

# THE STORY OF GREY OWL

by ALEX ZELLERMEYER\*

He was an Indian. He was a half-  
ed. Or was he an Englishman? He  
s an author, a naturalist, a lecturer.  
man presented to Prime Ministers  
d Kings. He was a drunkard.  
haps a bigamist?

To most people of the past and, un-  
tunately, even the present, he was a  
question mark. A man known more by  
umor than fact — judged more by  
suspicion than reality. Where does the  
truth lie?

**THE EARLY YEARS.** The story of Grey  
Owl began far from Prince Albert  
National Park. It started in 1888 with  
the birth of Archibald Stanfeld  
Belaney in the southern English  
pastoral town of Hastings.<sup>1</sup> Decades  
would pass before Grey Owl would  
emerge.

Archie's early childhood was typical  
of most English school boys at the end  
of the 19th century. His education was  
looked after by the two maiden aunts  
who had raised him from infancy. Ar-  
chie was particularly talented on the  
piano.<sup>2</sup>

Like most schoolboys of his day, Ar-  
chie lived a constant daydream of ex-  
periencing the world of the North  
American "Wild West". These dreams  
of becoming an Indian pathfinder — a  
hunter — were to follow him from  
childhood through adolescence and,  
eventually, to manhood.

By the age of 17, Archie was too  
restless to remain in Hastings with his  
two aging aunts. The thought of set-

tling into the local office clerk's  
position he seemed destined to occupy  
encouraged his growing wanderlust. In  
1905, Archie Belaney booked passage  
on the S.S. *Canada* from Liverpool,  
arriving in Canada in April of that  
year.<sup>3</sup>

At the turn of the century, northern  
Canada was a country of wildlands,  
occasionally broken with mining  
towns, lumber camps and train stops  
on railroads to places of greater im-  
portance. Into this Ontario northland  
came Archie Belaney. At a small rail  
stop called Temiskaming, Archie  
made friends with the local Indians,  
trappers and guides.<sup>4</sup> They were  
mostly of Ojibway origin, a people to  
whom Archie would always credit his  
woodland talents. It was here that over  
the years that Archie Belaney learned  
the arts of trapping and wilderness life.

In 1910 Archie married his first  
wife, a young Ojibway girl named  
Angele.<sup>4</sup> The marriage was to last for  
only a year. Archie's restlessness,  
which he felt whenever he became too  
"settled", was a personal uneasiness  
which would haunt him for his entire  
life. However, the Ojibway customs of  
marriage were simple. A couple  
remained together for as long as they  
desired or parted whenever they  
wished.<sup>5</sup> Archie was taking on more of  
an Indian identity with each passing  
year.

Little is known of Archie's life from  
the period 1910 to 1915. He spent one  
winter with his second wife, Marie  
Gerard. He worked with the Ontario  
Forestry Department near Biscotosing  
where he had the occasional run-in  
with the local constabulary.<sup>6</sup> Archie  
was fond of "whooping-it-up".

\* Prince Albert National Park,  
Saskatchewan.



**PRIVATE BELANEY.** The onset of World War I saw the first Canadian contingent fighting under their own command and colours. Listed with this Canadian Expeditionary Force was Private A. Belaney. In France, Archie was wounded and subsequently sent to England for convalescence.<sup>7</sup> Back in his boyhood country, he spent over a year renewing old friendships and memories. One of these was his childhood sweetheart Ivy Holmes. In 1917 they were married.<sup>8</sup>

It was here that Archie must have finally decided that a well-ordered life, especially a rigid English one could never truly satisfy him. After months, the couple decided to dissolve the union.<sup>8</sup> Archie Belaney was Canada-bound for a second time. When England saw him next it would be as the triumphant Grey Owl.

**GREY OWL.** Back in the Ontario north woods near Biscotosing, Archie returned to the life of a trapper and guide. It was in 1920 at an Ojibway gathering that Archibald Belaney gave up his Christian name. With his hair long and braided, clothed in buckskin, he chose the name Wa-sha-Quon-Asin, the Grey Owl.<sup>9</sup> Not until his death would it emerge that he had ever been known by another name.

Now, as Grey Owl, he continued his trapping. It was circumstance that returned him in 1920 to the Temiskaming area where he met Gertrude Bernard, a young girl of Iroquois descent. Grey Owl called her Anahareo — her ancestral name. After several months of correspondence they were married.<sup>8</sup>

**PILGRIMS OF THE WILD.** By the time Grey Owl had met Anahareo he was familiar with the value systems of the Ojibway, with their customs, and with their language. He was, for all intent and purposes, an Indian in both manner and appearance — especially in appearance. Even his blue eyes and flawless English did not lessen the impact of this tall, long-haired man in moccasins. With a single eagle feather hanging from his braided hair and a determined scowl perpetually on his face, it appeared as though he had stepped from the very pages of those books he had read long ago in England.

These early years with Anahareo changed Grey Owl from trapper to conservationist. In the overhunted trapping regions of Ontario and Quebec, Grey Owl found it in

creasingly difficult to trap for a livelihood. Since 1670, when the B.C. ship *Nonsuch* sailed from England to the new-found fur lands of what was to become Canada, the beaver had started a slow but steady population decline. Two hundred and fifty years later, in Grey Owl's time, it seemed as though the last refuge for our national animal was destined to be in the Canadian nickel.

One spring, Anahareo found two orphaned beaver kittens. Their parents had been trapped, and it appeared that the fate of these kits was bleak. The young couple adopted the orphans.<sup>10</sup>

Grey Owl was so moved by the intelligence and loyalty of these "beaver people", as the Indians called them, that he became more concerned with finding measures to protect them, rather than better methods to trap them.

It was then that Grey Owl's fortunes improved. A nature article he had submitted to an English journal, *Country Life*, gained immediate recognition.<sup>10</sup> The publishers were only too eager to

learn more about this eloquent half-breed from Canada's backwoods who went by the name of Grey Owl. They asked for more.

At the same time, Grey Owl agreed to lecture to an audience at Metis Beach.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the summer of 1927, the attention he had received convinced Grey Owl that conservation was to be his life's work.

**A NATURALIST IN THE NATIONAL PARKS.** Success followed success. Grey Owl completed a series of articles for *Forest and Outdoors* while *Country Life* began negotiations for his first book, *The men of the last frontier*.

In 1931, Grey Owl accepted a position with the National Parks Service as a naturalist. His project — to re-establish beaver colonies in areas of the National Parks from which they had been long exterminated.

Thus, in April of 1931, Grey Owl arrived at Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the local conditions for establishing a beaver colony didn't meet Grey Owl's



requirements and a transfer was requested.<sup>11</sup> It was because of this that on October 27, 1931, Grey Owl, with Anahareo and the two beavers, Rawhide and Jellyrole, arrived in Prince Albert National Park.<sup>11</sup> Here, on the seldom visited shoreline of a small lake called Ajawaan, a cabin was built. Grey Owl called it "Beaver Lodge". The name was more than appropriate. Rawhide and Jellyroll had built their mud lodge against it, and after a hole had been cut for them through the lakeside wall, they completed the other half of the lodge inside the cabin itself.

It was at Ajawaan that Grey Owl emerged from relative obscurity to become the celebrated Indian author and conservationist. He wrote articles and answered requests which never seemed to end. Streams of letters from the corners of the world flowed to Ajawaan.

During this period, 1932 to 1934, Grey Owl completed his best known work, *Pilgrims of the wild*.<sup>12</sup> It was in this book that he told the story of Anahareo and the two orphaned beaver kits. It was also here that Grey Owl attempted to express his source of inspiration — the Canadian wilderness. *Pilgrims of the wild* was translated into eight languages so that there were few people in the western world who had not heard of the "Beaver Lodge" of this Canadian backwoodsman.<sup>13</sup>

In 1935 Grey Owl agreed to his publisher's suggestion that he go on a lecture tour — destination: England.<sup>13</sup> Thus he returned to the country of his birth in beaded buckskin. Tall and stern-faced, he stood in front of more than a quarter of a million people on that tour alone.<sup>12</sup> He filled and refilled theatres and still people were turned away for lack of space.

The tour was so successful that more were planned. On a subsequent lecture series in England, Grey Owl made a

command appearance before King George VI and the Royal family.<sup>14</sup> Afterwards, having been asked for tea with the sovereign, Grey Owl bade the king goodbye with a "Farewell brother" and a hearty slap on the back. For the former Hastings resident this must have been more than a memorable occasion.

It is difficult to tell if Grey Owl himself realized the following he had created. His work on beaver conservation was continued throughout Canada, and because of the attention he focussed on preservation, a country whose existence was founded on resource extraction was quickly warned that if her successes were to continue, she would have to adopt a more moderate attitude to the land. As he put it . . .

"I think the Canadians take their priceless heritage of the North rather complacently for granted. Well, they want to watch it, or they soon won't have it. The policy they are pursuing in regard to its exploitation and to a very much lesser degree, its preservation, is lamentably short-sighted."<sup>15</sup>

**THE PRICE OF FAME.** The lengthy lecture tours, writing schedules and world publicity also took their toll. In 1936 Grey Owl and Anahareo agreed to part. Later that year he married his fifth wife, Yvonne Perrier, and completed his last book, *Tales of an empty cabin*.<sup>16</sup>

In the autumn of 1937 Grey Owl undertook another European lecture tour. Returning to North America, he immediately started yet another lecture series in eastern Canada and the United States.<sup>8</sup> The pressures of his travels, writing deadlines, and his life style wore away Grey Owl's health. As he told one reporter in Ontario, one more month of this "will kill me".<sup>17</sup> It did. A month later, April 3, 1938, Grey Owl passed away in a Prince

port hospital after being found unconscious on the floor of "Beaver Edge". He had pneumonia.

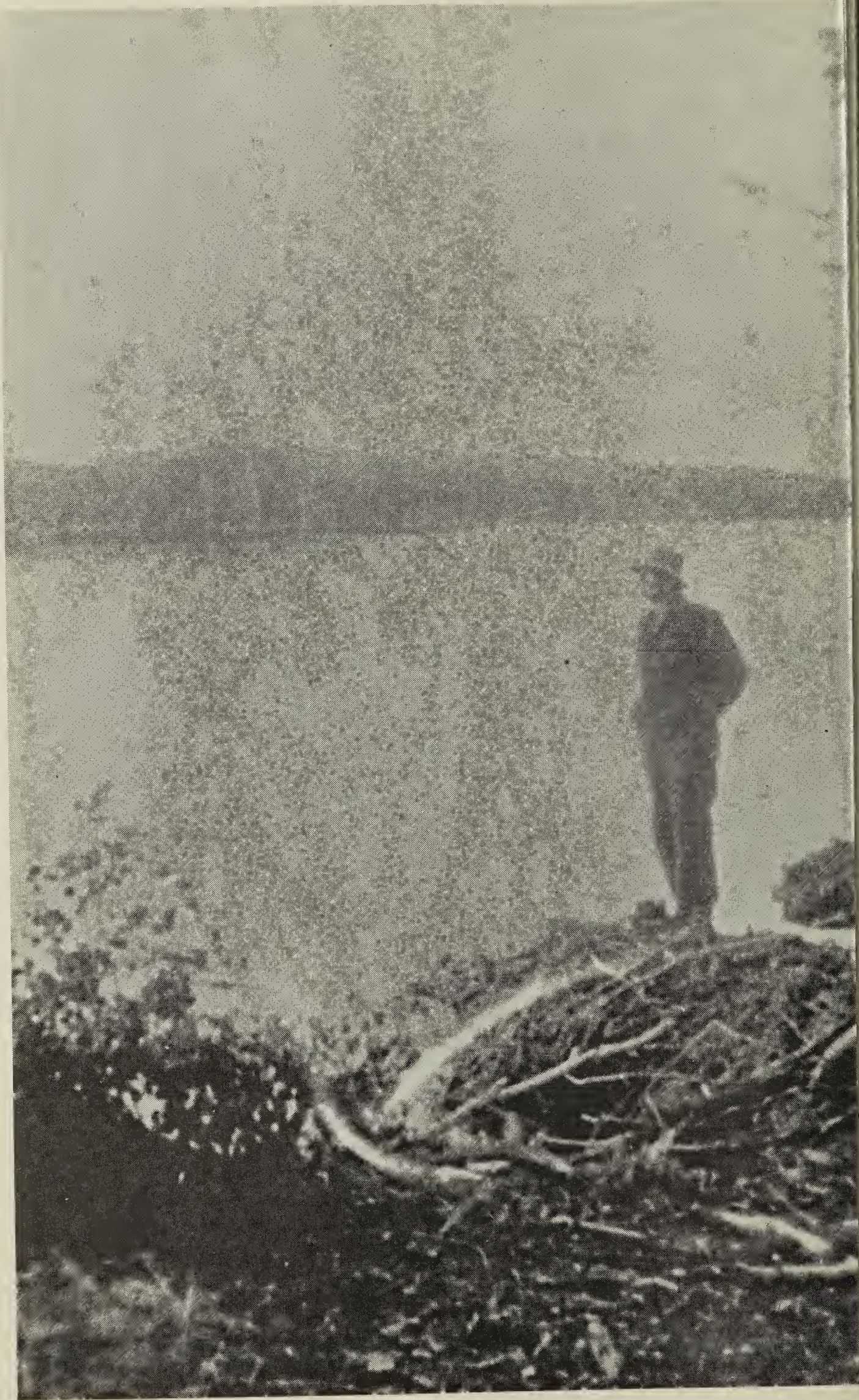
**GREY OWL EXPOSED.** The day after his death Grey Owl was exposed as an impostor".<sup>14</sup> It had been only a matter of time before someone connected him with Archibald Belaney, and when it opened, no holds were barred. He became publicly associated with fraud and scandal. People were more interested in his masquerade than his writings. The number of his wives was more important than his effort to further Canadian conservation. The pride and encouragement he gave to native peoples and their traditions was set aside for the sensationalism of his love of "whooping-it-up". And when the public was tired of the expose and their own moralizations, he became as

forgotten as yesterday's newspapers.

Yet, it is time which becomes the final judge of a person's accomplishments, and it is time that the words and thoughts of Grey Owl have survived. His books are regaining popularity and he may yet become recognized as one of Canada's greatest northern writers, as he was called before his death. One saner journalist wrote after Grey Owl's death, "He was not, they say, a real Red Indian. So what?"<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of what Grey Owl was not, today we may be certain of what he was. He was an exceptional author and naturalist. He was a perceptive man whose life style demanded that he cast his fortune to the wind — no matter what. He was a great Canadian. The sadness is that it has taken us so long to realize it.





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*Pilgrims of the Wild*. 1935, MacMillan Company of Canada, Toronto, 282 pp.

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