Richardson, Indians and Empire: History, Social Memory and the Poverty of Postcolonial Theory

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Abstract
Canada's first novelist is the usual reply.1 He was born at Amherstberg in present day southern Ontario in 1796. When the War of 1812 broke out, he was sixteen, bored with school and fired up to join the Army in defence of Upper Canada against the Americans. He became a volunteer in the 41st Regiment, was involved in the surrender of Detroit to the British, took part in a number of skirmishes and battles in the years 1812 and 1813 in the Western District region of the front, until he was captured, together with most of his regiment, at the ignominious defeat at Moraviantown in October 1813. He spent a year as a prisoner of war in Frankfort, Kentucky under difficult circumstances before being paroled back to Canada, this time with a full commission in the British Army. On the way over to fight Napoleon's second coming, the Battle of Waterloo was fought and for the first time in a generation Europe found itself with an uneasy peace. Richardson became part of a surplus war machine, scratched and scraped for the retention of his full commission by getting posted to the West Indies for a year, before lapsing back into the life of a half-pay British officer spent mainly in France in the mid-twenties.
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Who was John Richardson?

Canada's first novelist is the usual reply. He was born at Amherstberg in present day southern Ontario in 1796. When the War of 1812 broke out, he was sixteen, bored with school and fired up to join the Army in defence of Upper Canada against the Americans. He became a volunteer in the 41st Regiment, was involved in the surrender of Detroit to the British, took part in a number of skirmishes and battles in the years 1812 and 1813 in the Western District region of the front, until he was captured, together with most of his regiment, at the ignominious defeat at Moraviantown in October 1813. He spent a year as a prisoner of war in Frankfort, Kentucky under difficult circumstances before being paroled back to Canada, this time with a full commission in the British Army. On the way over to fight Napoleon's second coming, the Battle of Waterloo was fought and for the first time in a generation Europe found itself with an uneasy peace. Richardson became part of a surplus war machine, scratched and scraped for the retention of his full commission by getting posted to the West Indies for a year, before lapsing back into the life of a half-pay British officer spent mainly in France in the mid-twenties. He got married in the British Embassy in Paris in the mid-twenties, probably more for his good looks than his income, probably waiting for another war to get him back on full pay, but in the meantime, we think, doing a bit of gambling, reading, attending theatres and being seen, as they then said, about the town, with an upwardly mobile, Beau Brummel set of aspirations and anxieties.

Around 1826, he put pen to paper, hoping to cash in on the new market for literature, especially novels, that suddenly opened up. The appetite for fiction was huge, stretching from the Silver Fork aristocratic fare to pulp, from satirical attacks on the establishment to romances. Fashion ruled the day. One season naval novels would be in, the next season military novels - all tapping into memories and constituencies from the late war, especially Wellington’s campaigns in the Peninsula.
Richardson had his own angle on this war, albeit a colonial side-show in the wilderness of Canada. He sent a prose piece to the New Monthly Magazine in London on his experiences, which got published alongside Stendhal's acid letters from Paris. He followed this up with a couple of verse pieces - one on Tecumseh - which were competent, very late-in-the-day imitations of imitations of Byron. They gave Richardson a kind of gentlemanly authority in the area of polite literature; at least, he legitimized himself in his own eyes. These performances were, quite literally, class acts, placing Richardson in a respectable niche, at the same time that he was carving out a distinctive territory for his writings. A novel, *Ecarte*, the name of a card game more difficult than snap and more socially acceptable than poker, was published with some success in 1829, before he really got down to his most successful novel, *Wacousta*, published in 1832. This is the novel that anchors the canon of English-Canadian literature, the genesis text of that early Family Compact generation looking back to that first great period of British arms in North America, after the French had gone down to defeat on the Plains of Abraham, when that thin red line had held out against the massed power of the Western tribes under the loose leadership of Pontiac. The siege of Detroit in 1763 was the Troy that never fell, in a land and empire that had not yet been fractured by the American Revolution. Detroit, Pontiac, and the disciplined professional soldier, Major Gladwyn, as the unflappable commandment of the fort, was a kind of Loyalist dream-beginning to an empire that never, from their point of view, made it in North America.

Undergraduates in Canada, if left to themselves, and deprived of Northrop Frye's notion of the Garrison Mentality or of Margaret Atwood's *Survival* equivalent, get lost in the gothic thickets, although when they realize that Mrs. Moodie is waiting for them in the genteel bush when they emerge, they can be reconciled to the thickets of Richardson.

I won't narrate the plot.

It made Richardson some money, but not enough. So, he joined a mercenary army called the British Legion, which was raised with the controversial connivance of Parliament to intervene in the Carlist War of Succession in Spain. It was a futile participation, very ill-equipped, extremely divisive between Whigs and Tories in England. Richardson got his title Major Richardson from this escapade and also got himself a reputation as a political writer of some ability and few scruples from the reports he sent back to London.

He obviously impressed enough people on the Tory side to get appointed as *The Times* correspondent to cover the aftermath of the Canadian rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada at 300 pounds per year. Unfortunately for him, he found himself persuaded, when he arrived back in the colony, after having spent more than half of his life abroad, by the arguments and influence of Charles Buller and Lord Durham, and sent
back Whig reports to a decidedly non-Whig paper. From that moment, he was stranded, with his Reformist principles intact, but without income or influence. He tried to shift himself into the politics and culture of Upper Canada, taking a loyalist, British line on Canada past, present and future, without having a political bone in his body and with, given the influx of immigration that had arrived in the Province since his departure for Waterloo, a quite weak sense of a new, volatile shifting of the cultural and social boundaries he remembered from his youth and that he had, quite naturally, carried with him in his travels.

He wrote *Wacousta*, Part 2 called *The Canadian Brothers; or, The Prophecy Fulfilled. A Tale of the Late American War* (1840), which is just that: me, my brother, General Brock, Commodore Barclay and the Battle of Lake Erie. A historical novel, with reminiscence, some plot, but without the extravagance of emotion and conception that found its way into *Wacousta*. He followed this up with an official *History of the War of 1812*, commissioned with some reluctance by the Legislature, and that turned heavily into an account of the activities of the 41st Regiment in the Western District.

By 1842, Richardson was scrambling, screaming, fidgeting his increasingly destitute way through the labyrinthine contortions of power, politics, governors and parties in the two Canadas, now formally yoked into a United Province, during the forties. History was leaving a lot of people, institutions and attitudes behind in this decade and Richardson had put so much of his metaphoric money and ambitions into the Compact camp, that when it lost out utterly in the new political arrangements, there was nothing for Richardson to do but to scratch for what he could get and that was so little that it drove him to distraction and his second wife to an early grave. In 1848, after one quick, final visit to Walpole Island, he abandoned Canada in the after-wake of the Annexationist Manifesto and went down to New York. He tried to make it as an historical writer in the Cooper, frontier tradition - *Wacousta* had done well in mutilated textual form in the United States - and when that didn’t bring him enough either to eat or to keep up his pretentions, he wrote pulp fiction.

He died of starvation in 1853.

This is simply a life, one ready-made for the National Script that, soon after Confederation, enlisted him as honorary literary anchor of the good ship, the Dominion of Canada. The English-Canadian narrative of nation (Bhabha) begins at this point. This is fine: up to this moment, most of what has been said about Richardson slots into this frame of nation. But this account is now in such trouble that it is as well not to push it too much. This is, on reflection, not such a loss. One doesn’t have to think much about Richardson to figure that he belongs more readily to an imperial script than to a purely national one. British North America is what he is about and that, for him, boils down to the area he mapped out for the British reader in the opening section of *Wacousta: Michilimackinac,*
the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence, the region that would include the present states of Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, northern New York. In short, what was known in the late eighteenth century as the Old Northwest. That means, then, the first British Empire, the mercantile one that went down one historical tube with the American defection, not the fully industrial-military complex of British Empire Two that the nineteenth century threw up and the one that everyone in the heart of postcolonial country today is attempting to throw off: Ashis Nandy, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha territory. There are ideological and historical discriminations to be made here. Imperialism is a word that totalizes, but that needs, rigorously and carefully, to be considered in defined historical contexts. It is one of those words, like capital, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty's subaltern studies perspective, that bullies the specific features of specific histories into its own order. Richardson's empire is the First One. This gets me, in a preliminary way, to the yoking of Richardson and empire.

How about the Indians?

There were a lot of them in that Old Northwest: Ottawa, Potawatomi, Winnebago, Chippewa, Miami, Shawnee. In addition to these populations, John Askin, Richardson's merchant grandfather, is believed to have had three of his first children in a relationship with an Ottawa woman between 1772 and 1779, before he married his Canadien Detroit wife in 1773 by whom he had six further children. John Richardson's mother was, in one prevailing interpretation, the daughter of this Indian woman and the Askins and the Richardsons - the whole extended family - lived and worked continuously in what continued well into 1812 to be Indian country.

So, at last, we have it: Richardson, Indians, Empire. But now we have got this far, what have we got?

For a start, we can notice that Richardson is the child/grandchild of Indians and Empire, with kinship affiliations connecting him to all parties in the Northwest:

(1) French through his grandmother Barthes; (2) Ottawa through that putative, absent grandmother; (3) British through his (Scottish) military surgeon father and (Northern Ireland Scots/Irish) grandfather. The whole Askin family spoke French and English interchangeably and John Askin Junior and his son John Baptiste Askin had close trading and military connections with the Ottawa and the Potawatomie. If John Richardson had stayed on in Canada after the War of 1812 he would have become a splinter of the Family Compact which took over the running of the Province in the post-war years. Wherever he eventually moved, it was always within the frame of empire, quite often in the most literal, patronage sense of the word. He was the child, product and milker of an imperial network. We could say that these two discrete items - Indians and Empire - found a lodgement inside the frame of Richardson himself. Not equally, not totally, not easily, but there. But having suggested the
co-implication of these terms in the same man, it becomes important to sort out the gravitational weighting of this implication, the way in which these are, by no means, reconciliations of identity, and are, most decisively, refusals, denials, camouflaged and brittle distancings of sensed association.

In doing this, we would not be working simply with the facts of Richardson's Indian birth relationship, but with the way in which he, subsequently, formally in his novels, informally outside of them, acknowledged, occluded, eluded this connection. We are dealing with emotional currents inside an order of symbolic arrangement, and often in a later social, professional circumstance which imposed its own tacit as well as explicit codes of expectation on what, apart from what he could personally say about these matters, and what audience/convention-wise he was constrained, positively and negatively, to say. His cradle in Amherstberg in 1796 had shadows and contexts to it that had to wait over thirty-five years for his own glance to look back on it. Of course, he didn't ever do that Amherstberg moment. He did the Pontiac uprising before it, and the War of 1812 after it, giving to this pivotal, in his work, unspoken moment, a brackets of Pontiac and Tecumseh. In this brackets of actual as well as imperially constructed Indians, neither his mother who died in 1810, nor his father who married again within six months and who lived on in Amherstberg until 1832, directly featured. Even to hint at formations of fictional Indian presences standing in such displaced, positive contrast to the negation and psychological absence of his parents opens up areas of Richardson's texts to interesting interpretative possibilities. We meet seams of emotional engagement and ideological representations and misrepresentations everywhere in his work that remind one of Homi Bhabha's comment on stereotypical constructions of the other: 'The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (that the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations.'

There is no doubt that the Richardson-Indian-Empire intersections have explicit and complicit simplifications, fixed as well as fixated forms of representation, a quite often moving attempt to control and deny the play of difference which, when buckling under the pressure of this control, yielded differences of such brutal and grotesque a kind that they exceeded - in the figures of Wacousta and Westbrook - the territorial limits of the social, the human and the natural that his time, period and class regarded as normative.

But I am uneasy with this introduction of Homi Bhabha, whose language and diagnosis are rooted in postmodern, neo-colonial space, in experiences and reflections that are a very long way from Richardson, interfering radically, root and branch, with the cultural meeting-ground, battleground
of that first Empire in the Northwest. And it is here that my grudge against some of the totalizing aspects of postcolonial theory in the Columbus 500 moment begins to show and my sympathy with E.P. Thompson’s poverty of theory stance comes out. It is no secret that there are longue durée intellectual and ideological features to the way literature represents contact situations: colonial discourse features, tropes, themes, motifs that pass through Hispanic, French, English texts as European scripts. Many of these accounts are analytic, retrospective autopsy overviews from the centres of empire. The temptation to script Richardson, Indians, Empire in this way is not particularly effective for grasping the stranded, islanded, specific case of time, place and belief between different cultures in differential modes of formation, reformation, deformation that characterized their interaction.

What I am saying here is that the Old Northwest in the period between 1760 and 1812, although the site of confrontations between French, British, American and Indian forces, remained isolated into the forms of life that marked the fur-trading regime, remaining for a time immune to the trans-Appalachian flood of settlers that poured into Kentucky and Pennsylvania after the Revolution, and that was arrested in northern New York by the strength and diplomatic successes of the Six Nations. Fort Pitt and Fort Detroit were small outposts with a sense of being at the most distant communicative edge of a commercial empire. John Askin, Richardson’s Scots-Irish grandfather, after arriving at Albany at the age of nineteen in 1757, spent all of his trading life in Michilimackinac and Detroit. Although his connections with fur traders like Alexander Henry and McGill were close and life-long and he played an impeccably sober role in his slot of empire, his connections, knowledge and family became quite local to the mix of cultures - Canadien, Indian, British - that he lived next to and inside of. I am very keen to emphasize the embedded situation of the Askin-Barth families in that territory of lineages and genealogies going deep into time and equally deeply, for many of them, into the lives, families and structures of the surrounding Indian peoples. The New People, the Metis whose consolidation into a political entity at Red River has been traced by Jacqueline Peterson, were already a social, fully-fledged community in existence in Askin’s time. Askin, his eldest daughter Madelaine by (let us assume) his Ottawa consort, and by extension, John Richardson himself, her son, all came from this very interesting space. He was, however ambiguously he would carry this inheritance into a very different, ideologically-charged, racist world, a Native Son, in Richard Wright’s sense.

As a final way of hammering the isolated fullness of this microworld home, we have to remind ourselves that it was only with the arrival of a settled and civil social and domestic order that a regime of discrimination that patrolled the borders of kinship and culture enforced itself in
these places. Sylvia Van Kirk (1980) has described this process with some accuracy.  

It is not difficult to sense the impact of these events on John Richardson's self-reflections. And if we see him as the crucified remembrancer on the cross of the spinningly-different eras that he had to handle in his fifty-odd years of life, it is not hard to see what a terrible and multiple burden of mediations, shames and uncertainties he had to negotiate to both remember and remain whole, or at least coherent to himself.

But even Richardson's difficulties could be said to pale next to the difficulty of a modern interpreter getting back to him, getting back to what George Grant, incorrectly of course in his essentialist way, might have called Richardson's primal space.  

The battle that sent Richardson to Kentucky as a prisoner of war, killed Tecumseh and broke that line of Indian resistance that had spent two generations since the French and Indian War trying to stave off annihilation and removal. The Northwest became American and as landscape, detail, history it got overlaid with an apparatus of mythological narrative. Cass and Schoolcraft turned the defeated Indians into, at once, anachronism and antiquities, and the loser empires of France and Britain into a family quarrel that went divinely wrong.

Then came Parkman and Bancroft. After them, in a more satisfying and totalist metaphor, Turner's frontier thesis; and finally, in the first global, national flush of the Cold War, the academic benedictions of self-congratulation: Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land (1950) and a flush hand of American Adams (Lewis) and, in a retrospect of schematic finalization of the Indians of the Northwest seen through the eyes of the eighteenth century Scotch Common Sense philosophers, Roy Harvey Pearce (1957) moving the real pieces aside, leaving us with - who could ask for anything more? - the Idea of the Savage, of Savagery sans even Savage. Consummatum est.

The frontier as a historical thesis was a clearance, removal device enabling the winners to thematize their new world in their own image, an image locked into the utopian shape of their own desires. Here, with Adam and Walt, the air is bracing, fresh, free, moral, transcendental. But, in its heyday, 1890 - 1970, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier was the enabling theory of American Studies in its literary and historical forms.

Typology as forgetting.

Typology as removal.

What guarantee do we have that the tangle of theory that now interpelates us into its domain of postmodern, postcolonial discursive delights, is any different?

Listen to this delphic utterance from Frank Davey: 'The dead are dead because they have, at best, problematical access to discourse'.

Columbus, we know, is dead, but certainly in the lead-up to 1992 he didn't want for access to discourse. 'Columbus' in this reincarnation,
however, was simply Turner's 'frontier' in contemporary, dare I say it, postcolonial drag.

The last section of this paper is going to be a Columbus, postcolonial, E.P.Thompson excursion which, in its conclusion, may indicate one way of regaining access to that primal Askin space of Richardson, Indians, Empire that gives undertow and integrity to Richardson's fictions.

Columbus did do something with himself. He was not without talent. He brought the kiss of death to the aboriginal populations of the Americas; the kiss of a kind of economic, political and cultural life to the expansion of Europe into this hemisphere. Like those Russian dolls fitting into each other, he contains symbolic multitudes. All the villainy of exploration and empire grow from the shadow of Columbus, but also in European eyes, the heroism. The fascinating thing, then, about the massive Columbus myth is its pan-European frame: it stands at the beginning of European expansion to other parts of the globe; his first contact with the natives of Hispaniola has been scrutinized again and again, as the archetypal first contact of all first contacts. Perhaps justifiably so, since, as Stephen Hugh Jones has pointed out, 1492 was the first and last time that two whole populations, living in separate physical and mental worlds, previously unaware of each others' existence, met face to face.17

Even when the scramble for empire grew nasty between the British and the Spanish before and after the defeat of the Armada, Columbus was never swallowed into the defamatory Black Legend that Protestant imperial propaganda visited on the brutalities of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Columbus, almost by tacit agreement among the imperial power-squabbles, enjoyed an Ishmael-like immunity. As if his discovery of the New World were a gift, divinely ordained, to a Christian world as its reward, in Spain certainly, for having defeated Islam and expelled the Jews. It was, indeed, a New World Order, especially if we throw in Gutenberg. The Italian Lazzaro Buonamico caught the prevailing euphoria in the following words: 'Do not believe that there exists anything more honorable to our and the preceding age than the invention of the printing press and the discovery of the new world; two things which I always thought could be compared, not only to Antiquity, but to immortality'.18 Columbus, then, even before the United States would retroactively embrace him for his status as the genesis of its Americas, got here in the dawn's early light and got his transcendental signifier status before the full nastiness got under way. Like Kurtz, all Europe has gone into the making of Columbus.

Now, it seemed by 1992, the unmasking of Columbus, in a deconstructive frenzy, came upon us, an endeavour again self-contracted to the discursive theory mills of Anglo-American thought. The site of the demythologizing and mea culpas was still heavy with the imperial project. One had an uneasy - although ultimately unfair - feeling in reading Todorov's Conquest of America from this side of the Atlantic, of a
re-accommodation, re-tooling job underway from Versailles, as indeed, with Peter Hulme's more distinguished *Colonial Encounters*, one detected the revisionist atmospherics of a post-imperial Britain revisiting past sites. Both Todorov and Hulme bring an informed radical scepticism to bear on their colonial texts, which were, in truth, imperial texts wading through colonized space with their own Blucher boots. These reflection-texts of empire have an important value for certain target audiences and target cultures attempting to extricate themselves from their histories: catch-up time of conscience and method in the old imperial corrals and their outlying pastures. The target audience is, by no means, the Maya of Guatemala or Yucatan, the Mohawks of Oka. These peoples are still the exemplary fish caught in the think-net harness of empire, a harness strapped comfortably in this, hopefully, late dusk to a flock of well-trained, hermeneutic Minervan owls. The New Net, as Witi Ihimaera might put it, Goes Fishing.

The descent into discourse, the transformation of the world, history, economics, power itself, into the textual site of language, has been one of the most persistent forces in European thought since the Second World War, from structuralism and post-structuralism to deconstruction. Revolution, revelation, revaluation, devaluation have all fallen into an aftermath of Saussure. Bryan Palmer, speaking about Levi-Strauss and the beginnings of structuralism, makes this point about the take-over, take-off point of language as the key dominant formation of modern and postmodern scholarly discourse: 'In universalizing Saussurian premises about *langue*, imposing them on economies, kinship systems, and exchange relations within 'primitive' societies, Levi-Strauss forced language out of the confines within which Saussure himself willingly placed it, literally initiating an interpretative moment in which any and all signifiers floated free of the referential constraints of material moorings'.

What makes me uneasy about these developments is the way postcolonial discourse itself has emerged as a penthouse/cellar within this panoptic prison house of free-floating linguistic signifiers.

This is why I introduced into my title a whiff of E.P.Thompson's anti-Althusser polemic, *The Poverty of Theory*. I asked myself what that part of contemporary postcolonial which tended to collapse different imperialisms, frontiers and societies into one Manichean morality play could do for what, in my research on Richardson, was turning out to be a quite complex and recalcitrant subject, one hard to locate with any of the current touchstone theories of nation, state or empire. The deconstructive peeling back of successive layers of interpretative frames as a way of re-accessing territory had its theoretical indebtedness. The post-structuralist basis of the postcolonial was also good for cleaning up the rigid determinism of structuralism and opening up notions of power, domination, agency, subject positions. But in downgrading history and off-loading, as a phenomenological archaism, the notion of experience as
a concrete lived activity in actual and active communities, the various posts often inflicted a stasis of theory on the events, objects and people they set out to address.

Thompson, in his assault on what he called Althusser’s self-regulating orrery of thought, moved into his not unusual gear of metaphoric overkill, one which expressed his own investment in the socialist politics of the Cold War period, the imaginative vigour of which found its way into *The Making of the English Working Class*. Take this wonderful passage from *The Poverty of Theory*:

> A cloud no bigger than a man’s hand crosses the English Channel from Paris, and then, in an instant, the trees, the orchard, the hedgerows, the field of wheat, are black with locusts. When at length they rise to fly on to the next parish, the boughs are bared of all culture, the fields have been stripped of every green blade of human aspiration; and in these skeletal forms and that blackened landscape, theoretical practice announces its discovery: ‘the mode of production’.

> Not only substantive knowledge, but also the very vocabularies of the human project - compassion, greed, love, pride, self-sacrifice, loyalty, treason, calumny - have been eaten down to the circuits of capital. These locusts are very learned platonists: if they settled on The Republic, they would leave it picked clean of all but the idea of a contradiction between a philosopher and a slave.²⁰

Shades, for Australian readers, of Manning Clark. E.P. Thompson is being very English here, with his weakness for Blake, English country landscape and William Morris showing through.

I am not suggesting that theory of any kind has wrought this havoc with the Old Northwest and very early Upper Canada in the years before and after Richardson’s birth at Amherstberg in 1796. Relative to the focussed, cultivated shape of Thompson’s pastoral of England, the Old Northwest of John Askin, Richardson’s grandfather, was unfocussed, uncultivated, a *terra nullius* then and subsequently to European perceptions. The challenge of locating the gravitational specificities of that early nowhere of shifting imperial frictions, is very considerable. Many writers are uneasy with the way Thompson refuses to problematize this notion of experience,²¹ but he has refused steadfastly to abandon it. Rightly, in my opinion.

Without the elements of history, experience and social memory, the treason, loyalty, compassion and ego of Canadiens, Englishmen, Scots, Anglo-Irish, French, Shawnee, Potawatomee, Ottawa, Six Nations Indians in the period between the end of the French and Indian Wars and the War of 1812 would simply disappear.
Thompson, in his own work, drew on working class memories of its own traditions stretching in his part of England back to the Chartists and the Tolpuddle Martyrs of the 1830’s; Richardson too, I believe, drew extensively, in a coy, intensive way on the histories and social memories of his Upper Canada, of his grandparents and their associations, Native, Canadien and English. He drew on family myths; he used and was used by collective myths, compacts both national and imperial.

Richardson, Indians, Empire: we cannot unpack the dynamic and shifting features of these connections from the static, synchronic optics of a discursive-rich, neo-imperial present, in which no colonies, internal and external, people or places, are post-anything. We are not dealing with our tropes of invention, representation, fiction. As Raymond Firth put it to Edmund Leach’s proposition that all ethnography was, in the final resort, fiction: ‘The Trobriands are not Laputa, Tikopeia is not Lilliput’.22

The world, as they say, was there; it is, in spite of rumours to the contrary, here now. We need, I think, to keep in touch with the referential constraints of Bryan Palmer’s material moorings.

There was a place called L’Arbre de Croche, there was an Ottawa village there, we think Pontiac’s, in which an Indian woman, we believe, gave birth to John Askin’s first son, a year before the actual siege of Detroit in 1763, when an actual combination of Ottawa, Potawatomie and Chippewa - under the loose, general direction of Pontiac - began an all-out war against the British, garrisons as well as settlers, who had moved into the possession of Indian land after the defeat of French power in North America. Real blood, real deaths, immense suffering went on in these territories. Destruction, genocide, greed, hatred of a most fierce and obsessional kind issuing, among whites, into that frontier type that Melville caught in his metaphysics of Indian-hating; landgrabbing of an unprecedented, cynical, pre-emptive and corrupt magnitude, together with a heroism expended in good and bad causes, went on in this Northwest in these generations in a misery of literal, unsymbolized loss. Much of this texture of terrible event was bulldozed over by the amnesiac conceits of national and imperial myth, but much of it too remained tangled as retained oral memory in the underground margins of popular and tribal, pioneer as well as native remembrance.

This was the membrane space of John Richardson’s fiction, his theatre of Northwest memory, the classical meeting ground in North America of Indians and empire.

All empires are not, to paraphrase Judith Wright, one empire at last; all Indians are not one Indian at last; all deaths are not, in an important way, one Death at last. Actually, that is what both Todorov and Hulme - in spite of my swipe at them - would, in the end, uphold. The poverty of poor theory locked too rigidly into the blindness of one epistemological and heavily institutionalized moment may be the real postcolonial culprit.
NOTES


4. The reference here is to Susanna Moodie, Roughing it in the Bush (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), first published in 1852 as an account of her immigration and adjustment to Upper Canada in the 1830's.


8. One of Richardson's last productions (1851) for the New York press was a gothic-horror piece called Westbrook, the Outlaw; or the Avenging Wolf. An American Border Tale, which rehearsed, graphically and with prurient ambiguity, the bestialities and taboos that Richardson felt moved in on civil society in 'wilderness' times and 'wilderness' places, like the Western front during the War of 1812.


16. This quote came to me in this form, with this intonation of humour, from an ACSANZ (Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand) Newsletter, March 1992. The source was Frank Davey's Beyond Tish.