

Ernest Thompson Seton and the Canadian Wilderness Imaginary: *The Realistic Illusion of Nature*

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Abstract:

I am interested in bringing complexity to the discourse around intrinsic human-ness as an ideological construct. In my research into Ernest Thompson Seton, *Indian-ism*¹ and the *natural* world, I examine the concept of the human through the political deployment of the natural world. This paper is a preliminary exploration of Seton's animal stories, illustrations and paintings as socially constructed concepts of *nature*, as appropriated space produced and reproduced by dominant power structures. My interest is specifically how these so-termed *natural* spaces are constructed, activated and manipulated – as well as resisted.

I. The Theoretical Topography

According to Henry Lefebvre, a Marxist theorist of space and place, space is “logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including the products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias” (Lefebvre 1991:11). Spatial practice embraces the production and reproduction of social formations. Each member of a given society is always-already constructed by that produced and reproduced space (powerful in its singularity); space governed by sedimented layers of mutable power relationships. The question is one of who benefits from these relationships and how. To glimpse these dynamics, I am borrowing Lefebvre's use of the idea of *nature* as politicized space which is

made up of fragments of nature located at sites which were chosen for their intrinsic qualities (cave, mountaintop, spring, river), but whose very consecration ended up stripping them of their natural characteristics and uniqueness. Thus natural space was soon populated by political forces. (Lefebvre 1991:48)

This is *nature* as the social construction of space and place that early twentieth century North America was, and continues to be, heavily invested in shaping.

Between the eighteen-eighties until shortly before his death in nineteen hundred and forty-six, Ernest Thompson Seton was involved in the spatial practice of observing and codifying *nature* and the non-human world. His work situates a nexus in the political harnessing of the *natural* world that remains evident. Those traces continue to shape the stories we tell ourselves about human being-in-the-world today.

¹ I use the term *Indianism* to describe the activities of those who appropriate North American Plains Aboriginal culture and spirituality in the form of clubs. The italicization of terms throughout this article indicates terms I am pointing to as demanding a degree of skepticism in their use.

II. Ernest Thompson Seton and the Wilderness Imaginary

Seton produced over 40 books and thousands of illustrations and nature sketches as well as paintings. He was a driven individual, a ceaseless researcher, scientist, lecturer, traveler, and artist who was critiqued as a misguided or outdated romanticist or, alternately, as an eco-radical, a literary innovator, a social activist and man ahead of his time. During his lifetime, he was criticized as well as celebrated by scientific and political notables such as John Burroughs, the American naturalist and Theodore Roosevelt, American President and vanguard of the Progressive Movement (1900-1917). In terms of conservation, the movement *reformed* large tracks of wilderness into a parks system whose purpose was, as Roosevelt's advisor and founder of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, put it "to make the forest produce the largest amount of whatever crop or service will be most useful, and keep on producing it for generation after generation of men and trees" (Pinchot 1947:32). This concept of conservation was antithetical to Seton's ideas about forests and the creatures that inhabited them, as well as man's interaction with the environment.

As a classically trained artist, Seton mastered animal anatomy and this gave his paintings and illustrations their *realistic* power. Best known in North America for his animal stories, the modernist agenda eventually undermined the values of his Woodcraft League boy's club in the United States and Canada. Ironically, Lord Baden-Powell co-opted Seton's vision of an organization that brought boys closer to *nature* through an idealized version of Plains *Indians* culture and woodcraft. With Roosevelt's backing,² Baden-Powell racialized and militarized Seton's Woodcraft League, gave Seton the title of a co-founder and then re-named the organization the Boy Scouts of America. Seton eventually resigned his title and severed his relationship with the hierarchical club. This was one of a number of professional contestations that Seton endured during his professional career and, as a peaceable man, he did little to contest.

In Central Europe, the Woodcraft movement took on new significance over successive eras and regimes. The Woodcraft Leagues continue to bring wilderness survival skills and North American Plains Indian culture to Central Europeans (in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland) from the turn of the century to present in the form of *Indianer* clubs, tramping, retreats and summer camps. The irony is that in North America and Britain, Baden-Powell's militarized and racialized version remains current, whereas in Central Europe, Seton's version remains a space of agency and resistance to industrialization and totalitarianism.

In North America, Seton is recognised as a naturalist, but more importantly as the founder of a uniquely Canadian literary genre. He used his highly developed powers of observation as a naturalist and artist to infuse his animal stories with a *realistic* edge, and although not literary successes, they made him a wealthy man with their huge popular appeal. For the purpose of this investigation, I situate Seton as a master of the "realistic illusion" (Lefebvre 1991:29-30) of *nature*, one of a few artist-scientists (a remarkable inter-disciplinarity for the times) to seduce us into believing that the *natural* world is still within our reach.

III. Nature-faking and Nation-making

In nineteen hundred and three, with the publication of the collected stories entitled *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1926), Seton was at the height of his career. John Burroughs, the legendary American natural history philosopher, reviewed Seton's collection of stories in an article entitled *Real and Sham Natural History*. In his article, Burroughs questioned Seton's scientific veracity and categorized him as a "nature faker" stating that

The line between fact and fiction is repeatedly crossed and... a deliberate attempt is made to induce the reader to cross too... Mr. Thompson Seton says in capital letters that his stories are true and it is this emphatic assertion that makes the judicious grieve (Burroughs 1903:299).

² Baden-Powell and Roosevelt both engaged in the masculinization of boys and men through training, training not invested in survival in nature, but rather survival in warfare using nature as a model. Also, in 1911 at the first official annual meeting held at the White House, Roosevelt received the honorary title of Chief Scout Citizen and honorary vice-president. Gifford Pinchot was selected as Chief Woodsman.

The criticism was of Seton's depiction of animals as intelligent and moral, specifically the way in which his animal stories gave non-humans a voice (without putting words into their mouths) by narrating their discursive activities based on his naturalist research. Seton was devastated, but as a man who avoided conflict, he refused to refute the article publicly. His colleagues arranged for Burroughs and Seton to sit next to one another at an official dinner, which cause for them to engage in conversation. Seton then invited Burroughs to view his library and, as a result, Burroughs gained new respect for Seton as a scientist. He recanted by writing an article praising Seton, but the damage was done. Theodore Roosevelt, upon reading Seton's stories, reignited the charges against Seton and put into play a site of contestation that lasted throughout Seton's career. Roosevelt's political agenda was to construct nature in terms similar to those of the American *Indian* --a dying primeval entity in need of preservation through the establishment of National Parks / Reserves where the land and its inhabitants could be *managed* (exploited) -- and he was building a national identity on capitalist ideals that masked environmental costs. In his ambiguity as scientist-artist, Seton did not easily fit Roosevelt's criteria as a woodsman. Seton championed the Aboriginal *Indian* population as well as giving the animal world aspects usually attributed to human agency. This made Seton a useful target given his naivety.

A particularly notorious painting first brought Seton to Roosevelt's attention.³ It evoked a negative utopia – one that challenged the natural laws that keep man distinct from animals. The painting, *Triumph of the Wolves* (1892), was based on the tale in French newspapers of a man in the Pyrenees who was eaten to death by wolves, which appeared to reverse the natural order of things – it was the trappers who usually caught the wolf, using the body and fur for profit. Written in the style of a Victorian melodrama with forest rangers arriving at a *murder* scene to survey the human wreckage, the media charged the incident with emotional terror of the wild and reinforced the folkloric image of the ravenous wolf. Seton became intrigued with painting the subject matter, which opened a space between what was a socially acceptable *nature* and those elements that appeared out of man's control. For Seton, *wilderness* defined man, not the other way around – and as a scientist, he felt compelled to communicate this version, which was his *truth*. In preparation for the painting's success in the student exhibition at the Paris Salon, while anticipating its controversial stance because of its *realistic* portrayal of unfettered *nature* – Seton tempered the piece. He changed the painting's title to *Awaiting in Vain*, which shifted the focus of the image from the ravenous wolves to the family and house in the background. Despite his self-censorship, the competition's jurors (who consisted primarily of Seton's instructors) deemed it offensive and rejected it. This condemnation was deeply shocking to Seton, who believed that the unusual subject matter coupled with his remarkably realistic style of painting merited its inclusion in the show. Disheartened, he returned to Manitoba in time for the Ontario School of Arts annual Salon where the painting received mixed reviews.⁴ At this point, Seton began strategizing for the painting's inclusion in the Canadian exhibit at the World's Columbian Exhibit, the first world fair to be held in Chicago, where the painting -- now satirically dubbed *Bones of Contention* by the media - gained the attention of the American elite, including Roosevelt (Keller 1984:114-129).

While Seton was greatly influenced by the work of Audubon who wished to rescue animals from the theory that they were automatons, Seton overstated their case in his animal stories by attributing to them a Victorian moral social formation. In turn, this situated his naturalist philosophy dangerously close to the anthropomorphism associated with American psychology (Wadland 1978:122-144). But Seton based his fictions on rigorous biological and behaviorist observations – in a flickering space of resistance between the politics of national and human identity making, between the vestiges of romanticism, the modernist reliance on empiricism, the Progressive era's bullish enthusiasm for man's capabilities, and the emerging science of ethnology. These points of nexus continue to reconfigure the animal today as an expression of what it means to be human in a socially constructed *natural* world. As Seton claims: "animals are creatures with wants and feelings differing in degree only from our own, they surely have rights" (Seton 1916:15), and while we consider the

³ Roosevelt saw the painting at the Chicago Exhibition of 1893 after it had already created considerable controversy in Paris and Canada.

⁴ There, the painting and Seton came to the attention of the First Nation's poetess, Pauline Johnston, who arranged a meeting with Seton after viewing it. She confirmed for Seton his hidden identity as a lost spirit *Indian* from the Wolf Clan, after which he adopted the name Black Wolf.

authenticity of the wants and feelings of animals, we are complicit in their construction as non-human ideals. How do we bring social justice to non-humans if their terms are lost to us; what is the *nature* of human social justice?

The wolf motif of Seton the artist re-appears in Seton the author. Prior to the 1903 *Nature Faker's* scandal in the years of his success as a naturalist and author, Seton published a tremendous number of animal stories in periodicals and books, his most famous being *Lobo, King of the Currumpaw* (1926). This story is a turning point, both for Seton the individual and for the genre of the animal story. Apparently, Seton was invited to the millionaire Fitz-Randolph's ranch in Clayton, New Mexico, to help cull the area of wolves. The cull lasted from four months between October and February, eighteen hundred and eighty four and five. In the process of tracking and devising traps for the wolves, Seton became engaged in a battle of wits with the pack leader, a wolf whose ability to circumvent the traps earned Seton's admiration. Eventually, as the story corroborates, the wolf's attachment to his mate proves his undoing as the animal comes looking for his mate who has been killed and whose scent Seton rubbed over the trap. The wolf, named Lobo in the fictional account, outwits man's technology (poison, traps, dogs, etc.) but is defeated out of a higher morality – that of his fidelity to his mate. Through the story of Lobo, Seton's attempt to reconfigure the wolf as capable of higher intelligence and morality based on his scientific observation problematized modern man's image of himself. Seton also collapsed the distance between absolute space and socially produced space juxtaposing the value assigned to a wolf's life by the narrator as translator of the wolf's *inner* life and the economic determinates assigned to the land in service to the cattle industry. From Seton's perspective, these politics of space and place determine whether *natural* law versus man's law will prevail or be denied. Also constructed, the positioning of these *laws* deny the inter-subjectivity of animals and humans, placing both within power sets. They deny the complexity and diversity while creating sites of contestation. As many Post-structuralists point out (Butler 1997; De Certeau 1984; Derrida 1973; Foucault 1977), sites of contestation reveal the tracings of their sedimented power relations and give them a degree of transparency, but as Lefebvre points out, there are no absolutes in these spaces either (Lefebvre 1991:251-252). Seton's legacy provides a glimpse of the shifts in representational space constructed for ideological purposes as absolute space and place, whereas what transpires is space activated in movement from one domain (as in place-power set) to another that opens up a flicker of resistance to its illusion of fixity as authenticity.

IV. Capturing a Canadian National Identity

Another painting, not at all publicly contested, serves as an interesting glimpse at the tactics Seton employed to reconcile competing social constraints. Painted early in Seton's career, *Goat Defending Her Kids From the Fox* is an overt example: to begin with, the background is not the wilderness it appears to be, but rather a landscape painted in the style of the American Hudson River School, which influenced Seton's painting from eighteen hundred and seventy-eight to ninety-six. It reflects a turning point in the tendency of Canadian painters to look to the United States for *pure* landscapes, fearing that Canada was too wild and uncivilized, not as worthy a subject as American and English landscape painting traditions that served as the landscape model. The nationalist feeling stimulated by Confederation as well as the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in eighteen eighty-five eclipsed this national and international tendency to see Canada as a colonial backwater and many Canadian (Ontario) artists headed across the country in search of pastoral settings that could be rendered palatable. However, as Wadland explains, Seton

was not a nationalist. Neither the wilderness nor its inhabitants required a specific geographic or national locus to work their inspiration on him...while Seton's paintings were always appropriately archaic in style, they were to become increasingly primitivist in content. There was no need consciously to rebel (Wadland 1978:114).

So, in an act of resistance to the dominant discourses around civilized and uncivilized *nature*, Seton simply added a study of a fox into the landscape to threaten the goat and her kids and re-infuse the animal world with its primitivist truth. In this way, Seton as the product of one ideology of *nature*

reproduced another, enacting a *realistic illusion* by feeding one construction into another seamlessly in the name of Canadian art and wilderness.

Although Seton may not have been a nationalist, he again played a part in another nation making project with his animal stories. In 1976, the editor of the American magazine *Field and Stream*, John G. Samson, wrote

Seton's bears chose to die a noble death in a gas filled valley rather than to live to an old age that made them susceptible to defeat in battle. His heroic mountain rams hurled themselves over cliffs before letting the red-eyed hunter undercut them down in ignominy. His mother grouse and mother rabbits threw themselves into frozen streams before slavering hounds to save their trembling young (Samson 1976:iii).

In this description of Seton's animal story plotlines, the human element is notably minimized and, according to Canadian literary critiques of the nineteen seventies, this is indicative of the degree to which the United States and Canadian cultures differ in their respective constructions of their lands. Margaret Atwood, Canada's literary icon, identifies the idea of *survival* as a single unifying and informing motif which recurs in all Canadian writing (Atwood 1976:71-86). She argues that in Canadian literature, the majority of protagonists waste an inordinate part of their lives failing before apparently insurmountable obstacles – a fact which typifies Canada's victimization by American cultural imperialism. In response, it became imperative that Canada create a cultural identity and Atwood took on the role of vanguard. In the classic text *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood points to Seton as the primary originator of the *realistic* animal story, *realistic* because, as Seton observed in the preface to his collection, "The life of a wild animal always has a tragic end" (Seton 1926:11). In linking this Canadian penchant for victimization to the work of the Canadian authors who follow Seton⁵, the construction of the *realistic* animal becomes, by extension, the *realistic* brutal and empty wilderness that continues to be stereotypically Canadian. Distanced as brutal and empty, this colonialization of the image of *nature* in service to national identity-making projects extends also to representations of humans, most obviously Canada's Aboriginal peoples both in Canada and internationally, but it also serves to distance humans from non-humans. While these writers are writing in protest of the idealization of *nature*, they are also caught by the idea's reiteration and reconfiguration into other socially constructed concepts. Canada, as a nation and a society, derives significant benefit from the reproduction and commodification of its *great wilderness* as an unintelligible yet endlessly renewable resource.

V. Tracking the *Realistic Illusion*

Despite literary critiques to the contrary, in his published dissertation, John Wadland points out that Seton's animal stories exceed their anthropomorphism in noteworthy ways:

Seton belonged to a fringe group of radicals who aspired to demonstrate, through an emphasis on the theories of learned and innate behavior, not only that animals possessed greater intelligence than was believed, but also that man's continued survival required reasoned acceptance of the fact. He was in the vanguard...of what has been called an "ecological conscience" (Wadland 1978:vii).

Thus, Seton developed his Woodcraft League in the belief that humankind's ecological conscience must be understood as a defining trait as well as a strategy for survival, and that the North American Plains *Indian* was the apex of this ability to live equitably on the land and with the animals. In his work as a naturalist observing animal behaviour as well as in his animal stories, it is clear that Seton

⁵The Canadian animal story as a genre was taken up by works such as Charles G. D. Roberts' *The Last Barrier*, Grey Owl's, Fred Bodsworth's *The Last of the Curlews*, Farley Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf*, Margaret Atwood's, and more recently Jan Martel's *The Life of Pi*, as well as poetry such as in Michael Ondaatje's animal poems anthology entitled *Broken Ark*, Alden Nowlan's *The Bull Moose*, Irving Layton's *The Bull Calf and Cain*, Patrick Lane's *Mountain Oysters*, which is by no means a definitive list.

was a precursor to the not yet established field of ethnology. What remains disheartening is the ineffectual iterations of ecological imperatives. Wadland claims that,

As an anti-Spencer-ian Social Darwinist, Seton despised competition and stressed mutual aid, believing that the example of the animal kingdom, if observed by mankind, would yield a decentralized, diverse and humble international society free of war (Wadland 1978:viii).

The allure of this notion is worthy of reconsideration because of its power and urgency, however, its utopian attachments merit deconstructing. Seton serves as an agent of potential change as well as a vehicle of ideological reiteration. As an expression of power negotiations, how does the allure of *wilderness* and indigenaety continue to be harnessed ideologically in order to elude us -- what is the *realistic illusion* presented to us as *nature*, by who and how?

Lefebvre coins the term “realistic illusion” in his book, “*The Production of Space*” (1991) as operating within the old notion of space as an abstraction that is absolute and therefore inviolable. Our perceptions of nature, indigenous peoples, and our constructs of the non-human world also fall into the empty landscape of this abstraction (the imperialist project). In tracing its movement, Lefebvre defines *nature*'s allure as residing in

[...] the illusion of natural simplicity – the product of a naïve attitude long ago rejected by philosophers and theorists of language, on various grounds and under various names, but chiefly because of its appeal to naturalness, to substantiality. According to the philosophers of the good old idealist school, the credulity peculiar to common sense leads to the mistaken belief that ‘things’ have more of an existence than the ‘subject’, his thought and his desires. To reject this illusion thus implies an adherence to ‘pure’ thought, to Mind or Desire. Which amounts to abandoning the realistic illusion only to fall back into the embrace of the illusion of transparency (Lefebvre 1991:29).

It strikes me that Seton and his work are caught in a version of this dichotomy between where the scientist ended and the artist (writer and painter) began. Although I cannot do justice to the complexity of Lefebvre's arguments in the scope of this article, the conflict Seton encountered in reaction to his paintings, animal stories and work as a naturalist can be understood as an expression of this ideological tension, which serves its iterability. As a scientist, he observed and decoded the natural world in positivist terms as an absolute material *reality* that implied substantiality as well as transparency. In writing and painting about nature in a way that implied realism based on scientific observation, he became a proponent of the “realistic illusion”, caught in a flicker between man in his garden and man in the wilderness. In this liminal space, his artwork and stories are an act of agency against the type of capitalist conservationism Roosevelt was endorsing – but in creating a site of contestation through his mastery of the “realistic illusion”, Seton also unwittingly furthered the aims of those invested in the illusion of *nature*'s transparency in order to continue denuding the land of natural resources. What needs addressing is that, as Lefebvre explains,

The apparent translucency taken on by...political forces in decline (the state, nationalism [even the environmental movement]) is that they can enlist images having their source in the earth or in nature...The fact is that natural space will soon be lost to view...Nature is also becoming lost to thought. Nature is now merely the raw material out of which the productive forces of a variety of social systems have forged their particular spaces. (Lefebvre 1991:28-31)

The story is an old one, for sure. So old that the allure of Seton's configuration of *nature* as an absolute that can serve as the basis for a social revolution continues in its flicker to reinforce the idea that *nature*, regardless of its state, is indeed *lost to thought*.

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Appendices - Illustrations:



Wolf Study (1896)



Goat Defending Her Kids from the Fox (Oil, 1881)