

## *The Afterlife of George Cartwright.* John Steffler.

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Volume 8, Number 2, Fall 1992

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds8\\_2rv01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds8_2rv01)

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### Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

### ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

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### Cite this article

Pierson, S. (1992). *The Afterlife of George Cartwright.* John Steffler. *Newfoundland Studies*, 8(2), 202–220.

## REVIEW

Steffler, John. *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992. viii, 296 p. \$16.99.

STUART PIERSON

### I

SENTENCES THAT STOP you in your tracks — “Cartwright [in the Labrador winter] patrolled the inside walls with his hands extended, feeling for blades of air. Where he felt them, he pounded scraps of discarded fur into the cracks the way a shipwright would caulk a hull. But even without draughts, the instant the fire died down the cold was there, rising up under their feet like the back of a whale” (139) — and passages that you read aloud to anyone near, like the one (190), too long to quote, describing a game of football (the ball an inflated seal’s bladder) involving Cartwright, whole Inuit families, and assorted dogs, and consisting mostly of falling about laughing. These are the glories of Steffler’s book: the detail, the little exactitudes that mark the poet’s attention to the unblinkable material facts of our existence — how things smell, for example, or how important seams are in fur garments, and how critical Inuit women are likely to be about these seams.

The structure of the book and the historical thinking that informs it I am a little less sure of, as I believe Steffler was too. I think he started with an idea for a story a little like *Rip Van Winkle*, only instead of having someone arise after a long sleep, as in Washington Irving’s adaptation of a folktale, he would have Cartwright dwell on after death and comment on the bad turn that history took in the late 18th century or early in the 19th, and on the consequences of that bad turn in our time. Irving’s Rip, stumbling into his village after sleeping — or having passed out, for he had got seriously into the little Dutchmen’s “beverage,

which he found had much of the flavour of excellent Hollands" — for twenty years, observed that in his absence,

The very character of the people seemed changed. There was a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquillity.<sup>1</sup>

Steffler's Cartwright, too, when we first meet him, is a man for whom "time has stopped"; yet he "knows that just beneath the surface of what surrounds him it has been racing along at an insane speed." He looks with dismay at the state of things. He has been dead since 1819, yet he still rides the lanes of his native Nottinghamshire, not with pleasure or curiosity, but in a state of annoyance: "He has spied enough of the present to know how small, how mechanical people there have become" (4). But this motif — the humane past hectoring the frantic and overheated present — hardly recurs at all after the opening passage. At pp. 18-20 Cartwright comes over a rise and "finds he's been tricked into the present again." He gazes on the cooling towers of a power station which stands where his ancestral house once was,

As though some experiment of his brother Edmund's lurched out of control, swallowing the house, pinning the landscapes in its cogged and levered arms.

More about Edmund Cartwright (1743-1823), inventor of an early form of power loom, in a moment.

Subsequently, the "afterlife" is quiet until it heralds, late in the book, a string of portentous events — mistakes, misfortunes, disasters minor and major — that will not long after wreck Cartwright's venture on the Labrador coast and send him back to England broke, lonely, and without prospects. In the middle 1770s Cartwright did well: "He was in love with the land, and was getting rich." After the years of travail we have by then seen him through, this sounds encouraging and well-deserved. In the very next sentence, however, the constant-companion hawk drives a pigeon into underbrush. Attempting to retrieve it Cartwright suddenly finds himself elsewhere — in a bar at a Nottingham shopping mall. A couple of "putty-faced" youngsters are complaining of nothing to do, too broke to go to Spain by motorcoach, about to have the telly repossessed, and so on. Cartwright-Steffler delivers himself of a diatribe against "these creatures who didn't know whether they want to live or die." These are the symbolic offspring of his brother Edmund, who dreamt up labour-saving machines, and of his brother John, the imperial administrator and parliamentary reformer.<sup>2</sup> The twentieth-century belly-achers in the pub, suffering from "Boredom — The last big problem left" — and from "lazy self-pity," do not deserve their heritage.

People now are still coasting on the physical stamina bred into their bodies by all their courageous and passionate ancestors... Now these bland dumplings coast along on that old fuel wondering why they're travelling forward in time at all. But

they're slowing down. Not even Edmund's machines could keep them alive. (251-2)

Earlier, Steffler-Cartwright is not so certain that the degeneration is going to head off the Malthusian nightmare. Setting his own time against ours, Cartwright reflects:

Some of the injustice is gone. There is less disease, and people have more machines with which to amuse themselves. But this is unjust in another sense. Considering the way they live, they deserve disease. In their greedy millions they are choking the earth. They will never vote themselves under control. (64)

At this, Steffler's conscience has Cartwright confess: "I am ungenerous." But in a book like this, it is not always easy to decide who's speaking.

These few passages are all that Steffler devotes directly to the Rip Van Winkle dimension of his story. I think they are remnants of an early plan for the book, before Cartwright himself began to move in, look around, and take over. When he did that, Steffler could only bow courteously and say "at your service," for his guest was an imperious, egotistical, demanding man whose attitude towards the proprieties might be imagined to find ready expression in a rude gesture. For a time this arrangement suited both. Cartwright liked being lionized, liked being interrogated, liked to dramatize himself. This twentieth-century author with his keen interest, his sympathetic reading of Cartwright's *Journal of Transactions and Events, During a Residence of Nearly Sixteen Years on the Coast of Labrador* (1792), his refusal to follow the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th edition, which devoted half a column each to brothers Edmund and John but remained silent about George, or the *Dictionary of National Biography*, which also ignored him (but not his two famous brothers). Steffler for his part wanted to hear all about this lover of wilderness and extreme weather; this man who had "never fit into London society... [and who] was happier gutting a deer" (9); who went for women with dark eyes;<sup>3</sup> who was driven by fierce accesses of will and appetite. I think that Steffler hoped Cartwright would be friendlier to the environment — in his politics, Greener. He had after all sought the wilderness, had preferred the plain to the ornamental, had scorned conventional domesticity, had been curious about and sympathetic to Beothuk and Inuit<sup>4</sup> in an age when British subjects — members of Cartwright's class and crowd — owned and traded in African slaves, and almost universally spoke of "wild Indians."

But Cartwright resisted Steffler's overtures, and tensions between guest and host began to be felt. Cartwright, after all, was a killer. His "oldest and most valued possession" was a rifle. Naturally he had to hunt to live, but even when he didn't have to, he bagged game for pleasure. It cheered him up. "Killed a partridge just off the Newark road outside Manfield. A fine day," runs a diary entry. Cartwright was devious and high-handed. He also beat his servants.<sup>5</sup> Steffler chided him by invoking Inuit good manners. Like well-behaved

children at a birthday party, the Inuit took only their share.<sup>6</sup> Also, Steffler often sent Mrs. Selby in to scold Cartwright for his arrogance and for the self-serving character of his ostensibly enlightened policies.

Steffler did not invent her, as he invented some other of Cartwright's women. She was there; she went with Cartwright to Labrador and stayed with him nearly to the end of that venture. But Steffler made her into the chorus — the moral authority — in what might otherwise read as an excessively male-centered, authoritarian, brutal and aristocratic drama, which, historically, is what it was. Two examples. Steffler's Cartwright met Mrs. Selby in 1770, during a public hanging at Tyburn, where she rebuked the crowd for its "savage amusement" in watching the poor wretch die. Cartwright, intrigued, asked her whether she thought crime should go unpunished:

'Of course not. But the punishment should suit the crime, and be less prejudiced against the poor. Death for what that man did is preposterous.'

Further inquiry divulged that she was on her own, lately back from France

'where changes are coming and people are not afraid to look at things with fresh eyes. We English pride ourselves on our liberty, but I find we could learn a thing or two from what's happening over there.' [1771! A prescient Mrs. Selby indeed.]

Further sparring. Cartwright told her about Labrador, and offered her a job.

"She stopped and looked at his face for the first time. Studied his lips and eyes." Understated George said that the remote coast had cured his ague and his melancholy. "I'm Mrs. Selby," she said, "when do you plan to leave?" (105-7)<sup>7</sup>

In the winter that followed, servant Nan, wife of blacksmith Charles, came to her term. Cartwright, according to his published *Journal*, delivered the child and drew compliments from the mother on his skill. There is no mention of Mrs. Selby. In Steffler's version, however, she breaks into the manuscript journal with an entry of her own to correct Cartwright's boasting and lies. She addresses Cartwright:

...it is not true that when your faintness had come upon you again I tied and severed the cord and escorted the after-birth from the womb?

These matters, by some strange omission, do not appear in your journal.

(155-6)<sup>8</sup>

Cartwright blusters, and, purportedly writing in the same journal, rebukes her for tampering with his records. None of this, of course, is in the published diary. Steffler inserted it, with Mrs. Selby cast as politically correct, in order to chasten poor autocratic Cartwright.<sup>9</sup>

in the humanities. A new scepticism has arisen out of the world's uncertainties to inform us that when we meet with something spoken or written — or with a "text," for short — and ask what it *means*, we *always* answer by referring to another text. Since we are human, and since therefore we think, classify, categorize, even *see* "in terms of" some language, we cannot break through into some sort of reality, past or present, independent of how things are put in language, and of how we have learned all we claim to know. For, universally, we have learned texts. This debate in its various forms is seen by some as a sign of decadence, since it seems to dislodge many signposts, or "canons" or ikons, of our culture from positions of privilege and authority. What justifies the exaltation of one text over another? Another text. Do we want to make a case for the intrinsic beauty or power or instructiveness of a certain text? To do so, we produce another text. Do we want to locate some text in a sort of cultural map? We examine the con-text, which means other texts nearby. Endless regress is on us.

Others see this dissolution of certain certainties as opportunity, as liberation, as release from the pedantic dead hand of the past.<sup>10</sup> There is no reason, they say, why categories should not be looked at closely, no reason why the cadastral surveys we have inherited should be closed to scrutiny, no reason why the boundaries between the trivial and the profound, the important and the ephemeral, the vulgar and the sublime should not be reexamined. As confusing as it sometimes gets, the present discourse simply reaffirms our duty as seekers, critics, and scientists to let the discussion lead where it will. If old walls crumble, perhaps it is because they no longer belong there. Borders, boundaries, distinctions, maps are equally textual with poems and philosophical systems; they all invite — indeed require — analysis. If you end up with Chinese boxes, with "reality" in inverted commas and nowhere to be found, *tant pis*.<sup>11</sup>

One line that this postmodern free-for-all seems nearly to have effaced is that between literature and history.<sup>12</sup> This has happened as the result of two strands of thinking. The first will be obvious from what has been said in the last paragraph: if all is text what is to distinguish one kind of story from another? The second sprang from multifarious attacks on the idea of the "hard fact" as that which historians unearth and disclose to their public. Even if hard atomic facts exist, they owe their interest and value (partly because they are in principle innumerable) to some scheme of relations that draws attention to the ways they interconnect. To paraphrase E.M. Forster, it may be a fact that the queen died, another that the king died, another that her death was later than his; but history only comes into existence when one can say "The queen died from grief over her husband's death."<sup>13</sup> But those connections, those causal bridges, are precisely what your documents, if you are an historian, do not give you. Consequently, you must use your imagination. And if the imagination supplies what the documents are short on, how can the latter exercise control?

Probability, plausibility, and a common sense of the possible keep the imagination within bounds, but these concepts are not themselves found among the documents, and, further, invoking them only puts the question back one step, since they are themselves open to very wide differences of opinion even among — perhaps especially among — those expert enough to make informed judgments. Is it probable or plausible that Cartwright delivered Nan's baby or not? Once the imagination gets going, the limits of plausibility may become fluid indeed.

History and literature have been closely and intricately related in the West<sup>14</sup> since the beginning of writing. A number of our founding documents — well, texts — in the Old Testament, and, from the Greek side, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the tragedies, are all poems or plays purporting to be history or histories cast in poetical form. Virgil at the dawn of our era drew on the Troy story to give Rome a founding myth; then Virgil himself turned up in the *Divine Comedy* to show the author around Hell.<sup>15</sup> Not content with that, the timeless author of the *Aeneid* later arrived as the hero of a mid-twentieth-century novel to deliver an elegy on an age — “death's signet was graved upon his brow” — with no promise of anything like a renaissance. The jacket copy of this great work, Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, states that the author has “created a new fictional form that lies between the historical novel and the prose poem;” it is a “triumph of the poetic imagination.” The translator adds, “Historical source material concerning Virgil's life and work is far from voluminous. It goes without saying that this material was consulted.”<sup>16</sup> Poetic imagination plus source material: the best of two worlds.

We might notice also that nearly half of Shakespeare's plays drew their characters from the historical record. The first European novel starts from an historical conceit: The Don was resuscitated from the “archives of La Mancha.” Racine presumably believed the world of classical mythology that he mined for dramatic subjects to be historical; similarly Corneille. And so on, through Friedrich Schiller, who gave us a *Wallenstein* and a *William Tell* as plays, as well as a history of the revolt of the Netherlands against Spanish rule, a narrative account of the Thirty Years War, and an inaugural lecture at Jena University entitled “What is Universal History and Why Study It?” All this work was for him of a piece. Edward Gibbon, meanwhile, had followed up his work on literary criticism — *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* (1761) — with his whopping *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (6 vols. quarto, 1776-88), a work now often recommended to readers as *literature* rather than as history.

Need I mention Sir Walter Scott, whose novels did as much for medieval history as whole archivesful of historians? Stendhal's Fabrice, in *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839), was present at the battle of Waterloo; Tolstoy's Prince Andrei was at both Austerlitz (Nikolai Rostov was there too) and at Borodino, in the battle for Russia against the Napoleonic armies.<sup>17</sup> Not only that, but along the

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way in *War and Peace*, Tolstoy expounded an explicit and extended philosophy of history.<sup>18</sup> So did didactic George Bernard Shaw, whose *St. Joan* and *Caesar and Cleopatra* were deliberately in the tradition of the Shakespearian history play.<sup>19</sup> More recently, Emma Goldman and other ex-flesh-and-blood notables appear as characters in E.L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*, Sigmund Freud and Sherlock Holmes meet in Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven Percent Solution*, and all the once live historical persons in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* are characters, according to the author's own designation, in a "non-fiction novel." Tom Wolfe, world's greatest self-appointed coattails-flying Trend-Spotter, as he himself might say, compiled an anthology of the "New Journalism," whose point was precisely the scattering, in the 1960s and 70s, of the boundary stones between literature and reporting.<sup>20</sup>

Further, some authors of "fictional" works take enormous pains to locate their purely imaginary actors in historically well-attested settings. *Ulysses* recapitulates the *Odyssey*, only instead of a veteran of the Trojan war, his wife and his son at center stage, we have an Irish Jew, his wife Molly (née Tweedy) and a lapsed Catholic poet, all proceeding through the steps dictated by a blind Greek bard, three thousand years their senior, and by an expatriate teacher of English (nearly blind), whose "Trieste, Zurich, Paris" at the end of the book evokes a kind of bohemian trail which one might expect to foster defiant indifference to time, place, circumstance — in short, to history. The whole scheme, after all, bordered on the fantastical. Yet here is James Joyce, writing from Trieste in 1920 to his aunt Josephine in Dublin:

I want that information about the Star of the Sea Church, has it ivy on its seafront, are there trees in Leahy's terrace at the side or near, if so, what, are there steps leading down to the beach? I also want all the information you can give, tittle-tattle, facts etc about Hollis Street maternity hospital. Two chapters of my book remain unfinished till I have these.<sup>21</sup>

The aim was the "transfiguration of the commonplace," in Muriel Spark's fine phrase,<sup>22</sup> and what is not rendered *exactly* as it is or was refuses to transfigure. Every true scientist knows this. So does every good painter, and poet. Every good historian?

During the century when Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were telling and retelling the fortunes and misfortunes of the House of Atreus and other dynasties of Greece's early history, the contemporaries of those tragedians, Herodotus and Thucydides, were inventing history in a sense different from theirs. For Herodotus the point of making "inquiries" (this is the meaning of ἱστορία, which my Donnegan's *Lexicon* defines as "the knowledge of facts and events acquired by personal observation and research") is twofold: to assign beginnings — who first attacked, our guys or theirs — and to commemorate — to celebrate the past achievements of various peoples, Greek and foreign. Thucydides, who was a generation younger and lived in harsher



times, repudiated these aims as resulting only in romances; history must deal with the realities — with the true determinants of collective life. These were, in Thucydides' view, power and its rational or irrational uses. Not contemplation of great or tragic deeds, not celebration, but *action*, should be the end of the study of past events. History properly so-called should be a science with a corresponding technology or practice. This takes the study and composition of history a long way from literature.<sup>23</sup>

And indeed a distinction made a century or so later than Thucydides seemed to consummate the divorce, and I'm afraid literature got custody of the kids. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, defines the function of the two (for "literature" read "poetry," meaning mainly that of Homer and the dramatists):

the poet's function is to describe not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, that is, what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one's writing prose and in the other's writing verse - you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in the fact that the one describes what has been, and the other the species of what might be. Hence poetry is more philosophic and more important than history, since it states universals, while history states singulars. I mean by a universal statement one concerning what a given man will probably or necessarily say or do...; by a singular statement I mean one concerning what, say, Alcibiades did or suffered.

Thus there isn't much difference between history and Trivial Pursuit. Of course, the poet is free to plunge his hand in and use whatever he finds:

And if [the poet] should take a subject from actual history, he is not less a poet for that; since some historic occurrences may very well be in the probable and possible order of things; and it is in that aspect of them that he is their poet.<sup>24</sup>

This is a position different from but related to Thucydides'. The latter wanted to avoid both "one-damn-thing-after-another," as in medieval chronicle, and "romance" or "fable" — what we would call myth or legend, like the one about Galileo and the tower of Pisa. But he did not look to the poet for the special insight necessary to isolate the "universal." Instead, political scientists — serious folk like himself — would extract that essence from particular political situations and instruct us on the permanently valuable lessons these contain. This is the origin of the saying "history is philosophy teaching by example."<sup>25</sup>

Lest one think that these are ancient and forgotten and superseded matters, let me recall an argument I mentioned before in these pages (*Newfoundland Studies* 5, 2: 246). Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, Murray Kempton reflected on Anton Chekhov's acuity as a Sovietologist twenty-five years before the Soviet Union was born:

It is altogether more serviceable for us to search for the destiny of nations in the permanence of their culture than in the transience of their political systems. That is why the novelist can always teach us more than the political scientists because

the realm called fiction is ruled by what is real, and the territory called fact has to make do with the dubieties of the fancied... [The novelist's] is the matter of fact. Social science and intelligence reports are the mere poor stuff of an unadorned imagination.<sup>26</sup>

I trust it is easy enough to follow this argument, even with so many terms used in senses opposite to those already introduced. (Kempton's political scientist = Thucydides' romance-monger; Kempton's "fact" = Aristotle's universal, and so on.) The point of it is exactly the ancient one: particulars must exemplify patterns (or universals) if they are to be of value to the understanding of human affairs. The shape is not found in taking brush-strokes one by one; the notes only form a melody when put together in the right way.

3

We come back to George Cartwright. We should note that we have versions of him. He lived (1740-1819), he spent a number of years on the Labrador coast. He kept a journal which George Story interprets as a ship's log kept on land at Cartwright's factory.<sup>27</sup> After he returned to England, with time on his hands, broke, he worked up the journal for publication, changing we don't know what and omitting we don't know what. Various people comment. Finally, Steffler reads the diaries and the commentaries. He imagines Cartwright's inner life. He invents conversations with Mrs. Selby. He invents everybody's sex life. So many layers of time and print and prose between us and Cartwright's experience! Would we be reading literature or history if we read the original manuscripts?

Questions unanswerable in principle, but flitting around the edges of consciousness as one reads and tries to assess this work. If we approach the question from the side of literature, we find much that is pleasing and powerful, as I said at the beginning; many pages are prose poems. But I think once Steffler pronounced the fateful name Cartwright he had a choice: either make the man dance to the author's tune altogether, as Bernard Shaw unabashedly did, and as I believe Gore Vidal does, or else try to get inside Cartwright's being altogether, as Marguerite Yourcenar did in *Hadrian's Memoirs* or Robert Graves in *I Claudius* (and other books).<sup>28</sup> Not having chosen, Steffler faces a constant dilemma. He picks up whatever reverberates with his own experience, and whenever Cartwright won't play, has Mrs. Selby badger him about it. Or else he transforms Cartwright's episodes into twentieth-century events resonant throughout with voices from our own time. The episode of the bears is a prominent example.

In the summer of 1778 Cartwright, hunting with two of "his men," but temporarily separated from them, came across a whole shuffle of bears, black and white, bathing in a pool in Eagle River. Though short on ammunition, he

fired away and when he was finished four adults and two cubs lay dead. The beasts were too big to skin (except one cub) and there was no way to get the carcasses out. They were left to rot. As Cartwright relates this incident, which obviously impressed him, since he gave it eight pages in the published *Journal*, it sounds like one more turkey shoot with a fillip of added danger owing to the size and "ferocity" of the beasts. He conveyed his own *sangfroid* in phrases that recall a tale of a Great White Hunter from some Boy's Own Paper. He waits for "an enormous, old, dog bear":

I turned myself round to front him, drew up my feet to elevate my knees, on which I rested my elbows, and in that position suffered him to come within five yards of me before I drew the trigger; when I placed my ball in the centre of his skull, and killed him dead....

Spotting another, he went into the woods, to "make ready my unerring rifle." When it was all over, he regretted the missing ammunition; "otherwise I am certain, that I could with great ease have killed four or five brace more." It was a disappointing end to "the noblest day's sport I ever saw." By the time he and the others get back to the ship, they were "as tired and ravenous as a pack of foxhounds after a hard day."<sup>29</sup>

In Steffler's retelling, Hemingway, Faulkner and various existentialists add their voices to the chorus. First, let us note that the passage in question is placed immediately after the one (cited above) indicting modern boredom among young city-dwellers. We have only to jump an asterisk to encounter this:

The white bear with her cub came out of the trees on the opposite side of the pool. Cartwright had been following them, scrambling from boulder to boulder up the river's edge, since mid-morning... He had never climbed this high up [the] valley before... Cartwright's legs were shaking partly from hunger, partly from eagerness. (252)

Compare Nick Adams, in "Big-Two-Hearted River," who, although only after trout, rather than bear, reacts similarly:

Nick's hand was shaky. He reeled in slowly. The thrill had been too much. He felt, vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down.<sup>30</sup>

Or again, bear à la Steffler's Cartwright:

The cub paused by its mother, was not at all baffled by what had happened to her [i.e. shot dead], looked at [Cartwright] on the bank, and came forward furiously, roaring, showing its teeth. It was what he loved about these animals, that they didn't retreat when they heard a shot, that they knew who you were, that they gave you a contest. (253)

And bear in "The Bear":

an old bear, fierce and ruthless not just to stay alive but ruthless with the fierce pride of liberty and freedom, jealous and proud enough of liberty and freedom to see it threatened not with fear nor even alarm but almost with joy, seeming

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deliberately to put it into jeopardy in order to savor it and keep his old strong bones and flesh supple and quick to defend and preserve it.<sup>31</sup>

And, for existentialism: Steffler's Cartwright confronted an old male bear, and quietly shifted to face it ... This shaggy fellow, he thought, has never doubted the woods. He wanted to let it come as close as possible. If his rifle misfired, he knew, the bear would take him. The gamble filled him with freedom. (255)

This is a moment which could exemplify Sartre's excessively abstract pronouncement:

The one who realized in anguish his condition as *being* thrown into a responsibility which extends to his very abandonment has no longer either remorse or regret or excuse; he is no longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being resides in this very revelation.<sup>32</sup>

All these echoes of mentalities alien to the eighteenth century, all these attitudes that tell us more about Steffler than about Cartwright, reveal the cleft the author found himself in from the beginning. The literary strengths of his book cause one to ask: why did you need Cartwright at all? The engrossing character of Cartwright as historical figure causes one to ask: once you chose him, why not stick by him?

Steffler does not stick by his hero. He throws him to the bears at the end, one of whom metaphorically devours him. Chapter 16, the last, begins with the invented diary entry, which recurs throughout the book like an incantation, for the day of Cartwright's death:

1819, May, Wednesday 19.  
Wind S.W. Light.

Cartwright's nephews and nieces climb over him in those last days, calling "Skin-a-bear! Skin-a-bear!" He dreams, he rides out, he releases the hawk. We are reminded of another literary bear with another literary bird, another traveller fond of violent weather, diarist, dreamer, desirous simultaneously of the wild and the tame. Another penman for whom experience had to be brought under control by sentences — Gustave Flaubert.<sup>33</sup> But Flaubert died conventionally of apoplexy. Cartwright, in contrast, succumbs to one of the bears in that bloody pool from forty years before that he conjures up in his last hour. He "feels no pain, feels instead the satisfaction of feeding a fierce hunger." The bear crunches him up, starting at the feet.

And with each bite, as more of him vanishes, a feast of new beauty appears. Small ferns and mosses curl as hair spring from the cracks in the rock where he was sitting... Then [the bear] plunges its snout between Cartwright's legs, up through his hips, burrowing under his ribs. The bear's white head is a wide pointed brush, moving from side to side, painting him out, painting the river, the glittering trees in.

That is the last sentence in the book. It could be read either as a statement about nature's recirculations, or as a statement about nature's revenge — *il miglior fabbro* — on the man with the iron gun. Either way it makes him punier that I thought we were to take him.

From the historical side, if I am right about any of the above, the book fails because it does not do justice to Cartwright's eighteenth-century-ness. It alternates between being a stick to beat our benighted times with, and being a reproach to Cartwright's own period for not being sound on capital punishment, on women's and Indian rights, and on landscape rights. Attuiock, Cartwright's Inuit friend, thrice complains (11, 135, 221) of England that its land is "man made." This is meant to imply: no *respect* for Gaia. In detail — especially the grubby facts of military life and the multitudinous small obstacles Englishmen and women faced in trying to survive Labrador winters, the book is vivid. But at the same time Steffler throws gobbets of lesson at us. To make sure we don't forget we are in the "Industrial Revolution," Dad instructs George's brother John on the virtues of canals and turnpikes:

'Will the roads and canals not stand vacant for want of people with money enough to pay the tolls? John wondered aloud.

"No." His father spoke to John with gentle intimacy. "When the means are improved, the traffic in goods by land will be much greater than what it is at the present ... There is great wealth, great wealth to be made by the man with the wits to improve the way things are done." (12)<sup>34</sup>

(At this point, in my experience, sons either glaze over, or else say "O, Dad" in that exasperated way that signifies spare us the lecture.) These bits are intrusive, and they once again reveal Steffler's indecision. It may not be impossible to go back and forth between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, between history and literature, between the record and the imagination. It is however very hard, and I do not think Steffler has quite brought it off. The failure is at a high level of achievement. In this I concur with the "wide acclaim" the book has received, to use a jacket copy expression. Still, as Mrs. Selby might say, "Mr. Steffler, your book is neither fish nor fowl."

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle," in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayton, Gent.* (London: 1819-20; rpt. Oxford Univ. Press, 1931), 54.

<sup>2</sup>They are thus representative of the forces which brought the modern world into existence. Alfred North Whitehead in *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Mentor, 1955), 13-14, musing upon Edmund Gibbon (born only a couple of years earlier than George Cartwright), observes that Barbarians and Christians, the twins who in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* brought about the downfall, had their 18th-century counterparts in Steam and Democracy:

Steam and Barbarians, each in their own age, were the senseless agencies

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driving their respective civilizations away from inherited modes of order... On the other hand, Democracy in modern times, and Christianity in the Roman Empire, exemplify articulated beliefs issuing from aspirations... The well-marked transition from one age into another can always be traced to some analogues to Steam and Democracy, or... to Barbarians and Christians ... When mankind has slipped its cables, sometimes it is bent on discovery of a New World, and sometimes it is haunted by the dim sound of the breakers dashing on the rocks ahead. The Fall of the Roman Empire occurred in a prolonged age of despair: Steam and Democracy belong to an age of hope.

Steffler's Cartwright is a hybrid: one Steam-brother and one Democracy-brother, discoverer himself of a New World, but deep-dyed with the despair perhaps of a later age.

<sup>3</sup>Devika, Cartwright's Bengali mistress:

Vigour and business were in her eyes, and amusement. But no mockery or arrogance. They seemed to Cartwright like black birds in the wild going about their affairs with frank appetite. (45)

Mrs. Selby, who lived with him in Labrador:

Her hair and eyes, which were the same dark brown, both had a new lustre since the winter had passed. (189)

Caubvick, his Inuit mistress, could hardly have had blue eyes. Finally, his hawk:

He swings his legs over the side of the bed, feels the familiar boards under his bare soles, and looks toward Kaumalak. The hawk opens her brilliant black eyes. (173)

<sup>4</sup>Cf. A.M. Lysaght: "[Cartwright and Joseph Banks] were exceptional men, and unlike many of their time they fought against racial prejudice and for the establishment of international goodwill." *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1766: His Diary, Manuscripts and Collections* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1971), 71.

<sup>5</sup>Gerald Sider makes a lot of this in his argument that Newfoundland and Labrador are microcosmic cases of the cruelty of merchant capitalism as it operated in 18th-century North America. See his "Mumming in Outport Newfoundland," *Past and Present*, no. 71 (1976), reprinted as a pamphlet by New Hogtown Press, Toronto, 1977. George Story in the article cited below, note 8, has reservations about the justice of Sider's case. I cannot here go into the intricacies of Sider vs. nearly everyone else. See J.K. Hiller, Peter Narváez, and Daniel Vickers, "Newfoundland's Past as Marxist Illustration," *Newfoundland Studies* 3, 2 (1987): 265-76.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. the episode (181-2) where Attuiock and Shuglawina helped Cartwright build a salmon pound. When the former claimed some of the trapped fish, Cartwright pulled all manner of rank, Royal grants and so on, to assert ownership, but then he remembered that he was outnumbered, and gave over. "After all, there were hundreds of salmon in the pound, and the Inuit only wanted a couple each."

<sup>7</sup>In dear old Hollywood they had a convention called "meeting cute." It is not now completely dead. When the male lead and the female lead had their first exchange, they were not to shake hands and say "Howdja do?" as sexually neutral persons in the script might do. They were to swap abuse. One knew immediately that the sparks that flew

then presaged the later romantic conflagration. It is this element in the dialogue just reported on, and also Mrs. Selby's tempestuousness, that prompt me to cast Maureen O'Hara for the role. Clark Gable could have handled Cartwright, though one cannot imagine Gable keeping a journal. Frederick March, maybe. Look, once the imagination has completely free rein in historical representation, where does one stop?

<sup>8</sup>Cartwright's original "journals" were published as *A Journal of Transactions and Events, During a Residence of Nearly Sixteen Years on the Coast of Labrador*, 3 vols. (Newark, England: Allin and Ridge, 1792). The entry in question was dated 12 February 1771; (see 1: 92-3, or, in the abridgement of the journals edited by Charles Wendell Townsend, *Captain Cartwright and His Labrador Journal* [Boston: Estes, 1911], 65-6. The passage stands out in the midst of what George Story called the *Journal's* "monotonous and relentless record of the pursuit of wild creatures," or in Patrick O'Flaherty's blunter phrase, "a narrative of relentless slaughter." See A.M. Lysaght's work cited above, n. 4; O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1979), 34-42; George Story, "'Old Labrador': George Cartwright, 1738-1819," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 76, 1 (1981): 23-31.

<sup>9</sup>Mrs. Selby is also dead straight on the question of relations with the Inuit. Cartwright by turns wanted to exploit them, civilize them, learn from their noble savagery, become their benevolent despot. Mrs. Selby, in Steffler's account, upbraids him for self-deception, and pronounces: "It's our duty, I should think, really, to leave them alone if we can't accept them as they are" (128).

<sup>10</sup>Sometimes some of the ideas I have just alluded to are referred to as "postmodern." I am not convinced that they constitute a break from modernism — which I think is, or maybe was, mainly a movement which tried to create "value" in the absence of supernatural backing — i.e., God. Modernists fell back on sex, on art, on criticism, and, less often, on social revolution: they were conscious of a departure from all past practice and institutions. Stephen Dedalus and the execrable Mr. Deasey, from opposite sides of the barricade, parley:

– History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

From the playfield the boys raised a shout. A whirring whistle: a goal.

What if that nightmare gave you a back kick?

– The ways of the Creator are not our ways, Mr. Deasey said. All history moves towards one great goal, the manifestation of God.

Stephen jerked his thumb towards the window, saying:

– That is God.

Horray! Ay! Whrrrwee!

– What? Mr. Deasey asked.

– A shout in the street, Stephen answered, shrugging his shoulders.

(*Ulysses* [New York: Modern Library, n.d.], 35)

And, of course, if *Ulysses* is modern, *Finnegan's Wake* must be postmodern. Surely someone by now must have identified it as the first postmodern novel. When, and on what grounds, does modernism give over to post-modernism?

<sup>11</sup>Good introductions to some of these ideas may be found in the works of Hayden White, Terry Eagleton, Stephen Greenblatt, and Christopher Norris. Brian Palmer, who deplores practically all of this as one more — there have been so many recently —

victory for right-wing forces, has written a history whose title anticipates his verdict: *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*. (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1990). Palmer's endnotes are a goldmine. He seems to have read *everything*. A recent article counts up the philosophical stakes of the debate: A.D. Nuttall, "Return of the Real," a review of Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Post-Modernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992) in *The London Review of Books* 14, 8 (23 April 1992): 5-6. Almost every issue of the latter periodical, incidentally, carries some reference to this struggle over where to locate real things. See the next note.

<sup>12</sup>As the line separating fact and fiction grows progressively fainter because of the volume of traffic across it, it is becoming common practice for novelists to acknowledge their sources" (as Steffler does, by the way), says Gordon Burn, "Where Mine Is At," *London Review of Books* 14, 10 (28 May 1992), 20-21, a review of Robert Stone, *Outerbridge Reach* (London: Deutsch, 1992). Michael Wood, *Ibid.*, 14, 3 (13 February 1992): 6-8, reviewing D.M. Thomas, *Flying in to Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), and Oliver Stone's film *JFK*:

There is no paranoia, or paranoia is everywhere. For Thomas, this means anything goes ("since fiction is a kind of dream, and history is a kind of dream, and this is both"). For Stone, it means whoever is passionate and well-intentioned must be right.

W.J.J. Mitchell, *London Review of Books* 13, 8 (23 April 1992): 7-10), also discussing Stone's *JFK* (along with CNN's Gulf War):

The notion of a secure and uniform visual authority, a clear boundary between history and imagination, is exactly what slips away from the film in spite of (or perhaps because of) its best efforts to control all the visual information. Oliver Stone is right to call his film a "myth": the term is appropriate to describe both its truth claims and its melodramatic narrative structure.

<sup>13</sup>Forster was distinguishing not between chronicle and history, but between story and plot. However, in both instances the vital differentia is *causation*. See E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Arnold, 1963) 82-3. Positivism, of course, in some of its versions and those the earliest, insisted that we know *fact*, that causes are hidden from us, and that we *construct laws* as a device to connect one fact to the next. The connections are not intrinsic to the matter under study, or at least we cannot know them to be so. Cf. Henri Gouhier, *La jeunesse d'Auguste Comte et la formation du positivisme* (3 vols., Paris: Vrin, 1933-41). It is a short step perhaps from the denial of any knowledge of cause to denying facts their presumed solidity and givenness.

<sup>14</sup>This vague geographical designation will have to serve for what is a cultural area rather than a well-defined stretch of territory. West? West of what? Why, the East.

<sup>15</sup>Virgil is of course not the only historical figure Dante encounters on his journey. All manner of contemporary politicians, military men, popes, notorious adulterers and -esses, are there. Poets and philosophers from the ancient world —

Poi ch'innalzai un poco più le ciglia,  
vidi 'l maestro di color che sanno  
seder tra filosofica famiglia,  
(*Inferno* IV, 130-2)



Aristotle, of course, the master of those who know, and the rest of the family (no historians, though), in the First Circle, where they have a fairly soft berth, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wished us to remember when he called his book about complicit intellectuals under Stalin *The First Circle* (trans. Thomas P. Whitney; New York: Harper & Row, 1968; reprinted as a Bantam paperback, 1969. See chap. 2, "Dante's Idea").

<sup>16</sup>Hermann Broch, *The Death of Virgil*, trans. Jean Starr Untermeyer (New York: Pantheon, 1945; rpt. San Francisco: North Point, 1983).

<sup>17</sup>*War and Peace*, bk. I, pt. 2 and bk. III, pt. 2, chs. 19-39. Steffler (remember him?) has read this work carefully. Compare his passages (79, 82) where Cartwright, wounded in Germany during the campaigns of the Seven Years' War, lies on his back and contemplates the blue sky and the nature surrounding him — "Cartwright was struck by the thought of this sanity, this vast undemonstrative order continuing outside the confines of his life. Something lovely and enduring that he longed, with a painful surge, for his life to match" — and Tolstoy's Andrei, fallen at Austerlitz — "Above him there was now only the sky — the lofty sky... 'How was it I did not see that sky before?... Yes, all is vanity, all is delusion except those infinite heavens, there is nothing, nothing but that'" (*War and Peace*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds [Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1989], 326. Nikolai Rostov has a similar experience in October 1805 at the Danube (168). I do not mean to say that Steffler is stealing or even borrowing from Tolstoy or, below, from Hemingway and Faulkner and the rest. I only mean to say that Cartwright's experience comes to us, in Steffler's treatment, refracted through many literary prisms. Well, I suppose Cartwright by now is in the public domain and no one's property. A historian, however, may be permitted to assert that to do justice to the dead one must take them on their own terms. Is this priggish?

<sup>18</sup>Bk. III, pt. 1, 715ff.; pt. 2, ch. 19, 895ff.; ch. 28, 931ff.; pt. 3, chs. 1 & 2, 974ff.; bk. 4, pt. 2, ch. 1, 1168-71; pt. 3, chs. 1 & 2, 1220-5; chs. 18-19, 1266-72; Epilogue, pt. 1, chs. 1-4, 1339-50; pt. 2, entire.

<sup>19</sup>Though with all the monarchical mystique eliminated. *Caesar and Cleopatra* dates from 1913; *St. Joan* from 1923, three years after her canonization. The great Dutch historian Johann Huizinga, whose field was precisely the period — the late middle ages — of Joan's short (ca. 1411-31) and eventful life, observed with some satisfaction that Joan managed to "wipe the grimace from Shaw's joking countenance." Huizinga nevertheless concluded that the play was not up to its material: there are, he said, "subjects ... whose character lies most intimately and indissolubly contained in the historical form itself, some in which the most sublime emotions of the tragic — the fellow-suffering and the catharsis — are bound to the historical account as such." Joan was so bound. Perhaps Cartwright was too. Huizinga's essay on the play was published in 1925 and may be found, translated by James S. Holmes and Hans van Marle, in *Men and Ideas: History, The Middle Ages, The Renaissance* (Princeton, 1984), 207-39.

<sup>20</sup>E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1974); Nicholas Meyer, *The Seven Per Cent Solution* (New York: Dutton, 1974); Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (New York: Random House, 1966); Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). After this essay was written, Rosemary Ommer called my attention to Terry Eagleton's *Saints and Scholars* (London: Verso, 1987), a "fiction" whose main character is Ludwig Wittgenstein.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Ellmann, ed., *Selected Letters of James Joyce* (New York: Viking, 1975), 248. The original is in the National Library of Ireland, Dublin.

<sup>22</sup>*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, in *The New Yorker* (14 October 1961): 52-161, many times since reprinted. The phrase is the title of a book by the character Sandy; see the novella's last page.

<sup>23</sup>Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 41, 43. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Thomas Hobbes (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989):

To hear this history rehearsed, for that there be inserted in it no fables, shall be perhaps [unlike Herodotus] not delightful. But he that desires to look into the truth of things done and which (according to the condition of humanity) may be done again, or at least their like, he shall find enough here in to make him think it profitable.

(14)

There may be no fables, but that does not prevent Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* from being a tragedy, to such a degree indeed that after the dénouement at Syracuse in the late summer of 413 BCE, Thucydides' history runs out of steam and loses its steering at the same time. He didn't finish it, is what they say, but that is inaccurate. He did finish it, at the end of Book VII. There was so little left to say that Book VIII trails off.

<sup>24</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452<sup>b</sup>, trans. by Ingram Bywater in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1463-4. I have altered the translation some.

<sup>25</sup>This phrase was tentatively attributed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (2nd half of the first century BCE) by Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke in *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, 2 vols. (London, 1752; rpt. New York: Garland, 1970) 1:15. I have not succeeded in finding it in the works of Dionysius. Perhaps someone expert in classical literature will help me here.

<sup>26</sup>*The New York Review of Books* 36, 21/2 (18 January 1990): 35.

<sup>27</sup>In the work cited above, n.8.

<sup>28</sup>Gore Vidal has set himself the odd task of recounting the history of the United States in a series of novels, beginning in 1967 with *Washington, D.C.* (Boston: Little-Brown). The latest, *Hollywood: A Novel of America in the 1920s* (New York: Random House, 1990), is not the last, you can be sure. My guess is that we shall soon hear of the publication of a big novel called *Roosevelt*. Vidal cut his teeth in this peculiar trade of the historical novel with *Julian* (Boston: Little-Brown, 1964), the story of an Emperor (331?-363) who was a little farther along the Decline and Fall than Robert Graves' Claudius (10 BCE - 54 CE) or Yourcenar's Hadrian (76-138). See Graves, *I, Claudius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 [orig. 1934]) and *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina* (London: Barker, 1934). Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, trans. Grace Frick (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), in many ways the best of this crop, itself exhibits the time-travel moralizing which is endemic to the lot:

I can well imagine [muses Hadrian] forms of servitude worse than our own, because more insidious, whether they transform men into stupid, complacent machines, who believe themselves free just when they are most subjugated, or whether to the exclusion of leisure and pleasures essential to man they develop a passion for work as

violent as the passion for war among barbarous races. (123)

That's us, chum; you were better off being a Roman Emperor, or, failing that, a Roman slave.

<sup>29</sup>Cartwright, *Journal*, 2:342-49. O'Flaherty, in *The Rock Observed* (cited in n. 8), quotes the story of the bears at some length (36-8).

<sup>30</sup>The story was originally part of Hemingway's collection *In Our Time* (London: Jackson, 1924). I use the reprinted version in *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 307-16, 319-30; see 324. While we're on the subject of Hemingway, may we ask why literary native persons talk in his cadences? Here is Attuiock:

'You have clever things, Cartwright, but your people are few and weak. And you have no home. You are always wandering. We Inuit are strong and very many. We could kill you all very easily. But if you are peaceful you can stay. You will be well here.' (136)

Only eleven words out of forty-eight with more than one syllable, two of them names.

<sup>31</sup>I use the text printed in Francis Lee Utley, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Arthur F. Kinney, eds., *Bear, Man, & God: Seven Approaches to William Faulkner's The Bear* (New York: Random House, 1964), 5-112; see 85.

<sup>32</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), 711. The main point of the 20th-century responses to bears or trout or other wild and natural creatures is that in some sense when you face them or hook them or shoot or knife them you are facing some part of your very own self. The shadow of Freud falls. My guess from reading Cartwright's journal is that all of this is utterly foreign to his cast of mind. For him, the beasts of the field were edible sometimes; useful for fur, feather, or oil sometimes; but always vermin to be cleared off. At the end of the carnage, according to Steffler, as the men made their way back to the boat, "Cartwright was now shaking more than ever, needing to use his hands to get from one rock to the next. It was from too much sun, he told himself, from not having eaten for nearly a day" (256). In Cartwright's version, quoted above, they were all "ravenous as a pack of foxhounds after a hard day."

<sup>33</sup>In *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Cape, 1984), Julian Barnes returns again and again to animals associated with his hero's owner, who wrote "'I am a bear and I want to stay a bear in my den, in my lair, in my old bear's skin; I want to live quietly, far away from the bourgeois and the bourgeois'" — much like Cartwright. Barnes quotes this remark at the beginning of ch. 4, "The Flaubert Bestiary." Note also how Flaubert, Attuiock, and Cartwright agreed about taming the landscape. The "shambles" left by a crushing hailstorm "delighted" Flaubert: "in five minutes Nature had reimposed the true order of things upon that brief, factitious order which man conceitedly imagines himself to be introducing" (162). Again observe the skepticism which Barnes (speaking through a fictional narrator) voices about history:

How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so? When I was a medical student some pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall a piglet which had been smeared with grease. It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet. (14)

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Steffler would go along with that.

<sup>34</sup>A better history lesson, it could be, is of Steffler's own devising, unhobbled by history texts. Cartwright has returned from Labrador (1779) and has gone to visit his ailing father, who "embraced him tearfully, struggled to open madeira wine, his hands trembling constantly," and explained schemes of betterment. He had bred a wonderful plant:

A thornless, edible thistle. It would alter the course of history. He was weeping again. "It will release the poor from hunger and reverse God's curse on Adam. It is a great step toward the recovery of Eden, which now must be the whole object of man's endeavour." (19-20)

An accurate and reverberant metaphor for every techno-fix ever proposed: thistles without thorns.