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Ian McKay

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The Quest @ 2006

I MUST THANK DAVID CREELMAN, Stephen Dutcher, Greg Marquis and Miriam Wright for their often insightful and always provocative comments on *The Quest of the Folk*, the Canadian Historical Association for hosting this interesting round-table discussion, and *Acadiensis* for preserving an edited version of this event for posterity.

I see *The Quest* as a sturdy little vessel that has sailed through some hurricanes, evaded some enemy fire, usefully delivered some passengers to destinations they might not otherwise have reached, and even captured a few vessels from the other side. Every year I get dozens of letters about the book, sometimes from students who want to undertake similar projects, and other times from readers who tell me they have hurled the book across the room, perhaps in the fond hope that some day they will be able to do the same to its author. Some people find it theoretically simplistic – and in truth, the world of critical theory has moved along a good deal since 1994 – and others say it is pretentious and overbearing. Many read it straightforwardly as an empirical report on events, and on this level I have not encountered any responses that make me feel that I fundamentally misrepresented the archival resources upon which the book so heavily depends. Others see in it a general textbook on modernity, and on this level I think the book needs to be supplemented by a thousand other titles in a host of different fields.

As Michel de Certeau says in the first chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, texts have meanings only through their readers and change along with them. They are ordered according to codes of perception that are not the ones that the author necessarily envisaged nor ones that the text necessarily authorizes.[1] *The Quest* has a life of its own. Its captain and crew send me postcards from their many voyages and tales from their latest adventures, some coming from exotic places the *Quest*'s shipbuilder had not dreamt of going (and some he has never heard of). Sometimes, when I hear of *The Quest*'s exploits and adventures, I find it hard to bring to mind the humble craft that set sail in 1994. Ten years is a long time in the career of a boat, a book and an author.

The background of *The Quest* really lies in *New Maritimes*, that radical regional magazine edited by Lorraine Begley, Gary Burrill, Michael Earle and Scott Milsom, and sustained by a host of other writers and activists, on which I worked in the 1980s and early 1990s (pointing this out in no way dilutes my own personal responsibility for the text nor implies the full or even partial agreement of my comrades-in-arms with its analysis). It was while working on *New Maritimes* that I first engaged systematically with the problems of tourism and history, epitomized in the 1980s by the Parade of Sail, the Gathering of the Clans and the annual tourist invasion of Peggy's Cove. I love David Creelman's trope of the detective – who could say no to the prospect of becoming regional history's answer to Hercule Poirot or Lord Peter Wimsey? – and yet the figure does not quite capture the intellectual voyage *The Quest* was built for. This vessel was not designed to go about exposing particular "miscreants", but to explore a concealed political and economic logic, a hidden

1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984).

Ian McKay, *"The Quest*@2006", *Acadiensis,* XXXV, 1 (Autumn 2005), pp. 152-157.

coastline of assumptions. The workshop within which *The Quest* started to take shape, in other words, did not resemble Sherlock Holmes's study on Baker Street. Rather, it was an ill-heated country-newspaper office in an Enfield basement, strewn in those days before computerized layout with scissors, paste-pots and columns on strips of paper. *The Quest* smacks, in other words, not of the detective's notebooks but of the radical rag. The first drafts of *The Quest* can be read in the back files of *New Maritimes*, and they emerged out of discussions and debates within the collective.

Radicals of the 1970s and 1980s confronted a paradox or, more accurately, a contradiction. If the region both in the past and present seemed to be alive with profound debates and movements contesting everything from arms manufacturing to environmental devastation, the region presented to us in countless official sites – often tightly coordinated with the tourism industry – seemed as static and cozy as an overstuffed Victorian sofa (one still senses this comfortable certainty in the assertion of Greg Marquis: *of course* the province/region/country simply *is* conservative, and will remain so no matter what its cultural producers say and do). It was this disjuncture between lived experience and official representations that moved an historian trained in structural social analysis to begin to wonder about why so many people would buy into a disingenuous, patronizing and reactionary version of their own region's history – in essence, into a kind of state-sponsored historical fiction that erased awkward people and divisive moments. Coming out of a graduate education in which I had long been exposed to a region that had historically been a pioneer in combative labour militancy and leftism, I was struck by how violently and completely this entire vibrant legacy had been erased – so much so that it was as though it had never happened.

This realization led insistently to an investigation into the underlying cultural and political patterns which might explain this erasure – and to ethico-political positions critical of the ability of elites retroactively to silence the voices and forget the achievements of past generations of Nova Scotians (and, by problematic but possible extensions, Maritimers and Atlantic Canadians). I believed, and actually still do believe, in the possibility of speaking a kind of unsettling relative truth to the complacent and the powerful, fortified these days by a neo-liberal ideology compulsively and destructively addicted to market metaphors.

The most valuable corrective suggested by the responses of my four critics is the point that antimodernism, which *The Quest* problematizes as an insufficient and inauthentic response to capitalist social relations, may nonetheless contain more elements of resistance than my 1994 analysis implied. One can find, one infers from them all, a much more complex pattern of resistance – a humanist protest against sexual repression and economic hardship in *Rockbound*, an assertive neo-nationalism in Smallwood's folksy "The Barrelman", a critique of unbridled capitalism in the Christian communitarianism of the co-operative movement, and assertions of a forward-looking identity in Saint John's whiggish Loyalist Days. They have a good point, and it could be taken even further – say, into examinations of the mobilization of the idea of the "Island Way" in the people's struggle against arms manufacturing and corporate farming in PEI, the uses of Evangeline as a symbol of national pride and self-determination on the part of the Acadians, or the exaltation of the age-old traditions of the First Nations as ways of critiquing the racist legacies of the Canadian liberal order. Still, as the example of J.R. Smallwood perhaps suggests, caution is in

order. I still think that, of the many elements that blended into the myth-symbol complexes found in the region, only some can really work within enlightened critiques of the *status quo*. The Call of the Celts, the Pride of the Pioneer, Loyalty to Blood and Soil, One Faith, One Church, One Baptism – these and other *motifs* of antimodernism can indeed inspire some Atlantic Canadians to resist the insipid and demeaning world of capitalist social relations. They can also lead to forms of exclusivism and essentialism as limiting as the order they critique. And I find myself intuitively unpersuaded by the argument that, "simply" because many of these *motifs* are now manipulated to retail everything from beer to politicians, they have lost their power. In some ways, when I re-read *The Quest* today, I have the sense that it radically and over-optimistically underestimated a hegemonic system of a neo-liberal ideology whose influence today verges on a new totalitarianism. My own self-criticism would not be that *The Quest* is too hard on antimodernism, but rather that it is too easygoing in its critique of liberalism.

The Quest is, as some of these critiques astutely note, a political document founded both on a realist epistemology (given that objectivity is a widely shared hunch, nonetheless some narratives about the world are in fact better than others, because they conform more fully to the evidence as we generate it through rule-governed procedures) and a deontological ethics (some narratives are in fact more ethical than others because, in declining to treat people as things and the environment as a resource, they accord complexity and dignity to the people and the life-worlds they represent). *The Quest* fires a broadside at dominant modes of public history in the Maritimes, massively mediated by the tourism and heritage industry and its house intellectuals. Drawing on resources from both Christianity and Marxism it asks, in effect, several important questions: What ethical and methodological principles should govern the representation of the other? How far should we be willing to brand the past – and ourselves? If we "spin" things for tourists, i.e., lie just a little bit, just to "make the sale", does it really matter? But if it does not really matter, then where, if anywhere, should the "spin" stop? How far into market-driven ethical and epistemological relativism should we go? Can we put on a good show for the tourists and then retreat to "the truth" in our off-hours? Or does the face start to fit the mask? Is the border between the stereotypes and oversimplifications marketed to tourists and our own self-understandings a permeable or impermeable one? What happens to the very possibility of telling the truth under conditions of tourism-history? Characterizing *The Quest* as merely a brief on behalf of "the labour sector" – a curious expression to apply to the region's working-class majority – seems to me a way of minimizing these broader ethical questions. And describing *The Quest's* strategy as "ironic" misses the wholly un-ironic anger that, when I reread it after many years, still sounds out clearly to me. *The Quest* was not conceived in the liberal academy. It was conceived outside the university mainly on the pages of a small, combative, radical publication. The liberal academics are well-advised to wonder if they really want to charter this vessel, since *The Quest* was designed for voyages that will lead them outside their comfortable frameworks of analysis.

Granting de Certeau's point, and acknowledging that a text will change with every reader, I still think – no doubt with an old-fashioned Nancy Drew-like realism – that some rules of interpretation apply. I have only a few arguments with Miriam and Greg, who raise valuable comparative points and suggest both differences and

similarities between the record documented in *The Quest* and that of other times and places; I might add, although, that there is not much in the evidence reported by Greg that would unsettle the narrative developed in *The Quest* that, in fact, argues that the major cultural shift to antimodernism occurred in the interwar period, i.e., after the commemorative events on which he has so interestingly focused. Stephen's critique made my eyebrows go up a little more. When I re-read *The Quest* I find, as have many disconcerted mainstream readers, a relentless focus on commodification and commercialization in its pages. By my count "capitalism" crops up no fewer than 26 times, and a critique of capitalist social relations is implied throughout. Thus Stephen's suggestion that the book's approach to modernity minimizes the place of capitalism seems eccentric, even though it is cheering to see that it has played a constructive role in intensifying his own appraisal of capitalist modernity and his welcome analysis of co-operative attempts to challenge it.

If anything, I would say that the concept of modernity operating in *The Quest* implies too direct a relationship and, at times, almost equates capitalism and modernity and thereby runs the risk of missing the categories of liberal order through which both modernity and capitalist social relations, in all their intertwined complexity, become politically effective and "commonsense". "A society is modern", Colin Duncan argues, "to the extent that its households consume little of what they themselves produce and produce little of what they themselves consume".[2] Historians of the 20th-century Atlantic region are just embarking on the exploration of modernity and, while I hope they will find some useful tips and information in *The Quest*, they would be indeed be miscreants if they did not go far beyond its fairly rudimentary treatment of this complex dialectic.

David Creelman's imaginative piece, which draws from contemporary critical theory to highlight *The Quest*'s politicized irony, impressed me with its range and incisiveness. I like David's gambit of working with Hayden White's endlessly debated *Metahistory*, which realist historians have so staunchly questioned with their own defenses of the truth-telling powers of narrative. What left me more uncertain were David's characterizations of the text itself. When I checked David's transcription of passages in *The Quest* against the book I have on my shelves, I kept coming up against difficulties of translation that suggest to me a more fundamental epistemological divide. So, for example, in David's account of *The Quest*, I am said to convict Creighton of a "neo-conservative and antimodernist agenda". Close, but not quite – conservatism and neo-conservatism are not the same thing. In the text before me, I read that she "followed the Quest of the Folk to its inevitably corporatist and conservative conclusions" (p. 149), which is by no means the same argument – in fact, it goes in the opposite direction. Even more worryingly, I read in David's account of *The Quest* the serious charge that I metaphorically implied that Creighton sexually seduced her informants: "Metaphors associated with Creighton in the second chapter are pointed. Her activities are sometimes imagined as being akin to a sexual seduction: 'once the ballad-hunter conquers the virginity of the singer . . . he is home free'". If true, this metaphorical overkill would surely mark me as a boorish detective

2 Colin Duncan, *The Centrality of Agriculture: Between Humankind and the Rest of Nature* (Montreal and Kingston, 1996), p. 26.

indeed – akin to Detective Kojak as played by Telly Savalas or maybe even to *Dirty Harry*'s Inspector Harry Callahan as played with magnificent menace by Clint Eastwood. My hopes of being like Poirot or Wimsey suddenly seemed in peril. Yet when I turn to the text of *The Quest* I find, to my great relief, that I had committed no such Eastwoodian crime. The words cited by David apply, not to Helen Creighton, but to folklorist W. Roy Mackenzie and his book *The Quest of the Ballad* (whose title indirectly inspired my own). *The Quest* first cites Mackenzie: "Many lovers, since the world began, have to their mistresses given vows of eternal fidelity, swearing by the bright moon, the stars of heaven, and the sands of the desert; but no lover did ever protest as I protested to Ann that day. She was forced to relent . . .".[3] It is *after* Mackenzie provides this pungent description of his own relationship with his singer that I add: "Once the ballad-hunter conquers the virginity of the singer, however, he is home free . . .".[4] In brief, the trope of ballad-hunter-as-seducer is *not mine*, but Mackenzie's and, contrary to David's assertion, this passage *has nothing to do with Creighton*.

I would lodge something of the same objection against the notion that I use a "mining metaphor" to discredit Creighton when, in fact, I am simply *reporting* on metaphors found in Creighton's own writings. David even remembers that *The Quest*, once more represented in a way that recalls Dirty Harry's less-than-fetching methods of interrogation, actually charges Helen Creighton with outright *lying*. He summarizes one passage as one that makes the claim that Creighton "lies about visiting Sable Island". I turn to the offending page 74, in expectation of making a full and clean breast of my "Bad Cop" routine and resolving to become more like Peter Falk's ever-decorous, if also irritatingly passive-aggressive, Lieutenant Colombo. Yet, in the text, I merely find a description of Creighton's shrewd appeal to pre-existing notions of the essential simplicity of Island life – but *no* charge of lying. And so it goes. As Sherlock Holmes would say, there is a dog that keeps not barking in these citations.

As De Certeau and countless other critical theorists have remarked, every text can be interpreted and re-interpreted. Yet there surely should be certain limits. Reading *into* texts things that (by precarious but precious common agreement) really are not there even by implication, and conversely editing *out* of texts words which really are there, is not something that Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, at least on their good days, actually endorsed. Something in me, my inner Miss Marple perhaps, protests against such liberties, even as I appreciate the imagination, theoretical brio and polemical energy that lie behind them.

I think *The Quest* arouses such controversy because it seems unusually critical of things that have a "taken-for-granted" feel to them. When *The Quest* pulls into some quiet harbours, it generates a "lock-up-your-young-ones" panic. And, in truth, *The Quest* does carry some dangerous cargo. It carries a political *and* ethical critique of liberal order and capitalist commodification. Especially at a time when everything is measured as a dollars-and-cents proposition, any possibility of living and doing

3 W. Roy Mackenzie, *The Quest of the Ballad* (Princeton, 1919), p. 29, cited in Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal, 1994), p. 48.

4 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, p. 48.

otherwise comes to be seen as the height of utopianism. Under conditions of capitalist modernity and regional marginalization, Maritimers in the Canadian myth-symbol complex easily become yet another "people without history" ready to fill the part the Canadian liberal cultural producers have assigned them – that of patronized primitives, pitiable dependants and anachronistic curiosities. It causes middle-class Torontonians, those archetypal CBCites, no grief whatsoever to be mildly charmed by the quaint folk of the East, with their colourful ways, salty vocabularies and perpetual kitchen parties. They just loved *Rockbound*. So primitive. So vital. So animalistic. So salty. So *Maritime*. Just do not ask these CBCites to share the wealth or critique the system that vests them with so much symbolic and political power. That would be, well, *so 20th century*.

To critique the aimlessness of life under conditions of possessive individualism is the equivalent of mocking the truths of a liberal secular religion. The irony is that it falls to the "trendy historians", with their heads supposedly full of postmodern abstractions, to defend the ability of history to relate its complicated "objective" truths while it falls to the mainstream liberal historians, in their imaginations so "realistic" and "hardboiled", to defend a state apparatus that systematically misrepresents, embroiders and edits out the lives of inconvenient others.

Once amplified, exaggerated and distorted, reasonable and empirically grounded critiques of liberal reason can be "othered" as unreasonable and uncivilized. Yet what if there are (or should be) political and ethical limits to the power of the state and its functionaries and apologists to re-describe and even to erase those whose lives do not fit into the branding and marketing strategies of capitalism and the liberal order? Are there, or should there be, any limits to capitalist modernity? To modernity itself? What are the costs – personal, environmental, political, spiritual – of living this way? I think that these enduringly awkward questions of *The Quest* explain the fierceness with which it has been resisted when it enters certain hitherto calm, liberal harbours. But it is in this very fierceness that I see grounds for hope that *The Quest*'s second decade, after it is reprinted in 2006, may be almost as interesting and provocative as its first. And I also foresee the day when the small coastal voyages undertaken by this one small craft will come to seem like modest anticipations of a much more ambitious, long-distance and international trading patterns prosecuted by hundreds and thousands of ships.

Once again, my thanks to the participants, to the CHA and to *Acadiensis* for marking the anniversary of *The Quest of the Folk*. And my thanks to the many readers, both *pro* and *con*, who have been so generous with their opinions and reactions. May the debates continue. May the activism intensify. And may *The Quest* have a few more years yet as a radical privateer in liberal waters.

Ian McKay