

James Raffan

York Club  
October 10, 2007

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It is indeed very much a pleasure and honour to have the opportunity to say a few words of introduction for this evening's speaker, James Raffan, who will be talking to us about his latest adventure into the publishing world - that of Sir George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. And James, on the behalf of all of us here tonight, we extend to you our congratulations.

It was not that many months ago when I was talking with James about a portrait of Sir George Simpson with the thinking that the portrait might be by the brush of Canadian artist, Paul Kane, that I learned James had been spending the last few years at my favourite archives - the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg. And admittedly I was initially surprised that a writer who has spent the better part of his writing career following the allure of the canoe would be changing his interest somewhat to a biography of a man who has been called "The Little Emperor." But then on reflection, to join the canoe and the Hudson's Bay Company, or the canoe and Sir George Simpson in the same phrase is no oxymoron. Indeed, Sir George Simpson is well known for his swift travels by canoe such that in 1846 he drove Paul Kane to antics that would be worthy of a Ben Stiller film in his attempts to catch up with Simpson's fading canoe.

Although I have not read James' new biography of Sir George Simpson, I suggest that the canoe is likely to be the unifying element, or at least one of the unifying elements between writer, James Raffan, and Governor, Sir George Simpson. James Raffan is the author of numerous articles, and the author and editor of a number of books that all in one form or another have the canoe as their central themes. In fact, every time I go into a bookstore there seems to be yet another book on the watercraft shelves by James Raffan. Not only is he a compelling writer, but he is prolific!

The book that James published in 1999, titled *Bark, Skin and Cedar: Exploring the Canoe in Canadian Experience*, is in my view a watershed publication that quite forcefully brings together the notion that the canoe and all that it represents in terms of materials, construction, and experiences is a "unifying symbol" for Canada. That when we think of Canada and its diversity in the sense of its history and in the sense of the Nation's present and future direction, the idea of the canoe as a "sacred text" - as labelled by Raffan - is insightful. And as we turn the last page we cannot help but agree with the

author when he states that the canoe is about “. . . relationships: between people and place, nature and technology, and among people who would pull together in common purpose.” In 1944, Pierre Trudeau wrote about the canoe trip in the same terms and recently John Jennings has written about the canoe as a unifying Canadian symbol. The realization that an object is material and ideas as it is also associations and knowledge; that it embodies both intrinsic and symbolic qualities is beautifully captured in James' identification of the canoe as a "sacred text."

I first met James Raffan through his writing, in particular through reading *Summer North of Sixty: By Paddle and Portage Across the Barren Lands* published in 1990. Over the years our paths crossed at a number of conferences where watercraft and canoeing experiences were being discussed and related. And to expand on the value of the canoe all one has to do is take a look at the list of speakers and participants at any canoe or watercraft symposium to truly understand what is meant when the canoe is referred to as a “unifying symbol.” Often times the speakers at these conferences are there because they have some form of professional relationship to the canoe: they are curators who are responsible for watercraft collections in museums; they are outdoor educators who use the canoe and the idea of the canoe in their teaching; they are historians who study and concentrate upon the role of the canoe in the building of this Nation; they are environmentalists and conservationists who use the canoe in the process of their work; they are adventure managers and operators who use the canoe to provide remote experiences; they are artists and photographers who use the canoe in order to access their subject matter, and the list goes on. But what is different about these conferences that separates them from all others, is everybody who speaks and everybody in attendance has a personal passion for the canoe. Not only a professional passion, but also a personal passion. And I think that it can be accurately suggested that in each of their lives, the canoe came first and the profession fell into place second. In reading James' books you will learn that the canoe came early into James Raffan's life and it has continued to be a significant force both in his personal and his professional spheres. An object that can join professional and personal lives in such a diverse group as educators, historians, doctors, anthropologists, artists, writers, philosophers, filmmakers, politicians, and lawyers cannot be anything else but a “unifying symbol.”

At one of these conferences, James Raffan presented a lecture based upon his research into the life and passion of Bill Mason who for many of us is the one man who represents the model of the canoe and the canoeist. Mason is the canoeist who was able to head off into the waters of Lake Superior alone for months on end. This image, which is emphasized in Mason's film “Water Walker,” represents in our imaginations the marriage of man and boat, the partnering of waterfall, landscape, sun, and scent with a man who got there in a red Chestnut canoe. What was most instructive about Raffan's lecture, however, was in order to understand this man, Raffan found it necessary to go where Mason went and he did it in Mason's canoe. Not satisfied with relying

upon interviews, archives, and Mason's own writing, Raffan felt that to relate the essence of a man one had to literally walk in his shoes. The result, is the book "Fire in the Bones: Bill Mason and the Canadian Canoeing Tradition" that deserves its place on your own library shelves directly next to Mason's own.

James' writings bring together history, technology, relationships, personal stories, myth, and philosophy that explain how the canoe is woven into the fabric of the Canadian story and into the weave of Canadian Experience. In a book titled *Tumblehome: Meditations and Lore from a Canoeist's Life* James writes about waking one morning to a flotilla of loons some 200 hundred strong. I was gobsmacked when I read this because in 1982 while working in northwestern Ontario recording pictographs, one evening, just before the lash of a thunderstorm, I looked out of the door of my tent to the scene of well over 100 loons floating quietly just a short distance off of shore. I have never seen such a sight again and it was not until reading James' passage in *Tumblehome* some nineteen years later that I came across another soul who had the pleasure of a similar experience. This is an illustration of how James has a way of connecting the reader to the story.

After reading his book *Bark Skin and Cedar* and enjoying all of the images it has to offer, the most significant image for me was the image of James Raffan wrapped in plaster with a full leg cast and a fractured left arm - a series of events that started with a dance. My interest in this image is not because I have anything against James Raffan, but it is because it brought him to write a paragraph about the canoe and how the canoe defines him as a person. And importantly, that definition is often not realized or understood until the defining element is taken away. Raffan writes:

Thinking back on the many days in my workaday life, prior to these accidents, I saw how deeply satisfying it had been to know that I *could* canoe, if the spirit moved, even if I chose *not* to canoe. But, for a while, that possibility was gone. Canoeing was out. And I felt claustrophobia that was even more constricting than the plaster casts.

This image took me back to one particularly melancholy Labour Day. As I drove south with thoughts of next day dropping two small daughters back off at school and myself back on the subway I clearly remember the sense of calm I felt in the face of the oncoming storm when I looked at the nose of my own Chestnut Canoe stretching over the windshield and remembered that we *could* go canoeing next weekend. We didn't go canoeing, of course, but as Raffan suggests the important point is knowing that the possibility was there even if the demands of that September did not allow it. Listen also to a heart felt song by James Gordon titled *That Old Cedar Strip* in the CD *Canoesongs* Volume 1 that was the concept of James Raffan and you will have an illustration of the canoe woven into who we are, and thus, for many of us, how the canoe is fundamental to our personal and Canadian identities.

The canoe is a unifying symbol as it also represents an ethic. And I would suggest that all of James Raffan's writing is about this ethic. The canoe and all of its many histories, is about the development of an attitude that can only be forged by a connection to the wilderness. In the nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau wrote the following:

We need the tonic of wilderness, - to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground.... We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigour, vast and Titanic features, the sea coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets.

What Thoreau is saying is we need a connection to wilderness as a fundamental foundation for our being. But it is more than that - it stems from a need to place ourselves within the real world. To be where we are humbled almost to insignificance. To be where we can actually see and feel ourselves as nothing more than just another living form. And that is what I think Thoreau is saying when he goes on to state:

We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.

And this is what is meant by the forging of another ethic. It is an ethic that becomes part of our everyday lives beyond the limits of the wilderness experience. And the canoe, as implied in much of James Raffan's writings, has become the symbol of this attitude.

There are two contemporary writers that I read with a fair degree of regularity and I will read their words from time-to-time whether it be alone in some restaurant, on the road, on a rock lined shore in the company of the setting sun, or in the morning as the coffee is perking. One writer is American and the other is Canadian. The American is Barry Lopez and the Canadian is James Raffan. In a review of one of James' books, Mark Hume wrote in the National Post "... it's the one [book] you would want for company, if you had to wait out the weather on a remote lake." And this I think is a fitting segue into our own evening here tonight at the York Club in that not only do we enjoy the launch of a new James Raffan book, but we are fortunate to be in the company of the author himself.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in giving a warm reception to James Raffan.