

Narratives of Coming Home: Gilean Douglas and Nature Writing

by Andrea Lebowitz

Nature is prodigal, but never wasteful. Even the most bizarre of her experiments have meaning and her endings are always beginnings.

—Gilean Douglas, *The Protected Place* (1979) (137)

Gilean Douglas lived to the age of ninety-three. In that time she knew many cities and isolated places, worked at many jobs from farmer to journalist, and published in hundreds of journals. But above and beyond all her accomplishments was her abiding desire for nature and writing. The two were connected and interdependent. Solitude in nature fully released her creative energies and writing was the ultimate homage to and capturing of her love of nature. Together they led her to herself.

I Origins

Born the only child of Eleanor Coldham and William Douglas in Toronto on February 1, 1900, Gilean Douglas's life ended on October 31, 1993 on Cortes Island off the coast of mainland B.C.¹

During her long, century-spanning years, she travelled widely in North America and Europe, but her true home was always in the Canadian wilderness. As the daughter of a well-to-do family, her life in a substantial city home was augmented by the country experiences of summer camping and touring and the rural pleasures of winter skiing and skating. In this respect, she was not unusual for her class. The difference rested in the depth of meaning these pastimes wrote into her life.

When she was six, Douglas lost her mother and her father's death was not long to follow. In the midst of World War I, she faced the world essentially alone at sixteen. Her relationships with uncles and aunts, of which she had several, were neither easy nor satisfactory, and, until her death, she felt that she had been betrayed by guardians who should have protected and advised her. By her early twenties, she had married unwisely and a vagabond life was hers for the next twenty years. One of her first jobs at the age of nineteen was as a cub reporter for the *New York Sun*. She lost that position fairly quickly, but worked as a writer for a travel syndicate. After a stint in public relations work, Douglas "got to the point where I could start freelancing" ("She Killed Grant Madison"). From then on she produced and placed writing in newspapers and journals throughout North America and the English speaking world. Over her career, her work appeared in several hundred publications as disparate as the *New York Times*, *Nature*, *Outdoor Canada* and *The Canadian Mining Journal*. For many years she was a feature writer for *Vancouver Sun Magazine* under her pseudonym of Grant Madison and for over thirty years—indeed, until only months before her death at ninety-three—she had a regular column, "Nature Rambles," in the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, which later became the *Times-Colonist* in 1980.

Writing and nature were always the centre of her life. Although she experienced many stormy relationships and four marriages, her involvements with men were a continual source of new beginnings and a perennial cause of disappointment. Indeed, the longest relationship that she maintained was not romantic. David Edwards, who had been working on the Anglican mission boats that ministered to coastal communities, came to Cortes Island as a young man and began to work for Douglas as a general handyman and caretaker in the 1950s. Young enough to be her son, Edwards continued to assist Douglas for the next forty years and was first among the very faithful friends who surrounded her at her death.²

During the rootless years of the 'twenties and 'thirties, Douglas worked in factories, as a journalist and at a myriad of temporary city and rural jobs. These years brought her friends and acquaintances, many of whom remained in contact with her, but this time was most important as her long apprenticeship as a writer and as a wanderer seeking solace and home in nature. She came to know and love the desert, particularly those of the southwestern US states, and the mountains. This latter love would lead her to her first wilderness home in the Cascade Mountains

II Voice and Name

Clearly not a woman to fit in easily with the demands of female conformity, Douglas was from the start an advocate of the equality of women and men. Presumably with tongue in cheek, she had Grant Madison, her alter ego, write in his most "manly" voice of the ills of married life and the necessity for women to have freedom and equality: "pitifully few of us ever consider anyone without bias, but in the case of women the scales are so loaded against them that any true estimate is impossible" (*River* 105). "He" decried the injustice of keeping women confined and asserted their rights to a life of their own. This is all the more amusing since Grant was known for being "A man's man" and for writing about "nature, animals and pioneering in the wild..." ("She Killed Grant Madison").

The use of a male pseudonym by a female writer is always an interesting subject, but it is particularly intriguing in nature writing. This non-fiction prose genre derives its authority from the eyewitness knowledge of the author. Recent critiques of the well-known nature writers Farley Mowat and Annie Dillard have rested on allegations that they did not always personally have the natural encounters about which they write. Their credibility has been questioned because the narrator of a work of nature writing is expected to have known nature not just as a passing eco-tourist but as one who has been immersed in and with the natural world. Such an experience may be filled with extremes of danger and endurance or harmony and pleasure but it is always one of abiding and lasting affiliation. It is this testing and living in nature that establishes the voice of nature writers and grants them moral authority.

The difficulty for the woman nature writer, particularly in the earlier part of this century, is obvious and immediate. The credibility of the narrative voice rests on first-hand experience but social scripts did not allow a female to live under the conditions necessary to establish authority—hence the general problem faced by female writers of establishing their authorial authority is complicated for the female nature writer by her society's refusal to allow her access to a wilderness life. While cultural definitions that equate women and nature and thus give women no place from whence to perform the cultural act of writing may create theoretical impediments, the problems for a woman who would be a nature writer in the early part of this century were much

more practical and mundane.³ The assertion that a woman could survive, often alone, in the wilderness and could willingly seek such an experience led to risibility rather than credibility. Yet without such encounters and evidence, Douglas's writing about nature might be relegated to the sentimental and inconsequential.⁴ In a *Vancouver Sun* interview that ran under the headline, "She Killed Grant Madison," Douglas explained: "I wrote an article on wild animals, and the publisher who thought no woman could possibly know as much as that about wild animals, turned it back. It was one of these men's adventure magazines. So I took the first name of my first boyfriend and the name of the street I lived on at home, and after holding the article for two years, I sent it back to the same publisher under a man's pseudonym. He took it." The name stuck and her reputation was established.

When Douglas published her first book of prose, *River for My Sidewalk* in 1953, her publisher flatly asserted that no one would believe that a woman had written the book and, once again, Grant Madison got the credit; however, the name did allow her some joke on the world as well as access to publication. With its ambiguous reversibility and its derivation from the Toronto street which marked her birthplace, it allowed her a space for sardonic observation of the world. She could play with, parody and alter the voice of this "man's man" at the same time that she had him espouse the cause of women's equality. In 1983 she killed Grant publicly but he been fading away for some time and "his" book, *River for My Sidewalk*, was about to be reprinted as hers. The waning of Madison may well track the waxing of an audience willing to accept a woman nature writer and nature narratives not delimited by derring-do adventures and the killing of large animals. (Not that Madison actually ever went so far.) Douglas's other two prose works and all six of her books of poetry appeared under her own name.

Douglas often manipulated the Grant Madison narrative voice by the application of overt sexual stereotypes. "He" would be seen to lack social graces when discovered in the bush by lady visitors:

"Well," exclaimed a strange female voice behind me, "so you *do* live in a house!"...I could see the lady was disappointed and I didn't know how to make it up to her....Then I thought of a sure-fire hit and started whistling in a come-hither manner which slightly disconcerted my guest. In a moment she was more than slightly anything. Out of the woodshed marched

At times the male narrative voice leads her into a certain archness and coyness as she tries to erase her own tracks with the cover story of her male narrator. It is not surprising that the second book on her life in the Cascades, *Silence is My Homeland* (1978), written without narratorial cross-dressing has a more unfettered narratorial voice. In this and her final work *The Protected Place* (1979), the life that she had found and made in nature was faced directly. Without the need to create the cover story of "a man's man" she could fully explore the texts of silence and protection, two key and enduring definitions for her experience in nature. She could also use more of the reflective forms of nature writing.⁵

III The Search for Place

Douglas always managed to take and make a life of her own, but finding home and community came more slowly and with greater difficulty, since a sense of betrayal and the perceived inadequacies of her guardians and loved ones was always with her. However, the turning point into a life of self-content and confidence came during the late 'thirties and 'forties. These were the crucial years of living in the Cascade Mountains not far (as the crow flies) from Kamloops, B.C..

She purchased a miner's cabin and lived for almost a decade in the valley of the Teal and Wren Rivers and Evergreen and Cougar Mountains. An initial year of coming to terms with isolation and solitude changed intimidation into release, and she settled into the pattern that would shape the rest of her life: working the land for survival, observing and immersing herself into the natural world and writing:

I remember when I first came here. The mountains made me feel so small and when the night fell, the forests seemed to threaten me with their greater darkness....Here was I, one little human being in all this immensity...(who had been) always surrounded by people and with cities everywhere. So now all this, to live in for my lifetime if all went well, seemed more than I could bear. I did not realize that I was like a starving man who has suddenly been given more food than his stomach can tolerate....First I must cleanse myself, then I must renew. Then, and not until then could I look my mountains calmly in

the face and know that the kingdom of heaven was indeed within me—if I would only let it be. (*Silence* 68-9)

Her initial sense of threat and foreboding derived not so much from the immensity of nature as from the failure and frailty of the human person within it. Having shifted her focus from the world's demands to her own inner strengths and desires, Douglas came to a profound experience of peace and contentment in nature and an unending delight in mountains:

If we still praise tall mountains and the sky
it is because there is need to know
that, in the darkly sanguine ebb and flow
with reason lashed upon the spar of why,
here is serenity: men war and die,
yet peace remains. The frail years come and
go,
but here is calm and certainty that no
mad mouth of greed can shame or terrify
("Nature Poets in Now,"
Prodigal 17).

Her achievement of a sense of serenity and fulfilment was directly dependent on nature which was also the source of her moral certainty. For Douglas, this perception of nature as the ground of her existence never wavered.

While there were other wilderness dwellers within walking distance and visitors and friends sought her out,⁶ her experience was marked by a profound solitude shared most closely by and with wild animals:

I have seen the eyes of the lynx then, too, following me at some distance in the underbrush as I moved along the trail. He seems to have quite a fondness for such sleuthing, so I judge him to be a rather curious fellow and perhaps not averse to a bit of human companionship....But if the mountain lion cares for two-footed companionship he has not announced it to me....Once I came face to face with him as I rounded a ledge of rock, and he reminded me of nothing so much as the Cheshire cat. One moment he was there and the next he had dissolved silently into the landscape while the impression of him seemed to linger on the mountain air. But he did *not* smile. (*Silence* 114)

During these years in the Cascade Mountains, Douglas grew or made most of the necessities of life and augmented her income with the proceeds of her writing. While she published poems and articles in many places, her major books were still a decade in the future.

In 1947, she was expelled from the edenic world of her mountain cabin by a fire that began spontaneously in the attic when she was out visiting friends in the city. Devastated by the loss, she again became rootless and homeless. For two years she stayed with many friends and spent some time in a summer cabin on Keats Island off the coast of B.C., where she undertook a search for a new home. Sight unseen, she bought the abandoned hundred-and-forty acre waterfront homestead of John Pool on Cortes Island. Her arrival on the island in 1949 is recollected in the first chapter of *The Protected Place*. It was here that Douglas lived the second half of her life and it was here that she came into a community that accepted her and within which she found home.

The tiny community of three hundred and fifty to four hundred⁷ was to gain a new population in the late 'sixties and 'seventies. As she often said, the generation of draft resisters and back-to-the-landers, although young enough to be her grandchildren, were her fellow spirits and friends. Finally, ideas and ways of being had caught up with her. Childless herself, Douglas did not assume a maternal role with her young compatriots but she was placed into the role of the wise elder and she found this to be a comfortable and comforting identity.

In addition to her work with the conservationists and environmentalists of the younger generation, Douglas was very involved in the Anglican Church missions to the coast, the Women's Institutes that were so important to the well being of women in rural areas, and with local government. In 1950, Cortes Island was very isolated. The provincial ferry did not come into service until the 1970s and the tiny community had to care for itself, from the necessities of life to the necessities of the spirit. The Anglican Church had mission boats which visited remote settlements along the B.C. Coast and brought residents medical assistance, supplies and spiritual succor. She travelled on one of these voyages and wrote many articles on life on the Coast. Her pieces are notable for her concern with the detail and daily reality of life in these remote settlements and her eye was particularly focused on the situation of women and aboriginal people, subjects who were often overlooked in accounts of life on the Coast.

Her work in the Women's Institute was also directed at the needs and

achievements of women in rural places. Started in Canada in 1897 by Adelaide Hoodless, the Women's Institute, the sister organization to the Farmers' Institute, sought to foster the skills of rural women, to improve their lives and work and to celebrate their achievements. In the political arena, it fought for the education of women, and, at home, it helped individuals and communities to improve their quality of life. Douglas was a local, regional and national officer of the Women's Institute for many years, and edited a work on the British Columbia Institutes, *Modern Pioneers* (1959), which celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the B.C. Institutes in 1959. On Cortes Island, WI members were busy with "spinning, basket weaving (taught by the Indians on Cortes Island), knitting, quilting, fall fairs, arranging for the first medical clinic and for the well at the school, starting a library...and all sorts of social affairs... Later members gave the school a library, financed a play shed and telephone system (and) ignited most community undertakings" (*Modern Pioneers* 82). Similarly, she became involved in the governance of the island and served for nine years in various capacities as a member of the Comox-Strathcona regional district responsible for local government of the island. Throughout these arduous years and indeed almost until the end of her life, she was a weather recorder at her home on Channel Rock at Uganda Passage, for which work she received several awards from Environment Canada. Yet, despite all these activities, the centre of her life was the land and her writing.

In these years, she called herself a farmer, and she worked a very large garden for her own needs and to sell produce and plants. She maintained a column in the *Victoria Times-Colonist* into her ninth decade and made regular contributions to the *Vancouver Sun* as well as many other publications. All of her books were produced on Cortes Island and she maintained a correspondence with a vast number of friends and fellow writers around the world. Her Christmas letter, which came out each year from the early nineteen fifties until 1991, was sent to several hundred people. As is common with many women writers, Douglas was largely overlooked by literary establishments at the same time as she was held in high esteem by a wide and loyal audience. Her gender and genre certainly had much to do with a lack of critical attention but she continued to pursue her writing despite the oversight.

During all of these activities, she lived at Channel Rock in a three-room cottage with no electricity or running water. (When she finally sold her property shortly before her death, she did it on the understanding that she would have life tenancy and that after her death

no road or electricity would be brought onto the land and that it would not be subdivided. The conservancy that holds the property has abided by these stipulations.) Channel Rock, "The Protected Place" as she called it, is stunningly beautiful. Facing southwest toward Marina Island, her cottage is built right on rock at the water's edge, although the building hugs the land so closely that it is largely invisible from the water. The front garden holds a pool and planting of heathers with stone steps carved into the rock for access to the water. With no road into the property, travel not accomplished by shank's mare down the two-kilometer trail from the main road, was by boat. Consequently both the location and the nature of travel on the island oriented Douglas to the water, and she wrote in a small bay window at the front of the cabin overlooking the sea.

Between 1952 and 1992, Douglas published six books of poetry, much of it nature poetry and several individual poems of which were set to music. Her three long prose work, *River for My Sidewalk*, (1953, reprinted in 1984), *Silence is My Homeland* (1978) and *The Protected Place* (1979), are all concerned with a life led in nature. As a nature poet, Douglas was, not surprisingly, shaped by the Romantics, particularly Wordsworth. As a nature writer, she primarily uses the two most classic forms of nature writing: the seasonal diary of a life in nature and the nature ramble, both of which were initiated by the originator of the genre, Gilbert White. As a naturalist, White linked the scientific and the poetic, a generic hybridization that has continued to mark the form. In his *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789), the daily observation of the natural world is recorded and from these events larger patterns of private and public meaning are drawn. Throughout Douglas's work, nature is a home where memory is released to connect past and future in the present space/time. A linear and end-oriented sense of time is replaced by the seasonal and cyclical and both the experience and telling of nature transform time into place. Similarly, nature allows for solitude which gives rise to a perception of spirit and value. The experience of value and desire in nature fits her for writing, which in turn allows her to enter the community through her texts.

You have been called by many names: nature, spirit, subconscious, creation, wilderness and more. No one name can contain you. You are all and yet none of them. Perhaps you are God, Manitou, Saghahie Tyee. To me you are under, over, all around. You are everything I see, hear, touch, smell, taste. Especially you are in the beauty of wind, water and light.

In silence, solitude and that sure knowing of wilderness and wild things. It is our not knowing of our vital need for you that may destroy us in the end. (*The Protected Place* 188)

A fascinating and accomplished nature writer and poet, Douglas also epitomizes many of the fundamental themes and concerns of the nature writing of women and men in Canada (see Lebowitz and Grady).

IV Nature as Home

Contrary to Northrop Frye's construction of the meaning (or, more properly, the cancellation of meaning) of wilderness in his conception of the "garrison mentality" (*The Bush Garden* 213-251), the narrative of nature for Douglas and many others is the story of the quest for and finding of home.⁸ Douglas tells her own life as a record of betrayal, expulsion and wandering from early youth when she was left an orphan at the death of her father. No familial or romantic relationship assuaged this sense of loss. Only when she discovered and settled in a wilderness cabin did she begin to feel at home.

For more than twenty years I had been homeless. It was not that I had no roof over my head during that time, but that I had too many. Roofs of relatives' houses, schools, boardinghouses, apartments, duplexes, tents, automobiles, trains, ships, summer cottages. But there had never been a home....there had never been a garden. Not a *real* garden.... then one day as I was fishing a strange western river,...I looked up at my surroundings. My right arm dropped slowly to my side, and the top of my rod broke the surface of the pool. I stood perfectly still and was not conscious that I breathed, for there, right across from me, gazing into my face with its deep-set windows, was—my home. (*Silence* 9)

Paradoxically, the construction of domesticity comes not through people but through immersion in nature. In the process, both domesticity and nature are re-defined. Douglas often engenders nature and uses both female and male representations of it; however, by employing a wide range of cultural definitions for nature, she escapes from any one, delimiting categorization.

The case of discovering her wilderness home is an interesting example. Although she faces a beloved, the gazer granting her identity is

not a man nor a face in the mirror⁹ but the place that will be home. This home is dressed in traditional homely detail: "in less than half an hour," the deserted grimy cabin is refurbished and filled with warmth and colour while outside the cabin which "looked as though it had sprung from the very soil on which it stood" is surrounded by meandering paths and flower beds but "nothing that could not live with the lovely inconsequence of forest, river and mountain" (*Silence* 10-12). While this harmonious vision takes much hard labour and time to achieve, Douglas has no regrets or reconsiderations: "I sloughed off civilization as one doffs a coat that is too tight and found that I had never been so comfortable before" (*Silence* 12). In this passage, the traditional domestic world is redefined. Domesticity is not an enclosure and erasure of her as a woman but an entrance into a new freedom. The homely domestic tasks of cleaning and renewing become the metaphors for the induction into a new way of being. Freed from the confines of the restrictive demands and definitions of civilization, the wilderness woman enters a new life. Nature's "endings are always beginnings," and the arrival at this home is the entrance into the creation of a new and more satisfactory self mapped onto the home ground of her cabin.¹⁰

Douglas's first home in nature was in the mountains and they remained as one of her primary sources of meaning and solace. Although she had assumed her mountain cabin would be her permanent home, the spontaneously generated fire that destroyed her cabin and most of her possessions including several manuscripts in 1947, also canceled a way of life. The loss was reversed only when she arrived at the abandoned Pool homestead on Cortes Island: "[i]t should all have been chilly and desolate," she wrote, "but I felt strangely warmed and comforted. I slept deeply on the camp bed in the sleeping bag I had brought with me. It seemed as though I had come home again" (*The Protected Place* 3). The sense of coming home first felt in the Cascades returned. The Cortes land had been homesteaded after World War I by John and Elizabeth Pool who referred to it as "Endahwin," the Ojibway word for home. In addition to the Pools, the land revealed the presence of earlier residents in pictographs done by aboriginal artist/shamans. "Not very far away are the shaman's cave and pictographs. Here, it seems, he practised his magic and taught it to novices. Here in this Protected Place..." (*The Protected Place* 33).

Douglas defines her responsibility to the land as one of custodianship rather than ownership. In the first chapter of *The Protected Place*,

"Three Come Home," she layers the homecoming of native residents, the Pools and herself into one tale of finding home and having time translated into the space that contains all of them. Beginning with the shaman who has dreamed the pictographs, she recounts his homecoming through the creation of his sacred rock paintings, over which she layers the arrival of the Pools and "all that had been built with care and caring" and finally her own entrance into a landscape where "everywhere I went I felt myself among friends and I knew that this was a place which had been deeply loved" (3). Her responsibility then is to preserve that place as token and homage to all of the past residents of the land as well as the generations of the future. "I felt myself an inheritor, a custodian, as far as possible, of what had been..." (*The Protected Place* 5).

During her long residency at Channel Rock, Douglas was a weather observer, farmer and writer. All of her activities were grounded in her intimate connection to the land. The sense of finding home she experienced upon arrival was transformed into the making of home in many ways: cultivating the garden, restoring both the house and the land, and, above all, making home revolved around the more and more detailed and intimate knowledge of home ground. Learning the ways of the nature around her led to further and further understanding. "After one has lived here for a time it is impossible to walk anywhere unobservantly" (*Silence* 40). Nature writing has traditionally asserted the unending tutelage of nature and the unending pleasure and instruction found in such continual observation. However, this traditional view of nature writing may be undergoing revision.

Patrick Murphy argues that the canon of nature writing now being formed and represented in works such as *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990) eschews the observational and reflective and concentrates on the "ego-bound" author and his "alienation from the object of attention" (31). He also points out that the recent anthologies of nature writing that purport to represent the subject actually embody the very limited view of one group of authors. For example, of the ninety-four authors in the Norton anthology only fourteen are women and even fewer non-white. This situation has led Karen Knowles to gather another kind of anthology, *Celebrating the Land: Women's Nature Writing 1850-1991* (1992), which concentrates on writings by women in the United States. For my part I have collected the writings of women in Canada in my anthology *Living in Harmony: Nature Writing by Women in Canada* (1996).

What both of these collections do is to refute the notion of the ego-

bound and alienated and to demonstrate that the solitary pleasure of intense observation is still in practice and that an observer, such as Douglas, does not experience alienation but is rather put in touch with all those who share the experience:

The first weather observers on this continent were the Indians and their predecessors. Now professionals have taken over, except for those amateurs like myself who do their observing at home but report to Victoria and eventually to Ottawa. When I go out twice a day to take my observations I feel close to all weather people: the Nootka scanning the sky for Pacific storm, the farmer of the Nile, the Bedouin of the Sahara, the cave man making his first slow connection between rain and cloud. (*The Protected Place* 153)

This process of learning reaps the reward not only of knowledge but also spiritual meaning.

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I have tried to learn everything there is to know about the trees, flowers, birds, animals, insects and rocks which are all around me. It has taken me years and will take more years, but I feel that every grain of such knowledge brings me closer to the great harvest of the universe (*River* 13).

Douglas is quite willing to expose herself to charges of sentimentality about her attitudes toward nature. Today she might be categorized with New Ageism. Yet she came by her knowledge through the slow process of life in nature over half a century, and for her the rewards of this wisdom and sense of home are immense:

Oh, yes, I know all the modern taboos on ‘sentimental nature writing,’ on assuming that animals can talk in their own way and that plants react to people. Maybe it is all silly sentiment. I don’t know. But I do know that persons react to places—. Always in the back of my mind was the desire for that one perfect place where I could feel fulfilled and truly at home.

I found it. I knew I had the moment I entered the mountain-fenced valley and saw the silvery shake roof of a cabin trying to peer at me over firewood and salmonberry brush. I have known it all through the years since and I can’t imagine not

knowing it forever. (*River* 70-1)

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I was led—what else can I call it in light of my seemingly foolish decisions?—away from the city, away from the crush of people and out into the quiet and aloneness of the natural world, the world where I am truly at home. Where there is timelessness, where mystery is everyday. (*The Protected Place* 53)

With the development of ecofeminism, such descriptions of the spiritual dimension of a connection with nature have been given new currency. While Douglas was always in favour of equity for women, it would be overstating the case to suggest that she called herself an ecofeminist. Yet the attitude toward art and nature expressed in such ecofeminist works as Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein's, *Reweaving the World* (1990), does echo her ideas about the spiritual dimensions of nature. In one of the essays in *Reweaving the World*, Orenstein suggests "that what might be called the 'ecofeminist arts' function ceremonially to connect us with the two powerful worlds from which the Enlightenment severed us— nature and the spirit world. If the severing of our intimate connectedness to the Earth, the sky, the dead, the unseen, and our ancestors was the accomplishment of the Enlightenment, then ecofeminism calls for an endarkenment—a bonding with the Earth and the invisible that will reestablish our sense of interconnectedness with all things, phenomenal and spiritual, that make up the totality of life in our cosmos" (279-80). In anticipation of this ecofeminist position, Douglas asks in *The Protected Place*,

Does our senseless destruction of wilderness, of the animals and people who live there, stem from our desperate, dark fear that we shall never be whole again? The story of the Garden of Eden is repeated over and over. (123-24),

Douglas shared a sense of the animate connection of all things and creatures in nature and was not afraid to declare this belief. It brought her a sense of place and home and it brought her spiritual values and a connection to the past both personal and public. Perhaps the hardest thing for her to bear was not the daily difficulty of wilderness living and survival but the thoughts of the future destruction of her home ground. Not surprisingly, her sense of custodianship of the land led her to be an advocate for environmental protection and conservation. As a member

of local government as well as through her writing, Douglas hoped to inspire the love and concern for the natural world that would lead to its protection. In this she is typical of many nature writers. ¹¹

V

Time/ Solitude/ Memory and Spirit

The work of Marcel Proust was always among the library of books that surrounded Douglas and, for her as for him, memory was awakened by the experiences of the senses and time overcome by the dominance of place. Her recollections are shaped by a Wordsworthian sensibility "of childhood memories of a different place which yet was home" (*The Protected Place* 61):

When I was a child, I lay on the summer grass looking up at the big, white clouds and imagining that they were towers and turrets of heaven. How simple everything was in those days! Now, for me, it is simple once again, after long years of needless complication. I know this: there has been thanksgiving in my heart every hour of every day since I came to this place. Here I have found faith, courage, truth and such beauty that even if there is no heaven after all, in the clouds or above them, yet I shall have walked its paths and sat beside its streams (*Silence* 48).

Although writing in a non-fiction genre, Douglas, like many nature writers, employs narrative structures to form her diaries and rambles. One meta-narrative in all of her books is the cyclical turn of the year. Within this large structure, the months shape each chapter and within this frame, the observation and experience of the events—and *thoughts*—of that time constitute the narrative of the chapter. The time-driven narrative of the month is intersected and interrupted by recollection of the personal past, inclusion of historical and scientific information, and psychic response to both the surface event and the uncovered response:

Just beyond a smaller dam—which marks the entrance to my irrigation system—is one of my favorite bathtubs. Shallow, warm and surrounded by large rocks through which a current of fresh water flows continuously, it is irresistible. Afterward I let the sun dry me as I sit, steeped in animal content, on a boulder of velvet moss. Time and space swing free for a moment. There is no beginning and no end, but only this *being*

of warmth and peace and the mesmerism of water. For these few moments I can grasp the ultimate essentials of life. Here I am, one human soul with my bed, my food, my small axe and matches for fire and my rod to add to sustenance. (*Silence* 82)

In this and many other passages, time is spatialized in the sense discussed by Joseph Frank in "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1945), for simultaneity and unity are both present in the place created in the text and in the literal place of nature that released the observer/narrator from the limits of time and allowed her access to this experience of transcendence and unity. In this sense time is turned into space. In addition, Julia Kristeva's notion of the spatialization of a text is discernible in the passage. In a recent work, Susan Stanford Friedman suggests that "for Kristeva spatialization constitutes the text as a verbal surface or place in which both space and time, function as coordinates for textual activity" (111). Constructed of horizontal and vertical axes, the first axis is a "transaction between writer and reader" while the vertical axis "implies a line starting with the text and moving down to the exterior texts, or contexts, of the text in question."

Both types of spatialization are created in Douglas's work by and through solitude and silence in nature. The linkage between solace and immersion in nature is a perennial theme of nature writing.¹² For Douglas the solace comes in large part from the psychic knowledge that is released by the experience of nature:

It has taken me nearly all my life so far to find out that this is life for me. Looking back, those years are like the time spent wandering in the wilderness. How strange that must seem to those who think that I am in the wilderness now!

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The air is cool and fragrant and that holy feeling of communion with the soil fills me completely. Such an exultancy wells up in me as I walk among my growing things! It is second—and by only a small margin—to that terrible joy I feel in the creation of a piece of writing. Here, in my gardens, I have not given birth myself but have only assisted in the delivery room. Yet the two experiences are so closely bound that it seems that one could not have come into existence without the other. (*Silence* 43, 47)

On both the horizontal and vertical axes, the text is a tale of loss, expulsion, re-discovery and union in the cyclical world of the wilderness. Nature is the time/place within which this story occurs and writing it is necessary to Douglas's psychic need for self-realization as well as to her aesthetic and political desire for the preservation of wilderness. Hence, all of her work is a meta-narrative of the wilderness which functions as the ground and home of all life. Having discovered this through her own experience, her writing is the necessary place for conveying this discovery to an audience.

VI Writing/Home

Nature and writing are always connected to home and, indeed, are home for Douglas. The "terrible joy" of creating a piece of writing and the almost equally compelling delight of working in nature are closely bound and mutually dependent. On March 1, 1992, a year before her death, her "Nature Rambles" in the *Victoria Times-Colonist* was entitled "All I Ever Wanted To Do Was Write":

Writing is all I have ever wanted to do. It is all I have dreamed of, thought about, cared for. It embraces everything: solitude, silence, the satisfaction of constructing something which I can always be improving. Sometimes I think that it is like going into the opposite form of this human world where there seems to be so little of anything but noise....

If nature is the place where time is spatialized and made home, the act of writing and the text itself are similarly spatialized. Within this space, the self is found or perhaps a better description would be that a composite self is created. Building upon the authority granted by her long residence in nature, Douglas writes as a historian, a scientific observer, an anthropologist uncovering the early residents of her beloved places and as a wise woman who has learned the value and meaning of life through her long tutelage in nature.

Feminist critics of life writing have studied the way in which women's autobiographical works create personal identities. In *Essays on Life Writing: from Genre to Critical Practice* (1992), for example, Marlene Kadar suggests that life writing should not be confined to a study of the autobiography, for while it "is a kind of writing about the 'self' or the 'individual' that favours autobiography..., [life writing also] includes letters, diaries, journals" (5) and, I would add, nature

writing. Kadar also suggests that the questioning of a clear distinction between fiction and non-fiction that has occurred in many postmodern texts can also be extended to the "boundaries between fiction and autobiography" (5). Again, I would extend both of these ideas to the suggestion that non-fiction may well draw upon fictional modes (as noted above in the discussion of spatialization and narrative structures) and that non-fiction nature writing may also be a form of life writing where the naturalist/observer/student learns herself as well as the world around her. In an essay on Anna Jameson in Kadar's volume, Helen Buss concludes that *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838) is a "corrective" to the view of "the self as unique, unitary, and independent" (57), and argues that in her writing Jameson assumes a range of identities as sociologist, political commentator, literary critic and feminist. Jameson's identity is not confined to that of writer but is instead combined with the identities of reader and critic—social and literary (Buss 57-58). These views of a composite identity constructed in and through the act of writing are particularly helpful in understanding Douglas's commentary on writing.

Writing was lifeblood to Douglas. It was the fundamental necessity of existence, which could only be fully achieved within the solitude of a wilderness life that created the space within which home and self might be found. Yet there is a paradoxical quality to this aloneness. Because of books, the library that she always had with her, the writing that she always practiced, and the reader, either herself or the reader of her texts, were always there to form a society. "Actually we are never completely by ourselves," she wrote in *Silence is My Homeland*, "[c]an I say that I am solitary when I may discuss friendship with Emerson, war and peace with Tolstoi, nature with Thoreau and history with Carlyle...?" (146). As a reader she was not alone, because she had been created by the texts that she read and could become part of their community even in her solitary wilderness home. Similarly her own texts assume a reader and create a readerly community:¹³

It all seems very simple, here in this rock beside the Wren, and I feel that I could not be doing a better thing than turning such thoughts over in my mind and writing them down so that what worth there is in them may be shared with you. For you are here with me, you who read these lines! The sun is in your face and the breeze from the uplands is wandering through your hair. There is a day before us and a night to come when we shall live intimately with soil and sky and know the

"In one of her Christmas letters, Gilean quoted Kafka: 'A book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us.' Her work is more like a door flung open so that those of us frozen in faraway places can share a life lived exquisitely on Channel Rock" (Hill 67).

Through the homes of nature and writing, Douglas's memory was released and she found psychic unity. All of Douglas's long prose works are retrospective narratives that crystallize the experiences of many years into one cycle of the seasons and create the meta-narrative of reunion and return. The reader enters this place and the writer re-enters it through the text. Writing is also the "blinding joy which comes with a poem that has stretched you to the limit, a story that is the very best that you can do here and now" (*The Protected Place* 98). Along with this delight comes a sense of moral responsibility: "[m]y writing goes out into the world and speaks for me. I must be careful of what it says, careful not to make things appear other than they are..." (*Silence* 75). And, finally, writing carries with it a responsibility toward preserving the natural world. At times this is an elegiac task: "I must write about it now so we shall not forget" (*River* 11). At other times, Douglas is more of a prophet exhorting her readers to preserve the wilderness not only for its sake but for our own:

I look up the word 'wilderness.' It is defined as 'an absence or want of order.' I wonder! It may not be *our* idea of order, but is ours the only true one—or even true at all? We speak glibly about 'the laws of nature' as though we knew them all. Perhaps wilderness embodies a law we have yet to learn. Could our city sickness be a warning of our ignorance? Could our longing for the windsweep and the wilderness be subconscious wisdom? (*The Protected Place* 150)

The implicit answer to this question is a theme of much nature writing. Wilderness is not a "want of order" but a source of order and meaning. In it, the wilderness dweller finds purpose and meaning but also herself. To live in solitude and to write of this experience most fundamentally serve as a way to self-knowledge and identity. Through the recollection and recording of her daily life Douglas makes another life of purpose and communication which in turn creates a community of readers who share her passion for the land. All of her poetry and prose partakes in this process. Written in recollection they form one cycle of seasons and survival, a calendar of growing and preserving, an almanac of a life

found in nature.

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Whatever comes I shall have had this. I shall have known what it is to work with my hands and brain on my own land and for my own sustenance. I shall have known what it is to work for the community by labor traded back and forth and by supplying vegetables. I shall have known what it is to live completely alone with nature...That is very good, it means that I can learn to know myself and to live with myself, that I can discover the ways of silence and beauty....Here, with my ear pressed close to the earth, I can listen to the very heart of humanity beating. From my primitive position I can evaluate civilization more truly and, freed from the pointless hurry and distraction of modern society, can appreciate for the first time the delicate nuances of living. (*Silence* 20)

This passage stands as a summary of Gilean Douglas's entire life in nature and her celebration of that life through writing. All meanings of the word, celebrate, apply to her desire for nature and writing. Derived etymologically from the Latin *celebrare*, to frequent, she employs the word: to extol and publicize the need for preserving the natural world; in the religious sense, to perform ritual observance; and, above and beyond all of this, to know through deep and constant frequenting.

On a literal level the readers are taken on a tour of home. Farther afield, they are shown the trails, mountains and sea that the writer considers to be part of her home ground. In turn, the readers become acquainted with the inhabitants of this terrain and exposed to its delights and dangers. More profoundly, Douglas's writing is a journey toward spiritual understanding of life and a co-journey with the reader toward a sense of community with and in nature. Through this process, the narrative of expulsion and wandering is righted in the natural world of solace and reunion. The journey leads not to an end but back to the beginning. The finding of home and meaning is transformed into the re-enacted recollection of the author's text, which initiates the reader into an analogous experience. The cycle continues.

Common to many nature writers is Douglas's belief that a life of work in and with nature is the key to protecting the environment and to

coming to a sense of one's own being and place in the world. The silence and solitude of nature release memory and through it a sense of solace, protection and home. Over and over nature writers insist upon the paradox of losing oneself in the natural world only to find one's self on a more profound level. In this respect, nature writing is a genre that uses the observation and classification of natural history to achieve the intensity and insight of poetry. Perhaps it is an overlooked form because it is not easy to categorize.¹⁴

Perhaps it is also an overlooked form in Canada because it does not conform to dominant ideologies of our supposed attitudes toward nature.¹⁵ Yet nature writing as a "marginal" and "nontraditional" genre raises many critical questions about the construction of identity, the meaning of writing and the connections between science and art. Above everything it raises fundamental questions about the relationship between the human and wilderness worlds.

Gilean Douglas in her life as well as her writings epitomizes the desire of many nature writers to celebrate in order to protect. As a woman she seeks home and the domestic but these longings are redefined in relation to place and nature rather than family. Although not all women nature writers eschew family ties, many seek and find home in and through nature. Their desire to protect and be protected is directed at the natural world and their self-identification is realized in union with the land. In this respect women such as Gilean Douglas give the lie to stereotypical constructions of female identity and monolithic definitions of Canadian attitudes toward nature.

Notes

I am indebted to Jill Milton, Gilean Douglas's literary executor for her assistance.

1. Lying at the entrance to Desolation Sound, Cortes Island is a hundred and fifty kilometers north of Vancouver. Although served by a provincial ferry from Quandra Island, Cortes is an isolated island with a permanent population of nine hundred and fifty.
[\[back\]](#)
2. Four months before her death, Douglas discharged herself from

hospital and went home to die. Linda Gagnon, the hospice volunteer for Cortes Island, organized around the clock attendants from the local population, who nursed Douglas in her home until the last few days of her life when she was moved to a neighbour's because of the difficulty of caring for her in her tiny cottage. The willingness of the community to muster this effort indicates the esteem in which Douglas was held. [\[back\]](#)

3. A significant body of work on the cultural definitions and engendering of nature now exists. Early initiators of this inquiry such as Sherry Ortner and Anette Kolodny have been joined by many who argue that engendered definitions of nature constrain or release women. A recent investigation of this topic is Patrick D. Murphy's *Literature, Nature, and Other* (1995). [\[back\]](#)
4. Paul Hiebert's *Sarah Binks* (1947) is perhaps the most notorious representation of the sentimental lady nature writer in Canadian literature. [\[back\]](#)
5. Nature writing incorporates various types of non-fiction prose from the animal story to the adventure narrative to reflections on a life lived in constant and careful observation of nature. This type brings together scientific knowledge based on detailed recording with lyrical celebration. This variation was the form most hospitable to Douglas's views. [\[back\]](#)
6. "A human hermit has been defined as 'a person who has abandoned society and lives alone.' I have made contact with a few of these recluses and found that in all cases, society comes to them" (*The Protected Place* 134). As with the hermit, society beat a path to Douglas's door. [\[back\]](#)
7. Neither the federal nor provincial governments kept official population figures for Cortes Island until the 1970s. Figures prior to that are based on anecdotal estimates by long time residents. Since there were small logging operations on the island, the