INTRODUCTION

The journey of Nello Vernon-Wood (1882–1978) was the opposite of that stock figure in North America: the rogue from a modest background who invents exalted social origins after arriving in the New World, where no-one can call his bluff. Nello was a gentleman born and bred, according to contemporary definitions. And yet his story and the stories he wrote about the New World and his place in it are much more than another version of Tarzan-of-the-Apes. His reinvention of himself as 'Tex Wood' (or Woods), an authentic western Canadian man both in his daily life (at least to some extent) and in his homespun tales of a vanishing era, has much to tell us today about how the West was not just won, but also created as a fantasy for many people who wanted (and want) to believe that the modern (industrialized) world itself can be left behind. In this, he was like two other popular writers of his time, Grey Owl and Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance. The Englishman Archie Belaney became a best-selling Canadian author when he took the name Grey Owl and lived as an aboriginal. Sylvester Clark Long had been treated as an African-American in his birthplace, the American South, because he was of mixed race. As the Blackfoot Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, he became a popular author of "Indian" stories for American and Canadian newspapers and magazines.[1] Also like his contemporaries Grey Owl and Long Lance, in his writing, and in the persona he invented for it, Tex Wood created an image of the frontier that was a rough-and-ready and above-all, an authentically wild

1. See Jane Billinghurst, *Grey Owl: The Many Faces of Archie Belaney* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 1999) and Donald B. Smith, *Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance: The Glorious Imposter* (Red Deer, AB: Red Deer Press, 1999).

place because he could pass as a member of that world. This world, often called "the Old West," was a place of infinite possibilities.

As Patricia Limerick points out, "[in] the search to distinguish 'the Real West' from 'the Fake West'...the Real West and the Fake West end up tied together, virtually Siamese twins sharing the same circulatory system."Along with many other writers of his time, Tex helped to knit together the West of his guiding experiences with the West as a literary object. It is not possible to tell, therefore, the difference between the "authentic" West (and its authentic author, Tex) and the "fake" West. In Tex's writings, both are real.[2] As we will show, Tex even "winked" at his readers in some of his stories to show that he was not as authentically backwoods as some might think. But he, and the West he helped popularize, seemed real enough—or entertaining enough—to ensure a steady appetite for his stories in sporting journals like *The Sportsman* and *The Forum,* slick magazines produced for a middle-class readership on the eastern seaboard of the United States.

During the early part of the twentieth century, when Tex was writing stories and working as a guide, people flocked to the Canadian and American frontiers to have an experience of a world they thought was lost: a place of adventure where civilization did not seem to have taken hold. And if they could not go there, they read stories about that romantic place by people who really lived there and who could tell them what it was really like. Tex was and presented himself as the tough old frontiersman that his readers wanted or needed to imagine. In other words, Tex could "pass" as a man of the wilds. Elaine K. Ginsberg points out "the positive potential of passing [is] a way of challenging ... categories and boundaries. In its politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to create multiple identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress."[3] Tex Wood deliberately created a persona and a life that freed him from the decidedly unadventurous constraints of his upper-class family life in England—and which he was later able to use as a writer because it fit and/or fed the fantasies of his readers. But, as we shall

2. Patricia Limerick, "The Real West." In *The Real West,* commentary by Patricia Nelson Limerick, introduction by Andrew E. Masich (Denver: Civic Center Cultural Complex, 1996) 13–22.

3. Elaine K. Ginsberg, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996) 16.

see, a close examination Tex's use of language in many of his stories shows traces of his education and upbringing from that previous life, mixed in with "Old West" turns of phrase, just as habits from his life in England remained part of his daily life as a man of the mountains.

Tex was born to a family that was at the very least genteel, in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1882. One family snapshot[4] shows him outside the gates of a country house, with his mother Ruth Hunter and aunt; he told family members that it was his family home, but he almost never spoke of his family. His father, an army physician, is said to have been killed in Egypt within a decade of his birth. Nello was named after his maiden aunt Nell, who helped to raise him. In his early twenties, Nello "lit out for the territories," landing in Ontario in 1903, where he worked as a hand on an isolated farm somewhere between Kingston and Trenton.[5] He left that hard life for the Canadian West, going first to Medicine Hat, where he arrived by 1904.

Nello was charged with manslaughter at Medicine Hat in late 1904 or 1905. He had pursued and fired on a Métis man ('halfbreed', as he would have been called then) who had stolen a horse belonging to Tex. After a lengthy struggle for his life, the man survived and the charge was dropped.[6] The judge, it seems, had known Vernon-Wood senior, who seems to have served in Canada at some point, perhaps with Wolseley's Red River Expedition in 1870, or in 1882, or perhaps even on Middleton's Expedition (1885) against the Riel uprising.[7] Not surprisingly, given the bonds of class, ethnicity, and privilege, Nello was paroled under the watchful eye of his mother, whom the judge summoned from England to stand surety for her unruly son. She arrived and had a large, comfortable house built for them. A year or so later, the terms of the parole satisfied, she returned to England. When she became ill, Nello went home to England to see his mother (who was to die of stomach cancer in 1906 or 1907). He

4. In the possession of Nello's grand-daughter Sonja Vernon-Wood, daughter of Christina Vernon-Wood, Lee Creek, BC.

5. See "Tex Vernon-Wood. Recollections by his Grandson, John R. Gow" in Appendix A.

6. According to Christina Vernon-Wood, in a private communication with Andrew Gow in 2003. Her source was her husband Bill, Nello's son.

7. The Wolseley connection is plausible because Vernon-Wood senior is said to have died in Egypt soon after Nello's birth: Major-General Sir Garnet Wolseley also led an expedition to Egypt in 1882 to put down the Urabi Revolt, and then commanded the Nile Expedition to relieve General Gordon at Khartoum in 1884.

left the Medicine Hat house in the care of a friend, returning a few months later to find the house deserted and emptied of its lavish furnishings. He sold the house and moved on to the Rocky Mountains, first to handle the horses used in the construction of the tramway up to Lake Louise.

In 1906 or 1907, Tex went to Banff, ostensibly to take the waters at the Springs to help heal a broken leg that had resulted from an accident when "a horse fell on him."[8] It was there that he met Jim Brewster, who offered him a job in the outfitting business.[9] Sometime in this period he earned the name Tex for a set of snazzy Texas riding chaps he affected, perhaps for practicality, perhaps to hide his egregious Englishness—a quality then not much in demand in the Canadian West.[10] He later said that he preferred to be called Tex, finding Nello "Shakespearean" and too high-flown for his taste.[11] He claims that he had all kinds of fights and grief as a child on account of the name: "My mother had been reading Dante or some bloody thing," he said in a good-natured way in an interview in 1969.[12] It would seem that "Shakespearean" in this context meant both "English" and "elite." Sarah Carter has pointed out that abiding colonial insecurities about Englishness were related to both ethnicity and class, citing J.S. Woodsworth's judgement that "the Scotch, Irish and Welsh have

8. From taped interviews made by Maryalice H. Stewart, 17 January and 2 February, 1969, at the WMCR: Reel S1/17 A, 1, accession number 1713.

9. *Banff Crag and Canyon,* Obituary for N. Vernon-Wood, May 17, 1978; also taped interview, WMCR S1/17 A, 2.

10. See, for example, Mark Zuehlke, *Scoundrels, Dreamers & Second Sons: British Remittance Men in the Canadian West* (Vancouver/Toronto: Whitecap Books, 1994), e.g., p. 60: "The popular Canadian folklore that grew up around the presence of British remittance men in the Canadian west represented them as fools, drunkards, louts, scoundrels, and snobs who refused to fit into the evolving Canadian society. The British gentleman was derided in bars, satirized on stage, lampooned in books, savaged in the music halls, and generally treated with scorn." For a very thorough treatment of this topic in the Canadian West, see Patrick A. Dunae, *Gentleman Immigrants: From the British Public Schools to the Canadian Frontier* (Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 1981), esp. chapters VI, Nature's Gentlemen and VII, Remittance Men. In the interview with Maryalice Stewart, Tex explains that he had made a good deal of money working on a pack train at an Idaho gold mine and spent some of his earnings on a fancy set of batwing (Texas-style) chaps on his way back to Lake Louise. As he was reticent about his unusual first name, he did not use it, and Jim Macleod decided to call him Tex because of the chaps. WMCR S1/17 A, 17.

11. Cf. note 3, John Gow's recollections; confirmed by Christina Vernon-Wood, in a private communication with Andrew Gow in 2003.

12. Stewart makes it clear that she had never heard the name Nello before, only the "N." in "N. Vernon-Wood." WMCR S1/17 A, 12.

A hunting party, 1924

WMCR: V255 / 6068

Banff in winter, 1928

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done well. The greater number of failures has been among the English… On many western farms, certain Englishmen have proved so useless that when help is needed, 'no Englishmen need apply'." Both the "failures of English cities" (working-class immigrants) and upper-class "remittance men" were equally unwelcome and scorned.[13]

Nello's childhood experience with animals (he had kept ferrets for hunting, and later a large hunting dachshund called Snapper) and especially with horses, seems to have stood him in good stead in Banff, where he worked as a horse wrangler, hunting guide, outfitter, and later park warden. While he was working for the Brewsters as a guide, a client shot an animal outside the law, and Tex "took a fall for the Brewster outfit in 1912" (with a conviction for poaching) but was "reputable enough by 1919 [sic] to pin on a badge" as a Park Warden.[14] He was soon assigned to Massive, a halt on the C.P.R. east of Banff, whence he visited town weekly in winter with a dogsled. His baby daughter Dorothy's first words, she claimed, were "Mush! mush!"

According to Cyndi Smith, Tex was with the Park Service at an earlier date than 1919—the date Sid Marty gives: "The Dominion Park Service assigned one of their wardens, Tex Vernon-Wood, usually called Tex Wood, to assist the Walcotts in 1917."[15] The earlier date makes sense because in 1969, he said he set up an outfit of his own in 1919.[16] He had worked for Charles Walcott since at least 1911, as Byron Harmon's photograph of the guides on the Smithsonian Expedition of that year attests.[17] The Smithsonian Expedition was one of the most famous scientific expeditions into the mountains at the time, and it provided material for Tex's later stories. Its members included Mary M. Vaux, a Quaker mountaineer, geologist and botanist from Philadelphia, and her husband Charles D. Walcott, a

13. Sarah Carter, "Britishness, 'Foreignness', Women and Land in Western Canada 1890s–1920s" in *Humanities Research* XIII, 1 (2006), 43–60; here 48–49; cited from J.S. Woodsworth, *Strangers Within Our Gates* (Toronto: F.C. Stephenson, 1909), 51 and 52.

14. Sid Marty, *A Grand and Fabulous Notion: The First Century of Canada's Parks* (Toronto: NC Press, 1984).

15. Cyndi Smith, *Off the Beaten Track: Women Adventurers and Mountaineers in Western Canada* (Jasper, AB: Coyote Books, 1989). See also Colleen Skidmore, ed., *This Wild Spirit: Women in the Rocky Mountains of Canada* (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 2006), especially on Mary Vaux.

16. Taped interview, S1/17 B, 31.

17. See Frontispiece.

geologist and palaeontologist who worked for the Smithsonian Institution. Vaux had met Walcott when he was working on his renowned discovery, the Burgess Shale. Tex would later turn an annoying encounter with a game warden while hunting (legally) in the Park for the Smithsonian's collection with Vaux and Walcott into a story, "Tex Reads his Permit."

Another echo of his work with this illustrious pair surfaces in "This Guiding Game," in which one of Tex's wranglers surprised a professor of geology with an intimate knowledge of the geology of the Rocky Mountains. Tex maintained an association with the Walcotts for many years. "After he quit the government and acquired his own pack outfit in 1919, Tex continued to escort them on their summer expeditions from Lake Louise... Mary was a very determined woman and the first time Tex outfitted for them he told her in no uncertain terms that 'I was quite open to suggestions but I was running the pack outfit, after which she left him alone'."[18] Clearly, Tex was independent and utterly undaunted by the elite clientele that came his way, principally from the upper echelons of U.S., and sometimes British, "society." In the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, among his personal papers, is a carbon copy of a letter one of his New York customers had written to another American, recommending Tex as a guide because he was "a gentleman" and thus fit company for women as well as men.[19] "I'd go to New York and go to their clubs, and they'd introduce me around. I had a whole clientele of New York lawyers," he said in 1969.[20] Tex made his living this way for some years, and guiding Roosevelts, Fleishmans, and other well-heeled clients kept him and his family comfortably in a frame house on Spray Avenue in Banff through the 1920s and 1930s. He took the yeast magnate Max Fleischman, whom he had met in California, hunting for trophy sheep. Though they did not shoot anything (no adequate trophy horns having presented themselves to their gunsights) they had a wonderful time stalking sheep.[21]

Eventually the Park boundaries expanded, and former hunting grounds, including Tex's beloved Pipestone River Valley, were off limits to his hunting guests. In 1938, his business "was getting impossible" and he moved to the Columbia Valley, setting up the Edgewood Ranch (apparently named

18. This is a verbatim citation from an interview taped 2 February, 1969: S1/17 C, 22.

19. M 77/1.

20. Taped interview, S1/17 C, 16.

21. Taped interview, S1/17 C, 27.

On the trail, 1924

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for his parents' house in Stratford) on the benchlands above Invermere, BC, as a combined ranching operation and summer camp for the children of his guiding clients ("boys with too much money and a little spoiled"). He got in touch with a school in Richfield, Connecticut, and in spring he went there "to meet the parents so they could see what kind of an egg I was."[22] The name "Dirk Roosevelt," one of the well-heeled campers, could still be seen decades later on one of the frame guest cabins on the ranch. Tex eventually moved from this property at the end of the Second World War, taking the Edgewood name with him to a ranch on fertile valley bottomland near Brisco, BC. He eventually sold this outfit too and moved in semi-retirement to Windermere, BC, where he worked for some years as a fire lookout on Mount Swansea, 6,200 feet above the Columbia Valley, and later as a Parks employee well into his late 70s.

Despite Tex's rugged life and self-fashioned image as a tough outdoorsman, he never completely abandoned his first identity as an educated English gentleman. He was a life-long subscriber to the overseas edition of the *Manchester Guardian* and a social democrat in a world of rugged individualists. He read widely[23] and this probably suggested numerous models and possibilities for his own writing style. He began publishing stories around 1930, after the expansion of Banff National Park had consumed his old guiding and hunting territories around Shadow Lake and the Pipestone Canyon. The stories, mainly written in the persona of a rough-and-tumble guide, complete with varying approximations of "western" dialect, kept coming throughout the Depression (1930–1938). They were clearly a means to help feed his fairly large family. After publishing in *The Sportsman,* he was solicited to write for other magazines, including *The Forum,*[24] the editor of which asked for stories to be written in

22. S1/17 C, 29.

23. See "A Gift from Grandad Vernon-Wood," by his grandson Harry W. Gow in Appendix B. In the piece entitled "Dried Spinach or Moose Steak?," composed as a letter to a friend in New York from "N. Vernon-Wood" and published in *Hunting and Fishing,* June 1935, we get a sense of Tex's appetite for reading: "Thanks for the magazines an newspapers. Last winter, we was stormbound so much that I learnt all of the Stockman's Almanac by heart, an most of the Government's report on grasshopper control. I sure was pinin for a change of thought. —*Yours truly,* Tex." In 1969, he noted that his unusual name, Nello, seemed to be Italian as it appeared in the work of Dante and perhaps of Bocaccio, of which he had a translation. Taped interview, WMCR, S1/17 A, 12.

24. Letter of October 20, 1930, from the editor, Harry Goddard Leach, to Tex: "How would you like to try an 1800-word Travelogue for *The Forum* on 'Big Game Hunting in the

“picturesque language,” and the *National Sportsman*.[25] Tex’s writing styles betray both his social origins and his aspirations—partly to some acceptable form of Western Anglo-Canadian (but not English!) normativity, which required a measure of downward mobility in the social sense. However, the erudite jokes and allusions in Tex’s stories make it clear that this is no hick writing: it is a “gent”sort of pretending to be a hick.

Tex also wrote a number of “straight” pieces in his first persona, that of an educated English gentleman. One was a hunting story, “Rams,” published in *The Sportsman,* April 1931, 67–68; here he betrays a classical education with an allusion to the first line of Caesar’s *De bello gallica:*

> All visitors are divided into three parts like ancient Gaul: “tourists,” “tin canners,” and “pilgrims.” Any old visitor is a tourist provided he or she comes by train. The tin canners explain themselves, but as soon as one mounts a cayuse and takes to the hills with an outfit, to hunt, fish, climb, or just loaf, then he or she becomes a pilgrim, and as such is accepted into the inner circle.

Another straight piece, “An Early Ski Attempt on Mt. Ptarmigan,” published soon after in the *Canadian Alpine Journal,* the official organ of the Canadian Alpine Club[26] and written under the name N. Vernon-Wood, is clearly a product of an English education, with (what was at the time) a gentle and natural use of scriptural language: “A day spent in intimate contact with almost overwhelming grandeur is reward pressed down and running over.” (p. 97; cf. Luke 6:38). His style is otherwise just as elegant but nonetheless suited to the grandeur of the subject as he notes the names and social class of members of another skiing party: “In March of last year [1931], A.N.T. Rankin, of London, England, and his wife, Lady Jean, accompanied by two of the original climbers made a ski ascent of Ptarmigan.” (p. 99). If we compare this with the language he used in “Us Winter Sports” in *The Sportsman,* for instance, we find a very different voice, even though the topic, skiing, is the same:

> Things didn’t go too awful bad until we hit the first hill. It’s steep and the trail

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Rockies.’ You can work in some of your most exciting experiences. And if you will use your own most pictu[r]esque language, and do not stumble into academic English, thinking it is for *The Forum*, you might produce something very original and refreshing for our readers. We will be willing to gamble $35.00 on the experiment, anyhow.” WMCR, M 77/1.

25. Letter of May 5, 1932, from E.W. Smith, Managing Editor, to Tex, asking for an 1800-word piece and “some good clear photographs, both action and scenic.” WMCR, M 77/1

26. *Canadian Alpine Journal,* vol. 21, 1932, 135–138.

> makes a bend at the bottom. The Bull [Mountie] takes off first, and makes it pretty good. Buckshot follows, but his pack gets going faster than he is, so he sits down, by way of putting on the brakes. I shove off, and pass Buck like a bat out of hell, but can't make that turn. I try stem turns, jump turns, telemarks, and a lot that ain't in our book, and finish in a nose dive, with kind of a tail spin, and come to a perfect fourteen-point landing, losing hide on all fourteen of 'em, believe it or not.[27]

The last story he had published appeared in the *National Sportsman* in October, 1938. His daughter-in-law Christina asked him later in life about the end ("around 1939") of his writing career: "Dad, could you do it [write] again?" The answer was "No—I don't think I would be capable of it. It was there—and then it left."[28]

This piece and many others of the dozens published in such magazines skate awfully close to what we could call "class minstrelsy," and away from "passing," since Tex was not at all the homespun, rather rough working-class character who speaks in so many of his stories for popular magazines. It was as if he were—metaphorically—in "black-face," the makeup that white actors like Al Jolson wore in early twentieth-century vaudeville productions when they were expected to play African-American characters. Just as it was clear to vaudeville audiences at the time that black-face was not real, so it might have been just as clear to Tex's readers that he could not be one of his own semi-literate characters; it was enough that the language sounded authentic according to the standards of the day. This language, although it might have led some clients to think that Tex had always been a frontiersman, "winks" at an audience which was expected to enjoy the conceit while understanding that it was constructed, rather than natural.

Sometimes that need to sound authentic, even to the point of caricature, creates views of aboriginal people and new immigrants in Tex's writing that are caricatures in themselves. Today, it is impossible to see Tex's portrayals of Indians, Chinese laundrymen, and foreigners as much more than stereotypes. But in the literature of Canada that was published before the Second World War, stereotypes were an essential part of its fiction and non-fiction for mass audiences. Although Tex's ironic tone suggests that he might have wanted us to be repelled by the coarseness of his characters' views, they were more common than we might like to admit. If we compare his tone to Emily Carr's in *Klee Wyck* of 1941, we see that she too was able

27. Jan. 1931, pp. 44–45; 45.

28. According to Christina Vernon-Wood, in a private communication with AG in 2003.

Bow Park

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to caricature aboriginal people and yet on the same page convey a strong sense of how "noble" she thought they were.[29] In *Janey Canuck in the West* of 1910, Emily Murphy—in her persona as Janey Canuck, intrepid Anglo-Canadian traveller—makes fun of recent immigrants and at many points expresses her dismay about their filthiness.[30] Thomas Chandler Haliburton's satirical lampooning of Americans in *The Clockmaker* series of 1836 and Susannah Moodie's stereotyping of Americans, Scotsmen, and and Irishmen in *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) use similar stereotypical devices that are just not funny today.

Fictional work about the Canadian West also included stereotypical portraits of uncouth immigrants and Indians, partly (as in the best-selling novels of Ralph Connor from the early twentieth century) to show how genteel the "real" Canadians could be. Tex's work betrays many of the same influences and sentiments, although his more positive portrayals of aboriginal people are more reminiscent of Grey Owl's approach. There are various references to Indians in Tex's stories, and none of them is hostile or judgemental; some are clearly positive, though most have some air of stereotype about them. In his serious piece, "Rams," he notes that the Indians in the Banff area are very good hunters and have a pragmatic view of guns, rather than making a fetish of the supposed differences, as wealthy hunters do: "Any gun good, shootem good," that is, any gun is a good one if you shoot it well.

In "Sawback and the Sporting Proposition," the Tex character tells his friend Sawback about a fish round-up by aboriginal people that he witnessed at Long Lake in the Cariboo: the women make holes and set nets at one end of the lake, which he says is four miles long and 500 yards wide; then the men gallop their horses on to the ice at the other end, all the way along the lake, driving the fish into the nets, which he admires for its efficiency but also calls "unsportin'," of course. In "It's Good to be Alive," he approves of aboriginal thrift regarding the meat of wild animals and identifies with their practices: "when it comes to salvagin' meat, I'm a reg'lar Indian. Nothin' burns me up like the eggs who drop a prime animal, an' then just saw offen the head, an' leave the meat for the Coyotes an' Wolverines." In "This Guiding Game," Tex appeals to aboriginal practices, but his client,

29. Emily Carr, *Klee Wyck* (Toronto: Penguin, 2006) originally published in 1941 by the University of Toronto Press.

30. Emily Murphy, *Janey Canuck in the West* (London: Cassell, 1910).

an uppity professor of geology, is not convinced: "Then I tried to tell him the difference between a tepee and a tent, and explained that the Indians had been using them for some considerable time, and that they cooked in 'em and everything, but it was no go." His character uses the derogatory term "Nitchies" (now archaic) for Indians[31] once, probably because that was the sort of word a mountain man might have been expected to use; the context reveals no particular disrespect (on the contrary, Tex is making sarcastic remarks about the professor of geology).

When Tex's Anglo-Canadian characters distance themselves from Indians or "foreign" people, pushing them to the margins, we might read this an expression of Tex's own desire to "pass" as a man of the people and a man of the mountains,[32] to efface his class origins and his Englishness. As Daniel Coleman has argued in *White Civility,* other Canadian writers for popular audiences—most notably Ralph Connor—had featured English characters who learned to be manly on the Canadian frontier, but who were also obliged to make "foreigners" understand how to be a real man in Canada, which includes being a gentleman when the circumstances warrant. This form of frontier manliness is a form of "muscular Christianity," and it involves having physical strength as well as strength of character. Upper-class Englishmen were not thought to have much of either.

As early as 1909, J.S. Woodsworth had argued in *Strangers Within Our Gates,* that the best English immigrants were working-class, and that even these people were inferior to sturdy peasant stock. [33] Tex clearly understood that being an upper-class Englishman was not a good thing in Western Canada. In order to pass, and become a "real" Canadian of humbler origins, he had to put "foreigners" in their place in his writing and attenuate his own foreignness. Tex clearly did this in his own life by avoiding his real name, by means of the nickname he started using early in the century, by his marriage to a working-class Irishwoman and by his Western-style clothing. Many of his stories also seem to be part of an active desire to articulate Western authenticity and nativeness (if not quite "nativity");

31. See William C. Richardson, "Nitchies" in *Notes and Queries* series 9, vol. XII (1903), 227 and 278.

32. In "Fifth Avenue Pilgrims Amid the Goats," Tex describes himself in an exchange with a customer as a "mountain man."

33. See Daniel Coleman's discussion of civility and masculinity in *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006) 22–23 and 128–140.

RNWMP with Dad

WMCR: V255 / PD 15

but then in most of them, his use of high-flown vocabulary, mock-lofty, and cleverly twisted clichés suggests a man of letters behind it all. Mainly he was concerned, as his grandson John Gow put it (see Appendix A), to distance himself from his English origins. The clearest efforts in this direction are "William, Prepare my Barth" and "What's in a Name?" in which he pokes fun at upper-class Englishmen:

> When it comes to hitting the trails de lux, though, it takes an Englishman to do it up brown, with butter on both sides. I got me a brace of Woodbiners before the war, and they brought everything except the brick house. They had a chest of silver, and a valet to see that we didn't pinch the spoons, and fill the bathtub. Their tents would hold a round-up crew and were as heavy as a green cook's bannock. The tents had telescope poles, with wooden hickeys to screw on top of the uprights, painted red, white, and blue. That was to show us bally Colonials where we got off at. Their rifles assayed $500 to the ton, and there was anyway $2,000 worth of them.

The crowning touch is this paragraph, a malicious send-up of the British "Great White Hunter":

> They used to tell us yarns about hunting in India and Africa, where they had a million misguided heathens herd the game past a couple of Morris chairs, in the shade of the fig trees, and then they would take their rifle from the second assistant rifle wallah and plug the galloping gazelle as he fogged by.

Tex also calls himself a Canuck in "Us Winter Sports": "but that's the trouble with us Canucks—never know when we are beat, till somebody pounds it in with a neck yoke," suggesting that Canadians are both stubborn and stupid, but noble and tough all the same. On the other hand, Sawback addresses Tex in "What's in a Name?" as an Englishman:

> "Far be it from me," says Sawback Smith, "to cast any aspersions on your nationality, feller, but you gotta admit that huntin' with some of these here County families is what curdles the milk of human kindness, an' frays to hell the cinch that binds the Empire."

Thus Tex refers to himself as a "Colonial" and a "Canuck"—but he is also addressed (and thus perceived) as an Englishman. Vernon-Wood never lost his gentle, precise Midlands British pronunciation (nor a sibilant whistle between his teeth when he pronounced the letter *s*), as one can hear in the hours of taped interviews and stories also preserved in the Whyte Museum.

Tex also used another *nom de plume,* "Ramon Chesson," clearly a calque of his own Anglo-Italian moniker, with a Spanish first name and WASP last

name ("The Wild Goose Chase," set in the "south [New] Jersey lowlands"!). This story is also clearly the work of an educated writer:

> I hauled out my watch and leaned over to get the glow of Hank's cigarette on the dial. "Still plenty of time to wait," I announced. Hank got up, shook off the snow, and looked out at the white marsh. Then he settled back in the flimsy blind and puffed away. For stoicism, Epictetus was a bush leaguer.

Again, we glimpse the educated gentleman who refers to classical philosophers casually, even colloquially, in the great outdoors. To support his creation of an authentic frontier voice, in most of the magazine stories Tex used non-standard spelling to indicate rough frontier diction or dialect. One senses that he is presenting us with an alter ego, an "inner Tex," who at least *thinks* in this style, even if Nello himself never expressed himself in it. His exaggerated diction shows that this persona is a construct. He was also writing for a market that relished the (to us) hokey diction and style of cowboy romance. However, there is much more to his style than hoke: in "Sawback and the Sporting Proposition," he treats us to this virtuoso piece of macaronic false hickery:

> "Do tell! Well, there's also a fardel of fish down where Skookumchuck Crick empties into the lake. I dunno about you, but I'm fed up on lean venison, so I rid over to see if you'd consider postponin' your various inutile pursuits, an' concentrate on decoyin' the odd Cristivomer outer his native element. Today's the 14th of May, you benighted old bullhead, an' lake fishin' opens tomorrow."
>
> "Lightenin' Lucifer!" I exclaim. "I'd plumb lost track of the days..."
>
> Next mornin' we leave Sawback's dugout before dawn had even commenced to crack, and make the ten or so parasangs to the mouth of Skookumchuck in less'n three hours, which is right good goin' when you consider we got a pack pony loaded with various housekeepin' utensils, a tepee, an' a pair of 90 x 90 flea bags.

"Inutile," "Christivomer," and "parasangs" were not in the vocabulary of ordinary fishing guides then, and they are not now either. The joke is clear only to the educated reader who can put together the quaint expressions ("Lightenin' Lucifer!") and grammar ("I rid over") with the recondite vocabulary and such elegant "false hick-isms" as "onmerited" or "before the dawn had even commenced to crack" in order to "get" all the various levels of linguistic jokes, cliché-wrangling, and language games the author is playing. An inflatable boat is by turns "newmatick," a "wherry," a "caique," a "coracle," a "pneumatic punt," an "aerated ark," a "danged dugout," and a

"shallop"; "cussing" is "maledication an' imprecation"; the "Siawash"[34] are "red brethren" and "noble aborigine[s]"; and their horses' feet pound on the lake "like the drums of Tophet."[35]

In "Fifth Avenue Pilgrims Amid the Goats," also with Tex as narrator, to vary the language when talking about mountain goats, he refers to them as *Ovis Canadensis*. In "It's Good to be Alive," Tex reports "Me an' the Pilgrim got going right celerious after breakfast," which he later refers to as "matutinal flapjacks," as he longs for supper, or "vespers." In "Sawback Cleans a Laker," his clients are "Piscatorial Pilgrims." In "Navigatin' for Namaycush," Tex uses an Italian phrase and in the same breath makes fun of it, of himself and of the reader by suggesting that it's Spanish: "It seems like a right pious idea. I shore need a change, an' settin' in a boat draggin' a spoon on the end of a line sounds right *dolce far niente,* as they say in Ensenada, so I lets myself in for it." In "Tex Takes a Trophy," more of his Biblical learning comes through when the Tex-persona, writing to a friend in New York, lets him know "I don't give three whoops in Sheol if" Yet there was not a pretentious bone in his body. In "The Guide Knows Everything," he makes fun of himself, of educated people in general, and of guides as well:

> An' every once in a while some bird will pull something like this: "Look at that view, Tex; don't you think Corot would have loved to paint it, or do you think Browning would have caught the atmosphere better—or do you?" When they start that sort of thing, it's a good plan to grab your field glasses plumb excited an' say, "Holy old doodle, they's a bear on that slide—no, b'gosh, it's a burned stump. Don't it beat hell how them shadders fool you sometimes?

There is more than a hint of P.G. Wodehouse or Walt Kelly's immortal cartoon *Pogo* in his ironic use of mixed high-flown and everyday or backwoodsy diction. Today, Tex's sly comic style looks like an attempt to call attention to the very thing that he sometimes tried to hide: the fact that he does not belong, and that this non-belonging gives him sharp insight about the world around him, and the privileged world he came from.

34. 'Siwash' is a term for aboriginal people in Chinook jargon, derived from French *sauvage*. This widespread racist insult was still used by ranchers in the BC interior within living memory to refer to all aboriginal people. See "Bill Casselman's Canadian Word of the Day": http://www.billcasselman.com/cwod_archive/siwash_updated.htm, accessed 4 June, 2007.

35. 2 Kings 23, 10 and Jeremiah 19.

Tex himself did not live conventionally in an urban setting with an occasional foray into the mountains for sport, as the casual reader of his piece in the *Canadian Alpine Journal* might have assumed. He was a working man who started out as a horse-wrangler, and was afterwards an outfitter, a guide, a park ranger, and a rancher. He married across class and religious lines: Joan Raill (or Real, or Reilly, or even O'Reilly, depending on the document), an Irish Catholic chambermaid from the district of Annascaul, County Kerry, the daughter of a fisherman, who was working at the Banff Springs Hotel when they met, and then married in 1912. He told her after they were married that he had "only two requirements: tea at 11:00 and lunch at 1:00."[36] He might have learned to read (and cite) Scripture as part of a conventional Church of England childhood, and he might have taken "elevenses" every day, but he chose a very different world to live and work in. In a certain sense, Tex straddled the privileged world of his childhood and the world of hard work and social and religious inferiority (as his associations would have been seen at the time). He goes out of his way in one story to distinguish himself and his friends (waddies, proletariat, commoners) from the aristocratic owner of one lodge who refused to allow hunting in the area he had leased ("Dried Spinach or Moose Steak?"); and in "The Last Great Buffalo Drive" he refers to himself and his friends, acting as extras in a Western, as "us poor benighted hill-billies."

For Tex in most of his stories, a proper mountain man gets dirty and does not worry overly about comfort. He does not need to engage in this behaviour anywhere else; it might be alright to be a dandy in New York or London, but to be a successfully masculine man and hunter in the mountains, one must, according to Tex, forget about hygiene and appearance. These issues are central to "William, Prepare my Barth," "What's in a Name?," and "Pipestone Letter No. 1." The English gents in the first two fail to attain proper mountain masculinity, because they continue to insist on bathing, shaving, and careful dressing in the morning, thus cutting deeply into hunting time; by contrast, the well-dressed club man who arrives at the station in the latter story successfully makes the transition, with Tex's none-too-gentle help, to proper mountain masculinity, becoming both dirty and a successful hunter.

Tex's own body, repeatedly characterized as very slight ("Nobody's ever

36. According to Christina Vernon-Wood, in a private communication with AG in 2003.

complimented me on my figger; in fack, I got to stand twice in the same place before I throw a shader…"[37])—not ideally masculine, therefore—plays a role in this drama. Due to his slender build, his ability as a mountain man, and thus his "mountain masculinity," is questioned by clients on at least two occasions, in "Fifth Avenue Pilgrims Amid the Goats" and in "Pipestone Letters No. 1." Just as the "muscular Christian" teaches foreigners in Canada how to behave themselves by beating them at fisticuffs and then lecturing them about proper behaviour, so Tex's "mountain masculinity" will show that he is the real man who has a thing or two to teach the over-civilized clients about manliness. He is vindicated on both counts; in the former because the questioner himself turns out to be effeminate and dainty, and thus capable neither of getting dirty nor of being a good hunter; and in the second, because Tex successfully helps his client to attain mountain masculinity himself. In both cases, it is made clear that Tex's physical prowess is up to anything these two men can dish out, and then some. Here Tex is writing back to his clients, who doubt his skills, and therefore his masculinity. It's one of the rare times in mountain literature when the guide gets to have his say.[38]

One crack appears in this system when the Honourable Fitzwilliam Smythe-Smythe manages to kill a trophy moose without getting a bit dirty or breaking a sweat, in "What's in a Name?" one of Tex's last pieces (February 1938). Furthermore, another code of sportsmanship makes a cameo appearance in this story. The Hon. Fitz shouts before shooting his moose, to startle it—because it is unsporting to shoot a 'sitting' animal unawares (and unwise to drop it in the water where it was standing in any case).

The imperial gaze of this gentleman-gone-native must therefore be imagined as a fractured one: on the one hand, he condescends to his characters (including his own authorial persona, Tex), deliberately having

37. In "Navigatin for Namaycush."

38. See Tina Loo's analysis of the relationship between guides and big-game hunters in "Of Moose and Men: Hunting for Masculinities in British Columbia, 1880–1939." *The Western Historical Quarterly,* Vol. 32, No. 3. (Autumn, 2001), pp. 296–319. Loo points out that hunters often mocked guides in their articles for *Rod and Gun* and *Field and Stream,* but that guides never had a chance to talk back. See also Alec Lucas' article about nature writing and animal stories in Carl F. Klinck et al., eds., *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965) pp. 364–388 for a detailed look at the genre of sporting books; Lucas notes that the emphasis in these sporting books is on "the pleasures of good fellowship and life in the open air" (372), from the perspective of sportsmen, not of guides.

them make all the mistakes his (more) educated audience would recognize and which would then have seemed to be characteristic of such “types”: dangling prepositions, faulty grammar, *g*’s dropped from the ends of words, slang, “cussin,’’ and so forth. When he is addressed as Tex by other characters in the story and is functioning as narrator of events, Vernon-Wood himself puts on a virtuoso linguistic performance, sending up hokey diction in every sentence, in a style reminiscent of Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster or Psmith.

In the end, Tex was no Grey Owl, nor was he anything like a colonial administrator, a conventional expatriate, or remittance man. He was a working man, ran a small business, and was an environmentalist to the extent that it squared with his living: guiding and hunting. In “It’s Good to be Alive,” Tex strikes a note of pragmatic frugality. Today, we might see this as environmentalist:

There’s a heap of awful good chewin’ on a Elk, an’ when it comes to salvagin’ meat, I’m a reg’lar Indian. Nothin’ burns me up like the eggs who drop a prime animal, an’ then just saw offen the head, an’ leave the meat for the Coyotes an’ Wolverines.

repeats the same idea in “Dried Spinach or Moose Steak?”:

While I’m in line with a reasonable amount of conservation, an dead agin killin just to see a beast fall over, I’m also one of the old reactionaries who still figger that game was put in the mountains to provide huntin for men, an mebbe the odd woman.

And what of women in the wilderness? What did Tex make of them? In “Sawback Changes His Mind,” Tex relates a successful hunting trip with the new wife of a long-time client, the Doc. Their initial fear that her presence will ruin a happy hunting trip proves groundless as she turns out to be “reg’lar,” both to Tex and to his grizzled wrangler Sawback—meaning they accepted her as one of them because she was a good sport and a good hunter. Even in a less generous version of this story, “It’s a Woman’s World,” the Doc’s wife is caricatured as an outdoors-shy ‘little woman’ with scads of luggage, but she makes three magnificent kills without leaving camp, while Tex and her husband are hiking up and down mountains without success. In “Tex: Gentleman’s Gentleman,” he makes fun of dandies, comparing them unfavourably to female clients:

Instead of splashin’ through the crick, which is all of four inches deep, he wanders up & down the bank lookin’ for a log to cross on. When he found one, he got halfway across an’ fell off. His mackinaw britches are all of a half inch thick, but there’s a

Camp in winter

WMCR: V255 / PD 19

cupful of water splashed on 'em, so he returns to camp to break out another pair, an' that finishes that hunt. An' I've guided female women who've jumped into a glacier-fed crick up to their shirt pockets to bring a trout to net!

In "This Guiding Game," a reflection on different types of clients, we read:

It's funny about the women. Nine out of ten men ask, 'Isn't this trail thing too strenuous and rough for ladies?' I don't know if it's just luck, but any women I have had to do with fitted in like a cartridge in a rifle. I figure that if a woman don't like the outdoors she never gets far enough to get here. The ones that do, know they are going to like it, and that's half the battle.

The rest of that story is about a trip with a woman and her four daughters after the father of the family goes back to town, and Tex's admiration for all of them comes through loud and clear, especially for the eldest daughter, who out-shot him hunting in the mountains. An echo of this opinion appears in the 1969 interview with Maryalice Stewart, when Tex said of Mary Walcott's daughter "she was as good as any man I ever knew when it came to scrambling around in the hills."[39] Tex was no misogynist, as these stories and other remarks about him (cf. his first encounter with Mary Vaux Walcott, above) suggest; he felt women who could hunt and climb and fish had every right and reason to do so, and that was not exactly conventional.

There is little about religion in these stories: Tex was no church-goer. However, he repeatedly, when tired or frustrated due to bad luck or bad weather, regrets that he did not become a minister instead of a guide—though this is clearly not because of a high opinion of the ministry, whose sedentary and spiritual pursuits prevented them from living up to Tex's standards of mountain masculinity. In "Us Winter Sports," he makes light fun of the Methodist Church in Banff and of its minister, dubbed "Rev. Hackleberry," who did not predict winter sports in the afterlife for Tex and his friends. Yet in "The Guide Knows Everything," a priest gets top billing: Father Moriarty, who ran the Bankhead Mission, was an expert fly-fisherman, and thus fulfils a primary requisite of mountain masculinity, namely hunting or fishing prowess. The tender tone demonstrates that mountain masculinity did not have to be about filth and blood alone; friendship and ethical qualities and practices were also important.

39. Taped interview, S1/17 A, 22.

On the trail, 1924

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I got so I invented jobs over to Bankhead on the off chance of runnin' into Father Moriarty an' persuadin' him to play hookey. I've seen him catch trout where there wasn't any, an' I never seen him lift more'n two out of the water in any one day. He'd bring 'em to the shallows, slip his fingers down the line an' takin' care his hand was wet, slip out his hook gentle as a woman. "There you are," he'd say. "Back to your pet eddy, an' meditate on the sin of gluttony, an' next time, don't mistake the shadow for the substance.

They buried the Father last fall. From the cemetery here, you can hear the Bow Falls roarin' loud an' deep in the spring, an' sort of musical the rest of the time, so his body is right handy to good trout water, an' I'll bet you four fits that his spirit is havin' one whale of a time with them other sportsmen, the Galilee fishermen, Ike Walton, an' Grey of Falloden."

Here again, Tex takes up the ideas of "muscular Christianity" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which held that God had made men physically strong in order to bring social equality and justice to all. Tex's approval of religion that dovetailed with outdoor skills and his gentle contempt for anyone who did not think that physical pursuits and sporting activities in the great outdoors were the best pursuits of all is part of a long story about the need for strong, masculine English men to work hard on the frontiers of the British Empire.[40]

Tex did not fit neatly into our categories—he simultaneously inhabited different worlds that were at the time mutually exclusive, at least by convention; perhaps he was able to do so because frontier/colonial situations were sometimes inhabitable by people who did not fit into conventional class and gender roles in mainstream society in the first half of the twentieth century. He had definite ideas about proper sportsmanship and its proper articulation in nature and with nature, particularly in the mountains. These ideas had something of Baden-Powell's scouting ethos in them and something of traditional British country sportsmanship, but they are of further interest because they were elastic enough to accommodate women—especially the "New Woman" of the early part of the century who did not mind being outdoors and who, in the spirit of Mary Vaux and her friend, the Rocky Mountains traveller and explorer Mary Schäffer, didn't mind roughing it in the process with British-born guides to help them.

Tex's beliefs about women therefore, were not merely ad hoc, but programmatic, held on principle. It might be objected that Tex simply required a woman to "act like a man" in order to accept her, but there

40. See Coleman, 133–138.

was more to his ideal than that: many men, including accomplished athletes and anyone who just stuck around town in Banff and missed out on experiencing “the outdoors,” fell short of the mark. He was himself a slender, bookish-looking fellow who wore little wire-rimmed spectacles, and thus by his own admission, was no lumberjackish heavyweight. Admission to the inner circle depended more on sportsmanship, fair play, respect for animals, lack of pretension, a willingness to sweat, get hot, wet, tired, and dirty, and a taste for hunting or fishing, than on a person’s sex or physical characteristics—an intriguing mix of genteel Old World sportsmanship and vigorous New World egalitarianism.

Adventurer, guide, former British gentleman turned outdoors writer: Nello “Tex” Vernon-Wood isn’t “CanLit” by a long shot. Why read these stories, then? The answer for us is that Tex lived during a pivotal time in the development of the Canadian Rockies from rough wilderness to national park system, and his writing shows us what a certain kind of masculinity—invented for his life in the mountains and for his readers—looked like. Tex’s version of how a man should live and work in the outdoors has vanished along with the guided hunting and fishing industry that he helped to foster, but the lure of the mountains and the myth of the Canadian West as the place where identity can be remade is still a powerful one for the tourists and adventurers who visit the national parks. Tex Vernon-Wood was there before us, and his writing has much to tell us about what it was like to make a living in the great outdoors, and what kind of man he became in order to do it.

Andrew Gow
Julie Rak
Edmonton, 20 November, 2007