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JACOB'S WOUND: A SEARCH FOR THE SPIRIT OF WILDNESS

TREVOR HERRIOT. 2004. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto. ISBN 0-7710-4136-5
Hard cover. $34.99 Can.

Most members of Nature Saskatchewan, particularly those from Regina, know Trevor Herriot as a naturalist and an accomplished artist. It wasn't until the publication of his first book, *River in a Dry Land* (2000), that we became aware of his contemplative side and his gifts as a writer. *Jacob's Wound* amplifies the ecological and philosophical concerns raised in his first book, in which he examined the history and natural history of the Qu'Appelle Valley.

Naturalists who pick up this book may be disappointed at first. There are fewer pages of the close description that characterized *River in a Dry Land*. Instead, *Jacob's Wound* is primarily speculative, even deeply spiritual; Nature is now the backdrop as Trevor, using narrative and an array of resources, considers what we have lost as we have become increasingly industrialized, urbanized, and isolated from Nature and our primitive roots.

Trevor's approach becomes clear when he takes us back to the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau. "In trying to write my own way to a more graceful encounter with the wild, the rural, and the aboriginal, I realized....I would have to begin by retracing our wanderings away from wildness and back again....I took refuge in the old texts, the Bible in particular, as a rough archive of the human spirit at certain critical horizons in our evolution as the primates who got religion" (p. 20) In a superb rendering of the story told in Genesis, Trevor tells how Jacob, representing 'civilization', usurps the birthright of his brother Esau, who remains a 'wild man', a hunter (p. 77-84). Years later, the day before Jacob is to meet with his brother, Jacob wrestles all night long with an unknown stranger. He is wounded and in the morning fords the river to face Esau. Expecting "bitterness and vengeance," he finds "reconciliation and peace." Trevor sees this story as an archetype of reconciliation; Jacob, recognizing the face of God in his half-wild brother, begs to "be blessed by all that is primary and ancestral and holy" (p. 84). For Herriot, the price of continuing a meaningful existence on this planet is to come to terms with the pagan, the wild, the primitive within us, the remnant of wilderness from which we came and from which contemporary society (and religion) are almost completely alienated.

Among the places Trevor takes us in his narrative, El Marahka (Mount Carmel), a mountain in Israel and a sacrificial site for 60,000 years, is central in the first half of the book. The second half is more closely connected physically with Saskatchewan, his native province. Drawing upon a lifetime of experience living in both rural and urban areas of the province, he singles out Lake Diefenbaker, the Qu'Appelle Valley (including "The Land" – the name he gives to his cabin in the valley and the adjoining seventy acres), and Regina. Much of this part of the book is set in St. Peter's Abbey at Muenster, the surrounding countryside and towns, and atop a hill of pilgrimage, known locally as Mount Carmel.

Even a casual perusal of the book reveals the breadth and depth of the author's reading.

He quotes at length from writers whom he admires and from a number of people, mostly from Saskatchewan, who have influenced his thinking. Prominent among the writers are Laurens van der Post, T.S.Eliot, Teilhard de Chardin, Mark Twain, Ron Rolheiser, Thomas Hardy, George Herbert, and Wendell Berry. His spiritual sources include the Jerusalem Bible, the Upanishads, the Tao-te Ching, the first Buddhist Council, and the Qur'an. The mentor to whom he seems most indebted is Father James Gray, a hermit monk, who shares with him the fruits of his thirty years of living alone "in the bush south of the abbey." Trevor also values the commitment and practice of farm-reformers like Peter Farden, Duane Guina, Brewster Kneen, and Paul Brassard , all intent on saving the family farm and the values associated with it. Deeply appreciative of native tradition and spirituality, Trevor also writes admiringly of the life and work of Noel Star Blanket, a prominent Saskatchewan aboriginal, former chief of the National Indian Brotherhood.

This is not an easy book. In an interview with Nick Miliokas, Trevor said, "I hope that people will read the book slowly and let it compost in their minds, so to speak. That's how I read books, and maybe that's why I write them that way."[1] Even if you can't always accept his arguments, you can respect his approach, his openness, and the predictably fine quality of his writing. Trevor offers some answers; more importantly, he raises essential questions. As Miliokas says, "The emphasis here is clearly on the journey as opposed to the destination."

I am impressed with Trevor's bravery and honesty. He shares with the reader his doubts, his dreams, his loves, and his on again-off again relationship with formal religion. He is at once a romantic and a realist, a poet and a critic. He is what is sometimes disparagingly termed a liberal, yet in some ways deeply conservative in the best of that tradition, appreciative of the past, aware of both the follies and successes. A key concern for him is reconciliation, coming to terms with conflicting views of life. His knowledge of nature has taught him to welcome the richness of diversity. His conclusion: only if we become less rigid, less aggressive, less acquisitive, more open to the primal sources within us, are we likely to survive as a society.

Reflecting on the ideas of Laurens van der Post, the South African writer who lived with the bushmen of the Kalahari, Trevor writes: "Our modern religious and cultural obligation is to re-enter the myth of Jacob at the riverside so that we can re-engage our legacy and culpability as the second sons of creation, and hold on for life until the wrestling becomes an embrace in which we can face and see clearly all that we have subsumed and overtaken – not for guilt or blame, not for that pointless wringing of hands, but for the greater spiritual reckoning that dawns when the sun lifts over the horizon, spills across the river, and shows us that we are in the hands of our ancestral brothers, the first ones who, nearer the Genesis point, bear the face of God and the original blessings we need and must beg for now more than ever." (85-86).

1. MILIOKAS, N. CanWest News Service, The StarPhoenix, Saskatoon, October 23, 2004

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