This belief in the confessant could be explained by what Bakhtin identifies as the reader's impulse to aestheticize confession.²² As the reader or confessor aestheticizes the confession, he or she moves towards a position of authorship, while the subject of self-accounting develops into a hero for the confessor.²³ We believe the confessant because we have, in becoming a sort of author of the confession, created the confessant. In the case of *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, this work has already been done for the reader. Steffler has listened to Cartwright's journals as though they were a confession and has acted as our representative in interpreting them,

becoming the author of Cartwright, the hero. Therefore, we need to read this novel for two levels of confession; as Les Smith suggests, “behind the confessant’s story in a novel, we might hear the author’s as well, a confession of a confession....”²⁴ This second confession is a natural response to the “self-accounting subject” who has been rendered a hero in the author’s mind. As Bakhtin explains in *Art and Answerability*, typically the reaction to hearing a confession is the desire to respond with an answering act.²⁵ Steffler has responded to Cartwright’s journals with his own concealed confession – the guilt he feels both as a non-Native Canadian and on the part of non-Native Canadians is clear in his creation of Cartwright as a man who is atoning for his colonial sins. And what of the readers of Steffler’s confession? I would suggest that Canadian readers are meant to take part in the same process of confession with which the novel is consumed, and, by doing so, receive the same product as Cartwright and as Steffler, through Cartwright: absolution for the sins of Canada’s settlement.

The community that will serve as Cartwright’s confessor, then, is not really chosen by the character of Cartwright, but rather by Steffler himself. Further, this community, is itself not a given, but rather a creation of the confession (and a creation of the author).²⁶ In terms of Steffler’s novel, Cynthia Sugars identifies the audience/community as an “imagined, and therefore reductive, national constituency . . . a constituency of Canadian citizens who have inherited the historical legacy of the colonial state and its accompanying sociocultural effects.”²⁷ The confessant appeals to the receptive audience that he has imagined in his mind, and the confessor, in becoming this audience, forms a community with the confessant. A funny thing happens, then, because the confessor becomes almost ensnared by the confession and community comes to imply a “mutual, personal responsibility”²⁸ for the acts being confessed. Confession draws the listener into the same pursuit of self-knowledge in which the confessant is engaged, so the community receiving a confession is also “thrust onto confession’s

long detour back to a primal state of innocence.”²⁹ Both the acts of giving and receiving a confession are tied up with a longing to emerge from the experience in a purified state, exorcised of the sin through its verbalization.

This desire to somehow go back in time and change the past is a major motivator for the confessional act. Confession is, therefore, undeniably linked to history – or, more properly, to the revision, even expulsion of history. As Smith explains, “confession reflects a basic dissatisfaction with history and a consequent need for periodic regeneration.”³⁰ If the memory of our history is intolerable, then confession is seen as providing liberation from those memories.³¹ It makes sense that a novel dealing with the past of a colonial nation would adopt the confessional model. Many aspects of confession could potentially provide a rich forum for the expression of postcolonial issues and concerns. For instance, the notion of the confessional subject as struggling with a sense of self-alienation could be linked to the settler’s fractious experience and identity which is formed on the site of a schism between known and unknown. The settler, Alan Lawson and Homi Bhabha argue, is in a constant state of negotiation with the Old World and the New World, “suspended between ‘mother’ and ‘other,’ simultaneously colonized and colonizing.”³² The fact that Cartwright spends much of the novel in Purgatory/England highlights the settler’s constant sense of alienation in terms of space, while it simultaneously signals the self-alienation experienced by the repentant sinner.

Like the confessional text, many texts premised on postcolonial theories of settler/invader experience try to examine and interpret the process of colonization from inside this divisive experience and identity. That is, both settler/invader narratives and confessional writing reenact the moment of rupture and the results of this rupture in an attempt to recuperate a wholeness or understanding of the current identity of an individual, community, or nation. At the end of Steffler’s first chapter, the third-person narrator connects Cartwright’s journal writing with feelings of “loneliness”

and the sense that “he’s about to implode, metamorphose into some horrible thing.”³³ The suggestion, of course, is that Cartwright is already a “horrible thing” or has, at least, done horrible things, and “the crisis of torment” he is facing can only be relieved through “examining . . . his memories.”³⁴ While the historical Cartwright’s journals are concerned with the ritual and patterns of hunting, these new entries have “less order and purpose.”³⁵ Instead of “pulling things together, making sense of his life,” the afterlife writings question this enterprise by exposing discrepancies, challenging the values of the historical Cartwright, and pointing out and filling in the absences in the real excerpts. If Cartwright’s published records functioned as a chronological and teleological narrative, the invented entries “pull things” apart, making sense not of his life, but of his current purgatorial position.

By moving away from the self-censoring and repression that Steffler sees in the historical Cartwright, the ghostly Cartwright gradually gains not only an awareness of himself as a sinner, but forgiveness for the actions and ideologies of the historical Cartwright. As Dennis Foster explains, confession is:

a mode by which people enter into the discourse of their culture. . . . It represents an attempt to understand the terms and the limits by which a people are defined, both as they listen to the confession of others and as they recount their own transgressions.³⁶

For Canadian settler fictions that are engaged in postcolonial concerns, the confessional version of history can work to make its readers aware of the nation’s sins of settlement and their own participation in colonial ideology and practice. Of course, the necessary corollary to this awareness is the search for and attainment of absolution. With the confessant (in this case an imagined version of an early colonizer), the confessor(s) (the Canadian reader(s)) not only recognize and re-experience the wrong committed in the name of imperialism, they obtain absolution for this shameful history. And here, I would argue, is where postcolonial interests and Steffler’s motives

diverge. The notion that Cartwright, the confessant, and the Canadian reading community, the confessor, can be forgiven for the sins committed in the name of colonizing the New World is problematic. The way in which Steffler re-frames the excerpts from Cartwright's real journals not only revises history, it eventually serves to wipe history clean by having our ancestral guilt whited out in the final scene of Cartwright's consumption by the bear.

The confessional work begins almost immediately with an afterlife entry at the start of the second chapter. Typical of the confessional genre,³⁷ the first entry presents the now presumably older and wiser Cartwright looking back on his younger self. Discussing his experience in India, Cartwright reflects on the misconceptions that he harboured, such as his belief that India would "transform" and mature him.³⁸ There is a distance established, then, between the Cartwright (the subject) who is confessing and the Cartwright (the object) that is being confessed. This distance is underlined by Cartwright's comment that India now seems to him alternately immediate and "foreign."³⁹ From the outset Steffler positions the afterlife Cartwright as withdrawing from the Cartwright of history, although not without conflict. By moving away from the colonialist that he was in his life, Cartwright becomes a more acceptable figure for the postcolonial reader. Simultaneously, by still feeling a connection to that past self, Cartwright is able to stand for the more shameful aspects of the nation's past, for the guilt that Steffler would have his readers vicariously purge through Cartwright's confession. The end of this first invented entry nicely demonstrates this double position. The reflective Cartwright wonders if he was not, in fact, lucky to "enter and exit" India relatively unchanged. However, this hint of insight is quickly counteracted by the final lines, "Killed a partridge today. . . A fine day,"⁴⁰ which are reminiscent of his real journal entries, entries that are largely a record of animals killed and weather conditions. Steffler's ending of the first entry in this manner, ensures that the historical

Cartwright's voice, when it appears a bit later in the novel, is appropriated and subsumed by the voice of a more self-questioning, even self-loathing Cartwright.

The dialogue Steffler creates between the imagined entries and the real journals makes the historical Cartwright's writings an integral part of the confessional process. The first series of excerpts from *A Journal of Transactions and Events*, which run from August 24 to September 30, 1770, are framed by two afterlife entries focused on Cartwright's attachment to his brother John and to his childhood. In the entry preceding the excerpts, Cartwright recounts the short boating expeditions that he and John took along the north coast of Labrador. The naming of islands, bays, etc., after family members is connected to the simple joy and exuberance of children's games of exploring.⁴¹ This description gives the entry a nostalgic air – "It was like being children again" – so the imperial act of naming becomes couched in a sentiment that seems harmless and innocent, that of trying to recapture youth. The act of colonization becomes linked to boyhood excitement and seems to come more from a general thoughtlessness than from a deliberate plan of exploitation and appropriation.

When we come to read the actions recorded in the real excerpts, then, we see them as more understandable and forgivable. Cartwright's detailed accounts of various animals killed, his presumptuous reference to certain territories by the names that he has given them, and his struggles to settle the land are contextualized by the afterlife journal which make us read barely repressed emotions and misgivings into the historical Cartwright. For example, in the original journal Cartwright's brief references to his brother John and the coldness with which he notes John's departure – "My brother left me this evening to return to St. John's"⁴² – when read against the nostalgia of the afterlife entries, become the records of Cartwright's fear of intimacy and fear of expressing his feelings. "I always thought of John's visit with me in Labrador as the happiest time we ever passed together,"⁴³

Steffler's Cartwright reflects in the entry directly following the excerpts from *A Journal of Transactions and Events*. Expressing regret over the financial disputes that "clouded" their relationship in later years, Cartwright remembers his excitement over showing John Labrador and his belief that John was "proud" of him during their visit.

While the other excerpts from Cartwright's *Journal* that are scattered throughout the novel are not so closely surrounded by the imagined entries, the afterlife journal, which becomes more and more confessional as the text nears the end, forces a reconsideration of the actions of the historical Cartwright. There seem to be two main, interrelated themes that recur within the excerpts, themes that are then taken up and injected with a degree of postcolonial guilt in the afterlife entries. First, there is Cartwright's fascination with and assumed superiority to the Inuit people he encounters, which, in turn, leads to the exploitation of the Inuit. This exploitation can be linked to the second theme that runs through Cartwright's real journals – that of hunting and trapping animals. The manner in which Steffler frames these excerpts makes plain the connection between Cartwright's position towards and relations with the Inuit of Labrador and his systematic and thoughtless killing of the country's animals. Cartwright's (and Britain's) presumed ownership of the land and its resources seems to have also implied an ownership over its peoples. Just as Cartwright compulsively slaughters many of the animals he encounters, so too does he (and his country) bring death to a whole community of Inuit people.

The ghostly Cartwright recognizes and regrets the damage that he caused, and so the afterlife entries almost answer each occurrence of these themes within the excerpts. For example, on October 12, 1770, the historical Cartwright recorded his disgust at the Inuit's lack of cleanliness. Describing their tent, which was filled with "part of the carcass of a seal recently killed, fat, guts, fish . . . all lying in a glorious confusion," he explains that he had "quit the place" due to its being "nauseous in the highest degree."⁴⁴ Such

observations are made ironic or even counteracted by an afterlife entry that reflects on the smallpox that Caubvik, Cartwright's Inuit lover, brought back from England, a disease that killed her entire community. Smallpox, as the third-person narrative describes it, is horrifying, causing bleeding from the mouth and anus, an unpleasant stench, blisters, and high fever; smallpox is a "plague."⁴⁵ This European "influence"⁴⁶ is far more "nauseous" and certainly more filled with danger than the lifestyle for which Cartwright faults the Inuit. By imagining Caubvik surrounded by the members of her community dying from an English disease, Steffler undercuts the historical Cartwright's characterization of the Inuit as the "most uncleanly" people with his afterlife perception of the terror afflicted upon them because of his own country's uncleanliness.⁴⁷

The dialogue between the excerpts and the afterlife entries does not just record and challenge Cartwright's assumption of superiority over the Inuit; it also brings to light the exploitation of these people and the realization of the detrimental effect of such exploitation. For example, the historical Cartwright's July 9 and 10, 1771 entries are used by Steffler to showcase the exploitation of colonization. Here Cartwright charts his first experience trading with the Inuit. There is again a sort of retrospective irony when, because "these people have hitherto plundered and murdered Europeans whenever they had opportunity," Cartwright worries that is to be his "fate now."⁴⁸ Read with the postcolonial confession of Steffler's Cartwright in mind, it becomes clear just how wrongheaded the historical Cartwright's thinking is; the reverse of his concerns, in fact, ends up being true: it is the Europeans (and Cartwright specifically) who plunder and bring death to the Inuit. Perhaps, more accurately, it is the Europeans, *through* their plundering or exploitation who annihilate so much of Inuit culture. In the original journal entries, Cartwright does "a brisk trade" with the Inuit, and, by the next day, he has "purchased the greatest part of their goods" in exchange for trinkets that are relatively useless to them.⁴⁹ Moreover, Cartwright seems to

be bragging about the small amount of money he has to spend in order to accumulate these “goods.” When a member of the Inuit community offers to sell Cartwright a silver fox’s tail, Cartwright takes the opportunity to highlight within his *Journal* the low amount he is getting away with paying “as he only demanded a small ivory comb which cost me no more than twopence halfpenny, and the skin and tail were worth four guineas, I made no scruple in completing the purchase.”⁵⁰ No scruples, indeed!

According to the afterlife entries, the historical Cartwright does come to realize the potentially negative impact such an unscrupulous invasion and appropriation might have on the Inuit. Instead of worrying about European concerns then, Steffler’s Cartwright suggests that on some level the historical Cartwright eventually began to worry about the concerns of Labrador and its inhabitants:

I looked in [Caubvik’s] mouth and found red spots, and was terrified. It occurred to me then that my influence, my country’s influence on her, and on all of them, was likely to be much greater than I had imagined, and more terrible.⁵¹

In the afterlife the realization of the “terrible” results his presence had on Labrador and its original inhabitants becomes even more palpable to Cartwright. Now outside of time, Cartwright begins to see his actions within history and time as damaging, even sinful. Invoking what he perceives as Adam and Eve’s recent separation from the animals, Cartwright suggests that in the process of human maturation he has “barely learned to toddle and talk. I am still at the stage of trying to break whatever I pick up, or putting it in my mouth.”⁵²

This impulse to destroy and/or consume can be witnessed throughout *A Journal of Transactions and Events* in Cartwright’s compulsive records of animals slaughtered. Steffler deliberately picks excerpts that showcase this slaughtering. For example, on March 19, 1770, Cartwright describes his encounter with an otter. After observing it for an hour, Cartwright “sent a

ball through him, and killed him on the spot.”⁵³ A similar detachment accompanies Cartwright’s relation of each hunting experience. On July 9, 1771, for instance, Cartwright discovers “a whabby swimming in a small pond” and immediately “sent for his rifle, and broke both its thighs at the first shot.”⁵⁴ Similarly, on Friday 30, 1770, Cartwright shoots a young hind, three curlews, three grouse, and an auntsary.⁵⁵ Cartwright’s constant killing of animals is meant to echo his treatment of the Inuit he encounters. While this killing is less intentional and more subtle, Cartwright does observe these people with the same detachment that he observes animals and is quick to trap, manipulate, and exploit them as well.

Steffler’s imagined afterlife entries ensure that we associate Cartwright’s unthinking brutality towards the animals with his treatment of the Inuit. Much of Cartwright’s regret centres on how his arrogance renders him cruel, even monstrous.⁵⁶ That Cartwright has begun to see his voraciousness as a sin is clear when he perceives himself as having “broken God’s restraints.”⁵⁷ This constant slaughter, in other words, is unnatural; Cartwright is a man who is out of balance, all appetite. By his last afterlife entries he has come to recognize himself as wholly consuming, as only taking and never giving back. Cartwright is able not only to confess his core flaw, but also to transmute his confession into a lesson for the reader:

I think now that I should have learned to worship instead of slaughter. The things we most love to kill we ought to worship most passionately.⁵⁸

These final entries suggest the growth in Cartwright of an almost religious sensibility. Through avowing his sins, Cartwright has found his way back to a more righteous path, to a harmony both within himself and with the world. For Cartwright, this harmony and the forgiveness that it produces are clearly linked to a sort of assimilation by Labrador. Throughout the novel, Cartwright has longed to see Labrador, but he can only ever see “as far as the mid-Atlantic. . . . But not yet as far as

Newfoundland and the Labrador coast.”⁵⁹ When the final afterlife entry is followed not only by a vision of Labrador, but by Cartwright’s acceptance of and integration with the land – in the form of the white bear – it becomes clear that, through his afterlife confessional, Cartwright has learned to worship and, by doing so, has been forgiven by the place and the people to whom he once was only capable of causing devastation.

Several critics have taken issue with this recasting of Cartwright as a “guilt-ridden wanderer in limbo,”⁶⁰ an alteration that paves the way for Cartwright’s redemption. As Herb Wyile argues, Steffler’s novel seems to suggest that “although Cartwright went to Labrador and behaved, to a great degree, like the typical imperial invader, at least he felt bad about it afterward.”⁶¹ Further, by taking Cartwright out of history, Steffler creates a space wherein Cartwright can feel “bad” and then do something about it. *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, as Robert Stacey observes, acts as a “second chance” for both Cartwright and the colonial history he represents and “the ghost of George Cartwright would seem . . . to rescue a true history of violence and failed ambition from tragedy . . .”⁶² Like Stacey, I am troubled not merely by the reinvention of Cartwright as a romantic, suffering hero, but by the message this novel seems to be sending about the possibilities of history. Terry Eagleton, whose arguments Stacey cites at length, contends that what gives the past significance is its “finality” or “irrecuperability.”⁶³ History, in other words, serves as an impetus for present-day revolution precisely because it is a site of failed revolution and the tragedy of that failure. “The power of the past,” Stacey explains, “lies in its pastness; the value of life lies in death. Both are reminders of the need for responsible action in the here and now precisely because there are no ‘do-overs,’ no second chances.”⁶⁴ By bringing Cartwright back from the dead and then recuperating him, Steffler’s novel both rids colonial history of its unique import and rids the present of any urgency in regards to socio-cultural changes as the narrative redemption of Cartwright seems to suggest a

similar possibility for Canadians in the future. Further, because this ghost fixes things, not just his own journal but the past itself, the ongoing responsibility of non-Native Canadians for the consequences of the nation's past is removed.

This erasure of responsibility is suggested in the final pages of the novel where Cartwright's reintegration into Labrador and his exaltation at being eaten by the bear point to forgiveness and even indigenization. Two interrelated implications arise from Cartwright's consumption by the bear-spirit. First, there is the intimation that Cartwright is actually erased from the landscape, allowing it to return to its pre-colonial state: "And with each new bite, as more of him vanishes, a feast⁶⁵ of new beauty appears."⁶⁶ As Donna Bennett elucidates, what Steffler is suggesting here is a diffusion of Cartwright's individual identity as he is integrated into a larger whole, Canada. The bear's head, Steffler tells us, is like a paint brush, "painting [Cartwright] out, painting the river, the glittering trees in."⁶⁷ Cartwright rejects the past and "old identities" in favour of a "unity with the landscape."⁶⁸ His reward for confessing his misdeeds is, as Sugars argues, the fulfillment of "his death wish, a desire for primal engulfment by the land."⁶⁹ Just as Cartwright got what Stacey calls a "do-over" in terms of his legacy, so too does Cartwright get a "second chance" at death. This time he gets "an authentic death"⁷⁰ in which he is taken in by the land and the people that he misused in life. In effect, Cartwright's death finally makes him indigenous⁷¹ because the bear represents both Labrador's natural environment and its original, and, by eating Cartwright, it metaphorically assimilates him.

Second, while Cartwright may be erased from the scene, he is also "delivered from a guilt-ridden purgatory in a mystical, penitent apotheosis that mirrors Inuit shamanistic initiation."⁷² The confession we are reading, in other words, not only leads to Cartwright's forgiveness and integration into the world he could never be part of in life, it also leads to a glorification

of Cartwright in which he almost assumes the exalted spiritual role of angagok. This final apotheosis is symptomatic of what can be seen as a sort of duplicity within confession. Bok explains that the person avowing sins “gains a measure of control over how others see” both the sin and the confessant. By continuing the revelation, “the speaker establishes his identity in the eyes of the listeners, coming to matter to them in a new way. He no longer feels blurred and anonymous . . . his life has taken on new meaning. . . . He is set apart, unique through what he has revealed.”⁷³ Cartwright, then, is not merely effaced from history and the colonized land, his invented afterlife entries and experiences also firmly implant him in national memory. Through the manipulations of confession, Cartwright has moved from flawed confessant to spiritual guide.

But who, exactly, is Cartwright a spiritual guide to? Steffler’s third-person narrative raises this question in the first chapter of the novel, at the same time the journal itself is introduced: “Now, when he writes, he does so with much less order and purpose. Who will read it after all? How long will it go on?”⁷⁴ Of course, the fact that we are reading these words at the present moment answers both these questions and renders them rhetorical. As I have argued, Steffler imagines a community⁷⁵ of listeners/confessors for Cartwright. These confessors are those Canadians who, because they “have inherited the historical legacy of the colonial state,”⁷⁶ are related and relate to Cartwright through a sort of national ancestry.⁷⁷ If Cartwright is forgiven and finally finds a home in the land, then the reader who has been privy to the confession can undergo a similar process of assimilation.

The Afterlife of George Cartwright revises Canada’s past for an audience that is invested in, and is even an inheritor of, national history. It is, therefore, not only the suggestion that Cartwright can be rewritten and his misdeeds erased from history with which I take issue; I am also troubled by the corollary that if Cartwright can be erased, so too can our responsibility for the fallout from colonial history. By taking his audience of confessors

through the confessional process with an imagined Cartwright, Steffler seems to be helping Canadians exorcise the ghost of Cartwright and their imperialist inheritance in order to rid Canada's national identity of this sense of being haunted by the past. However, as Eagleton argues in "History, Narrative, and Marxism," any narrative "which represses the ultimate irredeemability [of the past] by dissolving the stubborn reality of the past into discourse or metaphor, which hopes to redeem or resurrect by semiosis, also risks suppressing the tragedy of the past and so striking itself impotent in the present."⁷⁸ In other words, it is this haunting by the ghosts of history that impels us to action and political responsibility in the present.

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- ¹ George Cartwright, *A Journal of Transactions and Events, During a Residence of Nearly Sixteen Years on the Coast of Labrador* (Newark, England: Allin and Ridge, 1792).
- ² John Steffler, "Memorable Images: The Winner of the Smith Books/Books in Canada First Novel Award is John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*" *Books in Canada* 22.2 (April 1993): 8.
- ³ Hutcheon, Linda, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English Canadian Fiction*, Studies in Canadian Literature Series (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988).
- ⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 114.
- ⁵ John Steffler, *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 7.
- ⁶ Steffler, 8.
- ⁷ Steffler, 226.
- ⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil, Emerson Buchanan*, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 8.
- ⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, eds., Vadim Liapunov, trans. (Texas: U of Texas P, 1990), 141.
- ¹⁰ Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 2.
- ¹¹ Brooks, 2.
- ¹² Brooks, 2.
- ¹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 59.
- ¹⁴ Brooks, 2.
- ¹⁵ Steffler, 128.
- ¹⁶ Steffler, 231-235.
- ¹⁷ Herb Wyile, *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2002), 184.
- ¹⁸ Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 73.
- ¹⁹ Dennis A. Foster, *Confession and Complicity in the Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 2.
- ²⁰ Terrence Doody, *Confession and Community in the Novel* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State UP, 1980), 4.
- ²¹ The community is the confessor (the one who listens).
- ²² Bakhtin, 147.
- ²³ Bakhtin, 148.
- ²⁴ Les Smith, *Confession in the Novel: Bakhtin's Author Revisited* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 37.
- ²⁵ Bakhtin, 148.
- ²⁶ Doody, 14.
- ²⁷ Cynthia Sugars, "The Impossible Afterlife of George Cartwright: Settler Melancholy and Postcolonial Desire," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75.2 (Spring 2006): 699.
- ²⁸ Doody, 6.
- ²⁹ Doody, 17.
- ³⁰ Smith, 32.
- ³¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, Willard R. Trask, trans. (New York: Princeton UP, 1954), 75.
- ³² Alan Lawson, "Postcolonial Theory and the 'Settler' Subject," in *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*, Cynthia Sugars, ed. (Peterborough: Broadview, 2004), 155.
- ³³ Steffler, 25.
- ³⁴ Steffler, 25-26.
- ³⁵ Steffler, 26.
- ³⁶ Foster, 7.
- ³⁷ We can see this trend in Augustine's and Rousseau's *Confessions*, and in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; more contemporary and more local, we can also see this in Robertson Davies'

Fifth Business and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, both of which David Williams discusses in his 1991 study of the confessional genre in Canadian literature.

³⁸ Steffler, 27.

³⁹ Steffler, 28.

⁴⁰ Steffler, 28.

⁴¹ Steffler, 111.

⁴² Steffler, 116.

⁴³ Steffler, 116.

⁴⁴ Steffler, 121.

⁴⁵ Steffler, 215.

⁴⁶ Steffler, 212.

⁴⁷ Steffler, 266.

⁴⁸ Steffler, 165.

⁴⁹ Steffler, 166.

⁵⁰ Steffler, 167.

⁵¹ Steffler, 212.

⁵² Steffler, 245.

⁵³ Steffler, 134.

⁵⁴ Steffler, 166.

⁵⁵ Steffler, 113.

⁵⁶ Steffler, 244.

⁵⁷ Steffler, 245.

⁵⁸ Steffler, 259.

⁵⁹ Steffler, 11.

⁶⁰ Wylie, 184.

⁶¹ Wylie, 184.

⁶² Robert Stacey, "Ghost of a Chance: John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright and the Meaning of History*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75.2 (Spring 2006): 718.

⁶³ Terry Eagleton, "History, Narrative, and Marxism," in *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology*, James Phelan, ed. (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1989), 280.

⁶⁴ Stacey, 720.

⁶⁵ Note the use of the word "feast" here; again Cartwright's end is connected with consumption, but this time instead of exploiting and using so much that nothing is left, Cartwright actually creates and leaves behind something consumable.

⁶⁶ Steffler, 267.

⁶⁷ Steffler, 267.

⁶⁸ Donna Bennett, "No Fear of Fiction: Life-Writing in the English-Canadian Novel," in *La Création biographique /Biographical Creation*, Marta Dvorak, ed., Collection de l'AFEC. 5. (Québec: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et Association Française d'Études Canadiennes, 1997), 210.

⁶⁹ Sugars, 695.

⁷⁰ Sugars, 695.

⁷¹ Sugars, 695.

⁷² Wylie, 185.

⁷³ Bok, 84.

⁷⁴ Steffler, 26.

⁷⁵ Here I am intentionally referencing Benedict Anderson.

⁷⁶ Sugars, 699.

⁷⁷ As Sugars puts it, this novel is "about legacy, with Cartwright standing in for contemporary Canadians who have 'inherited' the unhomeliness of the Canadian nation-state" (713).

⁷⁸ Eagleton, 275.