In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History

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Episode 3: Grey Owl

The most famous Indian of the day in Canada in the 1930s was the writer and lecturer Grey Owl. In 1965 Alec Lucas, the founding co-ordinator of McGill's Canadian Studies Program, forerunner of The McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, argued in his 1965 essay, "Nature Writers and the Animal Story," in the *Literary History of Canada* (page 376): "No other Canadian writer had a greater reputation in the 1930s, both at home and abroad than Grey Owl." His four books, articles, and movies with the beaver made him a public figure on two continents. Harold Innis of the University of Toronto after whom one of its colleges was later named, Innis College, recognized his contribution. In his review of *Pilgrims of the Wild* in the June 1935 issue of the *Canadian Historical Review*, the distinguished Canadian economic historian wrote: "The volume by Grey Owl is a significant book as the autobiography of a famous conservationist." Reporting back to Canada that same year Georges Vanier, a future Governor-General of Canada, then an official at the Canadian High Commission in London, explained the reformed trapper's phenomenal reception on his 1935 British lecture tour. "Grey Owl has been a great success over here in every way. All those, and they are legion—

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who have come in contact with him, have been much impressed by his knowledge, by his simplicity and by his manners who are instinctively those of gentleman in spite of his long and almost continuous life in the woods."

Grey Owl's triumph in Britain brought him more publicity at home. One of his grandest moments in Canada occurred in 1936 at the Toronto Book Fair. On the evening of 9 November, the tall, hawk-faced man, dressed in buckskins with his long hair in braids, addressed a capacity crowd of 1,700 people at the King Edward Hotel. He had just published his fourth and final book, *Tales of an Empty Cabin* (London, 1936). The fair's organizers turned away 500 more people at the door. Inside, the champion of the Canadian wilderness argued in his deep and thrilling voice: "Canada's greatest asset to-day is her forest lands." His constant message was: "Remember you belong to Nature, not it to you." He called for an end to the plundering of the country's hinterland. Here in Alec Lucas's words, "was the romantic's noble savage, the natural man who could depict the natural world with an insight denied other authors" ("Nature Writers and the Animal Story," page 376).

Who exactly was Grey Owl? In *The Canadian Who's Who of 1936-37*, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, one of Canada's most famous literary figures, cleared away the mystery in a short summary of what was known of his background: "Born encampment, State of Sonora, Mexico; son of George a native of Scotland, and Kathrine (Cochise) Belaney; a half-breed Apache Indian… adopted as blood-brother by Ojibway tribe, 1920… speaks Ojibway but has forgotten Apache."

In late March 1938 the gifted Native writer and lecturer addressed another huge Toronto crowd, this time an audience of about 3,000 in Massey Hall, the largest concert hall in Canada. His talk came shortly after his second lecture tour in Britain, one which included a royal command performance at Buckingham Palace before King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, and the two little princesses

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Elizabeth and Margaret. Children had become his target audience for his conservation message. As he had written in his last book, *Tales of an Empty Cabin* (1936), page 333, he wanted "to implant in fertile minds, anxious for knowledge, seeds that will perhaps blossom into deeds after the planter has been long forgotten."

When Grey Owl returned to his cabin in Prince Albert National Park in Saskatchewan, his home for the last seven years, he collapsed from exhaustion. Taken immediately to hospital, he died in Prince Albert on 13 April 1938. The media on two continents had accepted without question his romantic story of his origins. The *North Bay Nugget* broke the story. The *Toronto Star* followed, "Grey Owl Really an Englishman, Old Friends Insist." In the week to follow, swift detective work on both sides of the Atlantic confirmed Grey Owl's real identity. The Dominion of Canada's most famous "Indian" was born and raised in England, in the Channel town of Hastings. Archie Belaney arrived in Canada in 1906, at the age of 17, and subsequently reinvented himself as an "Indian." His story of his racial origins was a complete fantasy.

As explained in Episode 2, my interest in Grey Owl commenced in the winter of 1968/69 during my M.A. studies at Université Laval. Back in Toronto in the fall of 1969, I began my Ph.D. but remained fascinated by Grey Owl. His environmental message attracted me, but even more appealing, I wanted the challenge of doing in-depth historical research on his life. To my surprise, only one biography of him had been written, *Half-Breed* (1939) by his publisher Canadian Lovat Dickson, who lived in England from the 1930s to the late l960s. The publisher's two widely acclaimed volumes of memoirs, *The Anteroom. Early Stages in a Literary Life* (1960), and *The House of Words* (1963), were both widely acclaimed. The writer's new, very successful, literary biography, *H.G. Wells. His Turbulent Life and Times* had just appeared in 1969.

Unbelievable. It still amazes me. One day in early 1970 I went to lunch at Massey College, the graduate college at the University of

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Toronto where I was a non-resident fellow, with dining privileges. One always signed the guest book upon entering which, of course, I did on this occasion. That day, by good fortune, I happened to look over several of the entries above mine. That winter Margaret Laurence, the famous Canadian writer, was the College's writer in residence. I saw her name with that of her guest, "Lovat Dickson." This truly was Hollywood! I looked around the dining hall but could not spot Margaret Laurence. I wolfed down my lunch, found out where her office in the college was located, then rushed off to see if they possibly were there. I recall her office door was open. The famous Canadian writer was in discussion with a lean, distinguished-looking older gentleman. I immediately, explanation made, asked her visitor if he was the author of *Half-Breed*? He was indeed, and he mentioned that now retired he and his wife had moved back to Canada, to Toronto.

The reference in my Acknowledgements to my 1990 biography, *From the Land of Shadows, the Making of Grey Owl*, best explains what followed. "Fortunately, in the winter of 1969-1970 I met Lovat Dickson, who had moved back to Canada from England. Over a sixteen-year period we met many times at his home in Toronto and I came to know him and his wife, Marguerite Dickson, as personal friends. I assisted him by showing him some of my early research notes when he prepared his second biography of Grey Owl, *Wilderness Man*, which appeared in 1973." My wife, Nancy Townshend, and I remember the Dicksons warmly every time we use the beautiful tea set that they gave as a wedding present in 1982.

A year off from my Ph.D. studies from 1 July 1970 to 30 July 1971 followed. I needed a break from the Academy. Ralph Heintzman, another Massey non-resident junior fellow, later to have a distinguished career in the federal civil service, "tipped me off" about a most interesting job. To take it I obtained a year of absence from the doctoral program. The year away gave me the chance to

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extend my Grey Owl research. My salary gave me a war chest to pay for it! I worked for the Canada Studies Foundation (CSF) with its inspirational director Birnie Hodgetts.

The CSF was founded in 1970 following revelations of the National History Project (1965-68) that the average Canadian high-school student had an abysmal knowledge of Canada. The CSF worked to promote Canadian Studies at the elementary and secondary school level. The Director, an office secretary, and a project officer (that was my post) constituted the initial three person staff. Three curriculum projects became the most important aspects of CSF activity that year: the Laurentian Project in Central Canada, Project Canada West, and Project Atlantic Canada. I learned a great deal. In my files, for instance, I still have a copy of the paper Dr. Donald Chant, Chair of the Department of Zoology at the University of Toronto, presented at the Laurentian Project Conference at Trent University, 24 August 1970. One line in particular still resonates: “The fallacy of the growth ethos must be revealed and we must instill in our society a new environmental ethic—one of reverence and respect for nature.” My project on Grey Owl certainly was timely.

For the CSF I became the Laurentian Project’s link between the francophone teachers in Quebec City, and anglophone in Peterborough. The Quebec City connection kept my French language alive. The fact that Nancy Ryley, a CBC-TV producer, became interested in making a documentary film about Grey Owl added real purpose to my continuing research on his life. Her award-winning film on Grey Owl, using stills and documentary film footage, as well as interviews with those who had known him, appeared on CBC in December 1972.The opportunity arose of making a presentation at the annual meeting of the Ontario Historical Society at Trent University in the late spring of 1971, with an invitation to submit the final version of the talk to *Ontario History*. My good friend, Gillian Hawes, CSF secretary, on her

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own time, generously typed my several drafts. “Grey Owl” became my first article to appear in a Canadian historical journal.

Back I went to my Ph.D. program in the summer of 1971. Through an energetic correspondence and the first of four research trips to England (1971, 1972, 1975, and 1976), I succeeded in locating several of Archie Belaney’s boyhood acquaintances. An enquiry letter to the Hastings *Observer* during my first research trip in 1971 led me to Percy Overton, who in turn put me in communication with members of the McCormick family in Australia. Through their help I obtained the address of George McCormick, who had lived next to the Belaneys seventy years earlier. In early December 1972 I visited Mr. McCormick, a World War One veteran and a retired major in the British Army in India, at his home in Maidstone, Kent. I was so excited to meet him, I took a train from London in the wrong direction, quite a way as I recall, and had to phone and arrange my arrival for the following day.

In September 1971, on my first trip, I had located Ivy Holmes, a childhood friend, who he had bigamously married in 1917 while in England recovering from his injury at the front. She had remarried and lived in Farnham, Surrey. With his aunts and Ivy, Archie reverted to his English accent, did not drink, and, of course, made no reference to his previous marriage in 1910. They fell in love and, with his aunts’ blessing, married in February 1917. Ivy accepted Archie’s plan of a life together in the Canadian forest. He lived totally unrestrained in his imagination. The couple decided that he should leave first (while the war was still on, wives could not accompany their husbands back to Canada). He sailed on 19 September 1917. She never saw him again. He made no call to Ivy to join him in Canada, but he finally told her about his previous marriage in 1910 to Angele Egwuna, a Temagami Ojibwe woman. She obtained a divorce in 1922 on the grounds of bigamy.

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The English side of my subject's life was largely sketched out by the time I moved to Calgary in the summer of 1974. Archie Belaney had been raised by his two maiden aunts Ada and Carrie Belaney, in the town of Hastings. His maternal grandmother lavished all her attention and most of her revenue on her only son, George, who received an expensive education. He wasted much of the capital his grandmother still retained, eventually departing for the United States to invest in an orange-grove plantation. After his Florida investment failed, George returned to Britain with his wife, English-born Kittie, pregnant and half his age. Kittie gave birth to Archie shortly after their arrival in Hastings. Two years later he abandoned Kittie. Shortly before their ne'er-do-well brother decamped, Ada and Carrie had intervened and had taken Archie to live with them.

As a boy his passions were North American Indians and wildlife. Ada, to her credit, understood the importance of the natural world to him and allowed him to keep his rabbits, snakes, and mice on the top floor of their home. With his books on Indians, his menagerie, and his solitary walks to look for plants and animals, the lonely boy lived in a dream world of his own making. His admiration for the North American Indians grew, so much so that he wanted to go and live with them in the Canadian forest. When he was 17, he did so.

To discover details about Archie's Northern Ontario years I headed north in the early 1970s many times to Temagami and later to Biscotasing, about 150 kilometres to the west, between Sudbury and Chapleau on the Canadian Pacific line. Off I went with a few clothes and a Uher tape recorder. In the spring of 1912 Archie Belaney appeared in the tiny lumbering town of Biscotasing. In Bisco he became well known for his skill in knife throwing, his expert piano playing at dances, and his heavy drinking. To support himself he worked in the summer as a forest ranger and guide, and a trapper in the winter. By this point he had lost his English accent

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and, if asked, he repeated his well-polished tale of being the son of a Scots frontiersman and an Apache woman.

With the declaration of war in August 1914 Archie enlisted in the Canadian Army, not immediately, and not in Northern Ontario. He signed up instead the following May, for reasons unknown, in Digby, Nova Scotia. His first military order was to get his hair, which hung down to his shoulders, cut. When asked by the recruitment officer if he had had any previous military experience, Archie replied he had served previously, in the "Mexican Scouts, 28th Dragoons." At the front Archie, an excellent shot, served as a sniper until a serious injury in his right foot took him out of the war in April 1916. He was hospitalized in England.

Archie returned to Bisco totally overwhelmed by the horrors of the war. He had seen inconceivable slaughter. His personal life was in total disarray. When out of the bush Archie was alcoholic with all the mood changes that accompany the condition. The friendship of Alex and Anny Espaniel and their children saved Archie. It is an important cultural value of the Anishinaabeg to be generous and helpful. Provided their guest abstained from drinking and behaved himself, they allowed him to stay with them on their trapping grounds. Archie lived with them for several winters in the early 1920s. With them he perfected his command of their language and learned more about the Ojibwe way of life. He gained a new appreciation of the northern forest. In his own words in one of his notebooks now held in Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, he recorded this thought. In his early days he did "everything speedy, rip tearing speed." After he met Alex he acquired "the appreciation of the woods in its fuller sense." From the Espaniels Archie learned the "Indian way of doing things." Alex and Anny's son Jim explained this to me in August 1971. This is what "the white man calls conservation" (Smith, *Land of Shadows*, page 177). Jim's sister Jane, then a girl of about ten, kept all her life a most positive impression of this Englishman who loved the Anishinaabeg's way

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of life. “We always called him Archie… like a member of the family… he stayed with us so long.”

A chance meeting on a short trip back to Temagami in the late summer of 1925 with Gertrude Bernard, called Anahareo, a young Iroquois woman, led Archie to propose that they spend a winter trapping together in the Abitibi region of Quebec. The turning point of his life came in the months to follow. Anahareo’s plea to save two beaver kits whose mother they had caught influenced Archie to begin his crusade for conservation. Finally, he had the opportunity to do what Ada had stressed relentlessly, to make something of his life. Anahareo initially encouraged him to write.

His articles led to his appointment in the spring of 1931 as a conservation officer, or caretaker of park animals, with the Department of the Interior’s national parks branch at Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba; after six months he was transferred to Prince Albert National Park in Saskatchewan. During the Great Depression, a time when thousands of Canadians were thrown out of work, Archie got a job. He completed his next three books at Prince Albert National Park. The “beaver man” lived at Beaver Lodge, a log cabin roughly 18 by 20 feet, on Ajawaan Lake. The beaver that he and Anahareo had tamed, and others to follow, built their lodge both outside and inside the cabin, thanks to a connecting underwater tunnel. Films were made of them.

In July 1971, just after my year with the CSF ended, I interviewed Anahareo for several days in Kamloops, B.C. where she was living at the time. Once I had settled in Calgary in 1974 it was possible to meet many individuals who had known Grey Owl at Prince Albert National Park in the 1930s. By the mid-1970s I had most of my research completed, but other projects intervened, including teaching, of course, and family responsibilities with the arrival of Nancy’s and my two sons: David (1983) and Peter (1987). Subsequent episodes will reveal many other projects of mine in

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Canadian history. Then I resolved in the late 1980s to complete Grey Owl. *From the Land of Shadows* was published in 1990.

After half a century of interest in Grey Owl what do I make of him? He certainly, British understatement, was a troubled man, with many contradictions, but I still hold to the interpretation offered in my sketch contributed about a decade or so ago to the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. "The story of Archie Belaney's rise to international fame is remarkable. Having led a life without purpose and direction, in his forties he transformed himself. As Grey Owl, he became the prophet of a vitally important message. Sometimes individuals on the fringe of society see critical issues more distinctly than those in the centre. He saw one truth clearly, the need to work for the conservation of the environment to preserve Canada's forests and wildlife. He was decades ahead of his time."

A Short Note on Sources

The best summary of my understanding of Archibald Stansfeld Belaney appears in *From the Land of Shadows: The Making of Grey Owl* (Saskatoon, 1990; repr. Vancouver and Seattle, 1999). My sketch in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is available at: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/belaney_archibald_stansfeld_16E.html. A short well-illustrated account is Jane Billinghurst's *Grey Owl. The Many Faces of Grey Owl* (Vancouver, 1999). For background on the making of the feature film, see: Jeremy Eberts, Dane Lanken and Anthony Hobbs's book, with foreword by Pierce Brosnan, *The Making of Richard Attenborough's Grey Owl* (1999).

Belaney's four books are *The Men of the Last Frontier* (London, 1931), *Pilgrims of the Wild* (Toronto, 1934), *The Adventures of Sajo and her Beaver People* (London, 1935), and *Tales of an Empty Cabin* (London, 1936). Excellent published reminiscences

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of Grey Owl include the memoir by his Iroquois wife, Anahareo, *Devil in Deerskins: My Life with Grey Owl* (Toronto, 1972). Sophie McCall edited and provided an afterword to the volume in a new printing, brought out by the University of Manitoba Press in 2014. Also see Lovat Dickson's *The House of Words* (Toronto, 1963). His publisher in England also completed the well-written biography *Wilderness Man: The Strange Story of Grey Owl* (Toronto, 1973). A. G. Ruffo, *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney* (Regina, 1996), is an interesting imaginative recreation by a descendant of the Espaniel family who befriended Belaney in Biscotasing after World War I. A revised edition has just appeared (Wolsak & Wynn) with a new introduction with further insights by the author. Kristin Gleeson's *Anahareo. A Wilderness Spirit* (Tucson, Arizona, 2012) reviews well the life of the extraordinary woman whose pleas to save two beaver kits led to Grey Owl's decision to work for the conservation of wildlife.

Albert Braz has written two important articles: "The modern Hiawatha: Grey Owl's construction of his aboriginal self," in *Auto/biography in Canada: critical directions*, ed. Julie Rak (Waterloo, Ont., 2005), 53–68, and "St. Archie of the wild: Grey Owl's account of his 'natural' conversion," in *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*, ed. Janice Fiamengo (Ottawa, 2007), 206–26. His full study, *Apostate Englishman. Grey Owl the Writer and the Myths* was published by the University of Manitoba Press in 2015. Braz's intensive examination of Grey Owl's writings is a welcome addition. The University of Alberta English Professor leaves aside the controversy about Grey Owl's imposture to reappraise his contributions as a conservationist and nature writer. His bibliography contains an impressive list of what appears to be every major article and book written about Grey Owl since his death in 1938. Rosmarin Heidenreich provides an overview of Archie Belaney's or Grey Owl's life, in *Literary Impostors. Canadian Autofiction of the Early Twentieth Century* (2018), 71-

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116. Tina Loo provides a critical assessment of Grey Owl's conservation work in *States of Nature. Conserving Canada's Wildlife* (Vancouver, 2006), pp. 111-117. I enjoyed greatly the article by Pierre Home-Douglas, "A Great Canadian, Warts and All. Grey Owl's biographer defends the legacy of the man born Archie Belaney in England," *Montreal Gazette*, 25 September 1999, page D7.

Canadian filmmaker Lloyd Walton's video (about 17 minutes) on Biscotasing makes Grey Owl's Northern Ontario hometown come alive. He describes the filming and the village in his historiography, "A Portal Opens," in his memoir, *Chasing the Muse: Canada* (Victoria, B.C., 2019), pp. 62-73. In 1973—half a century ago! —I was the researcher for what was originally an automated slide show. Here is the link: https://youtu.be/o3mTqZfQ1Jo.

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