

Impossible Journey

*In Martha Baillie's novel, a German photographer
looks for Nature freed from history.*

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The Search for Heinrich Schlögel

Martha Baillie

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HEINRICH SCHLÖGEL, SON OF A PROSPEROUS German hop farmer, and his sister Inge first encounter the Arctic as children in the early 1970s, in books. Inge begins teaching herself Inuktitut from a kit she found in the school cafeteria, and Heinrich, at his sis-

ter's urging, reads the 1771 journal of Samuel Hearne.

The mode of this encounter—through text—is at the heart of Martha Baillie's new novel, *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel*, which explores how our understanding of a place is written and bound—inescapably, often cruelly—by our own histories. Baillie, author of the Giller Prize-nominated *The Incident Report*, a novel told in 144 "reports," has here created a beautiful and highly original work, layering postmodern nuance over a deep bedrock of myth and colonial history.

Inge Schlögel's interest in the Arctic is at first purely linguistic, but another book she discovers will trigger depression and a suicide attempt: the diary of Abraham Ulrikab, one of eight Inuk taken from Labrador to Germany in 1880. It matches a headline on a scrap of newspaper Inge once found in the seat of a sleigh: "Family of savages from the Frozen North draws large crowds at the Berlin Zoo."

Heinrich, however, perseveres in his own quest for the North, not yet able to see that he is pursuing something created out of his own background, his reading, his fears and his longings. He accepts an invitation from a travelling Canadian to hike in the Arctic and arrives in Frobisher Bay in July 1980. His new friend, however, has changed his plans; Heinrich will have to walk alone. And already, his romanticized idea of the pure, empty North is being challenged: in the Hudson's Bay store, he finds a book on residential schools: "I have bought a book," he writes in his journal. "It is surrounded by silence. The ravens keep talking. I cannot think of anything to say."

With a tent, camping stove and enough food for twelve days, Heinrich sets off for the Turner glacier, immersing himself in a landscape that is at first

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thrillingly and jarringly bare, stripped down to the elements of rock, ice, water. Driven by a romantic desire for the sublime, nature without culture, the land stripped of horrors only humans can generate, Heinrich stops frequently to photograph what he sees. A perfect composition (like all art) promises him an experience of the transcendent, "the experience of time as indivisible."

But a photograph is still time bound: it is "a moment removed from the natural flow of time and made to point backward." And while offering us images of a stark, wild, seemingly untouched landscape, Baillie ultimately reminds us that all

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landscape has been marked by human activity. Like Inge, Heinrich cannot encounter the Arctic without its colonial history. At some point on his trek, he stops to photograph a lost snowmobile glove and feels his camera become a relic. His map becomes unreliable. Hearne himself appears, and Heinrich has horrific visions of historical encounters. As his two-week food supply runs out, he follows a hare through what geologists call an erratic—a stone deposited by a glacier far from its source. When he emerges from this apparent hallucination, it is 2010.

We learn of these mysterious events from the heavily footnoted reconstructions of Heinrich's archivist, a German architect living in Toronto, who began her search after seeing a remarkable photograph in *The Globe and Mail*. We, too, are searching—not just for Heinrich, but for the identity of the archivist, and for something to hang on to, to call truth, as we sift through the letters and journals and notes that make up the novel.

Every answer turns into another question about the nature of history, art and truth. What, for example, drives the archivist to "decipher, elaborate, speculate, turn upside down, reconsider, arrange, classify"? What does she want from Heinrich? She herself wonders: "Am I leading an irresponsible life, given how little time is left? Storms decimate one coast after another ... What I want from Heinrich is immense. Something immense is required and time is short."

An obsessed and occluded figure, she goes to great pains to validate the historicity of Heinrich, while dropping truths about herself that sound increasingly fictional. As she is pursuing Heinrich

through thrift shops and over Skype, her parents, a doctor and an engineer in Germany, develop a gambling problem, lose all their money and die within months of each other. She appears at first to have some luck in assembling her archive: a journal is preserved by an anarchist working in Toronto; an 1875 adventure novel from a Munich bookstore turns out to be Heinrich's own copy; a half-page of his writing is posted on a website entitled "Did You Lose This?" But then she undercuts her credibility by including a dream as evidence.

As her presence comes to seem far-fetched, impressionistic, illusory, Heinrich's impossible journey becomes more elemental and real. And yet it is through the archivist that we come to understand the context of Heinrich's encounters on Baffin Island, the meaning of his visions, and how histories and landscapes are constructed out of stories, longing, lies and omissions. Like Heinrich, the archivist first came to Canada hoping to discover a "pristine wilderness." Like Heinrich, she encounters a geography she cannot read—"Beyond the town, forest spread in all directions"—and after three days in Kirkland Lake, she catches a bus back to Toronto.

Heinrich eludes her desire to define him, as she eludes ours.

How has Heinrich emerged after 30 years, only two weeks older, and why are his ears filled with a rushing sound, like ice melting? (It may well be ice melting. Sarah, his Inuit landlady, tells him, "You think water is running when no water is running. But you hear good. The cold is not like before.")

The teacher in me wants to explain Heinrich's mystery, to label it (magic realism, say) and reduce it to some form of "it means." But then I remember Tolkien's essay on the dragon in *Beowulf*, in which he argues that myth is "at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography, as our poet has done ... For myth is alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected."

Revealing, puzzling, dazzling, *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel* resists reduction, rewards rereading. It draws you forward, as narrative should, but ultimately unfolds in you like poetry, with images so vivid and powerful they cannot be paraphrased. Some are horrifying, like Heinrich's hallucinogenic vision of residential school abuse; some have the clarity of a black-and-white photograph; and some remain inexplicable, irreducible, undissectable, like the final glimpse we have of Heinrich emerging from a subway station in Toronto before disappearing again.

[J.R.C.]