

# “Tampering With the Truth”: John Steffler’s *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* in Dialogue with History

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[See table of contents](#)

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## Article abstract

In John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, fur trader George Cartwright's journal is revised and amended by former lover Mrs. Selby, who adds her rendition of events in a way that mirrors the novel's treatment of the historical journal. In the supplementation of a document that describes the era of British colonialism in Canada, Steffler provides a postcolonial revisioning of Canada's past, one which is not engendered and written exclusively by British men. The novel's dialogic form criticizes the idea of a universal Canadian experience in the historical journal and, by extension, in Canada's history. But rather than setting up its own version as the final representation, the novel discloses the processes employed by the group in power to establish a version of history that reflects its own interests rather than the truth.

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NICOLA RENGER

Mrs. Selby, as it now appears, has made a secret practice of reading my journal, and has had the audacity to take my pen and enter, by way of amending my notations, her own version of recent events . . . I adjure you, Mrs. Selby, to remember your place. (156-57)

THIS SCENE taken from John Steffler’s *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* provides the thematic and structural key to the novel. For one, it alludes to George Cartwright’s journal, which is not an invention of Steffler’s but was published as *A Journal of Transactions and Events, During a Residence of Nearly Sixteen Years on the Coast of Labrador* in 1792 and as *Captain Cartwright and his Labrador Journal*, edited by Charles Wendell Townsend in 1911. Cartwright and Selby are both authentic historical figures who become protagonists in Steffler’s novel. At one point in the novel they engage in a written dialogue via journal entries. Cartwright’s statement above refers to Selby’s supplementary, but fictional correction of his previous account of events that is a quotation from Cartwright’s historical journal (Townsend 65-66).<sup>1</sup> Selby’s fictional revision of this documentary text mirrors the novel’s treatment of the historical journal. This episode thus tackles what is at the heart of the novel: a dialogue between literature and history. Supplementing a document that describes the era of British colonialism in Canada, the novel provides a postcolonial revisioning of Canada’s past.

The historical journal portrays the fur trader’s activities and ability as a colonizer, providing an example of colonial settlement and trade in Labrador. Townsend, the editor of Cartwright’s journal, notes that “Cartwright reveals himself in these pages as a lover of the truth, a good

observer and hard worker, a philosopher in good fortune and in ill fortune, a resourceful man in many trying experiences, and above all a man of strict honour and justice" (xiv).<sup>2</sup> In Steffler's novel this portrayal of Cartwright as an able, honest, and just pioneer is challenged.

The episode from which I cited above begins with an excerpt taken from Cartwright's historical journal in which he glorifies his competence as a midwife. After reading Cartwright's journal, Mrs. Selby feels the urge to confront Cartwright, who has been her lover, for his representation of events by making a journal entry of her own. She alters his version by adding her rendition of events. When the Englishman felt faint at the sight of the actual birth, Selby severed the cord and looked after the after-birth. She ironically comments on his boastful account:

These matters, by some strange omission, do not appear in your journal. Likewise, while it is true that you were afterwards obliged to take the child to bed with you ... you neglect to record that I was also in your bed ... . I only make this intrusion in case your journal comes to serve as a substitute for your memory. (156)

Cartwright does not want to leave written evidence of his incompetence and the socially less acceptable fact of having an extramarital lover in Labrador. Instead, his journal is to testify to his skillfulness and virtuousness as a pioneer. The historical journal is, indeed, convincing in its representation of Cartwright: the poet Robert Southey compared Cartwright's writing to "sitting down like Robinson Crusoe to his Journal" (Townsend xiii). Through his journal, Cartwright turns himself into the prototype of a colonizer: Robinson Crusoe. However, Selby's revision suggests that this self-portrayal is not entirely accurate; it is just as fictional as Robinson Crusoe. Her own version depicts Cartwright as a rather incompetent and feeble pioneer.

The novel's third-person narrative corroborates Selby's version: Cartwright is unwilling to admit his deficiencies as a colonizer. When Selby advises Cartwright on traps, he silences her by claiming: "I've thought of this myself" (152). He is not able to give her any credit for her ideas. After Selby recommends that they build a trench, he notes in his journal: "I resolved to have a drain cut parallel to the upper side of [the house]" (121). He completely effaces her existence and advice from his account in order to present himself as a competent colonizer.

Since Selby's voice supplements and, as a result, undermines Cartwright's self-representation in his journal, Cartwright strongly objects to Selby's written intrusion. He records in his journal that Selby "has made

a secret practice of reading my journal, and has had the audacity to take my pen" (156). It is interesting that he deems her practice of reading his journal a secret one, although she obviously has no difficulty in revealing her activity by inserting her own version. His comment suggests that Selby is a devious, untrustworthy woman who, however, can be shamed and silenced by his admonition: "I was satisfied by her show of contrition" (156). As a countermove to Selby's revision of his image, Cartwright disparages her. The novel here displays that "history [is] a weapon, not only in a war of competing ideologies, but of competing identities" (Palmer 641). Cartwright establishes himself once more as an authority figure who has his people, as well as any situation, under control, while constructing Selby as a woman in need of being put into her place: "However, ... let me caution you that I shall not respond so lightly a second time to evidence of persistent meddling in this log. ... I adjure you, Mrs. Selby, to remember your place" (156-57).

Selby continues to resist the colonizer's construction of identities and his overriding voice. Disobeying his orders, she inserts another note "attempting to bring greater balance and truth to your account of events" (157). She again corrects his impression: she was not contrite. Instead, she admits to having reacted to his "show of ill temper" and "interminable sermonizing" with a "mixture of boredom" and "suppressed laughter" (157). In order to undermine his authority further, she parodies his language in her mimicry of his customary closing weather report (157). Selby casts doubt on Cartwright's presentation of himself as the virtuous master, but also questions her own position within the household: "What, Mr. Cartwright, is that place of mine, which you adjure me to recollect?" (157).

What indeed is her place in the settler community and its corresponding history? Selby was Cartwright's lover and companion in Labrador. In the historical journal, Cartwright defines Selby as "the housekeeper" though he later on formally divorces her (Cartwright v. I, 3; v. II, 442). Steffler is alert to these contradictory statements: in the novel, just as Selby inserts herself into history by writing in Cartwright's journal, she demands to be openly identified as either partner or servant in the oral dialogue following her final journal entry. As a servant, she requests to be paid for her work. Instead of financially depending on Cartwright, she asks for a "reasonable return for [her] contribution" (160). Selby does not wish to be limited to Cartwright's romantic, domestic vision of her "at the fire-side, ... in a silk gown in the midst of this wilderness" which might yield him "a sense of victory" (158). This image diminishes her physical efforts and contributions, confining her to a passive, stationary place within the

house. Selby will not submit to the domestic sphere to which no historical value is attributed in Cartwright's journal.

Selby's opposition reveals that the romantic version of colonization as the single-handed venture of men is a product of omission and falsification. In the many years of their companionship little mention is made of her in Cartwright's historical journal: her name is mentioned in passing four times within two years (Townsend 15, 26-27, 116). Likewise, little mention is made of the female population as such and its contribution to the settlement; women seem to be historically marginal. In the novel Selby observes this erasure: "You omit all mention of me. That doesn't seem truthful. But very revealing nonetheless" (158). In its selectivity Cartwright's journal presents the traditional view of history, in particular colonial history, as made by men. That women are perceived to be without historical consequence or value is remarked on by Selby: "Your journal's a truer measure of how you value me" (159). Though the journal presents a false version of reality, it, ironically, betrays the truth concerning Selby's historic value. Selby's journal entries disclose that the colonizer's writing is "embedded in a cultural perspective whose assumption of authority and 'objectivity' continues to silence and marginalize voices outside it" (Jones 18).<sup>3</sup> The fur trader writes from a patriarchal and colonial perspective that denies the contribution of women — or the colonized<sup>4</sup> — to history.

Nevertheless, Selby's voice finally enters the journal even if her writing remains marginal. In the written and ensuing oral dialogue between Selby and Cartwright, the novel challenges both Cartwright's construction of male and female identities and the history this construction endeavours to create. Steffler's narrative thus exposes "those modes of feeling, valuing, perceiving and believing which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power" which Terry Eagleton calls "ideology" (15). The dialogues between the lovers reveal that assigning women the position of dependency and historical insignificance empowers the "white male."

Critique of the historical marginalization of certain groups is a recurrent concern of Canadian literature. In Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*, for example, the protagonist Annie learns "that history is the real story the city fathers tell of the only important events in the world. ... so many ordinary men turned into heroes" (28). Her search for and resurrection of "missing persons in all this rubble" of history (134) finally forces her to ask: "where are the city mothers?" (28). Resisting their historical disappearance, Annie begins to add to the historical diary of a Victorian settler-woman, Mrs.

Richards.<sup>5</sup> Annie's writing inserts not only this historically marginalized female pioneer into history but also her own mother Ina whose daily domestic contributions have also been evaluated as ahistoric (137). Marlatt's novel thus exposes and criticizes the erasure of female settlers and of the domestic sphere from history. Like Steffler's novel, *Ana Historic* reveals that "one missing piece can change the shape of the whole picture" of history (134), particularly if this piece consists of a whole group of people. By unveiling what Helen Tiffin calls "'traces' of past annihilation" ("Post-Colonialism" 177), *Ana Historic* and *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* recover women from such a historical annihilation.

Central to the investigation of history in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* is the colonial ideology which legitimized the erection and maintenance of the British empire. In his introduction to the historical journal, Wilfred T. Grenfell judges it to be "a concise illustration of the enterprise, pluck, perseverance, self-reliance and stoicism of the old English stock" (Townsend viii). Cartwright's historical journal serves as a demonstration of the superiority of the English stock and thus complies with colonial ideology.<sup>6</sup> In its depiction of Cartwright, the novel reacts to his exemplary role as colonizer as constructed in the historical journal: the protagonist is presented as a firm believer in the colonial doctrine of the "white man's burden," according to which the less developed races need to be civilized by the superior English.

Selby's emerging character and voice overtly challenge the fur trader's colonial belief system and resulting actions.<sup>7</sup> While, for instance, Cartwright maintains that "It's the duty of the civilized man to elevate the savage" (127), Selby counters that "It's our duty ... to leave them alone if we can't accept them as they are" (128). Considering Selby's earlier judgement that Cartwright is "more of a savage ... than any of them" (10), the colonizer's claim about the value of civilization — offering himself as an example — is full of hidden irony. Selby's criticism of the transfer of European belief and value systems to the New World entices Cartwright to present the full range of the colonizer's perspective and reveals the weakness and inherent inconsistency of his arguments.

The novel's treatment of the British law and its practice, for instance, negates the proclaimed necessity to import the superior English achievements. Cartwright's wish to uphold the law can be attributed solely to the authority and power it conveys to him as its representative — after all, he admits that he "was not much concerned with the general issues of truth and justice" (64). Selby discerns his true motivation and attacks him for using "the law as an instrument of [his] own savagery" (174).

In the case of the sawyer Williams, Cartwright indeed makes the law an instrument of his revenge. Having suffered from Williams's ridicule of his person, Cartwright gladly takes the opportunity to deal with the sawyer "according to the letter of the law" (170) and presses charges for the capital crime of sodomy against him. Steffler's description follows the historical journal, which states that only after Williams was punished for his "small crimes," did Cartwright accuse him "of a capital crime" (Cartwright v. I, 121). Proceeding in this fashion, the historical Cartwright appears vengeful, just as he seems callous when mixing the curt description of the legal proceedings with his account of hunting ducks. Steffler's description of the process illuminates both the personal use to which the law is put as well as the colonizer's character.

Cartwright again applies the law when he discovers the affair between his lover Selby and his foreman Daubeney. In the court scene, the Englishman sets himself up as prosecutor, judge and executioner, repeatedly claiming that he seeks truth and justice "according to the law" (270). When he forces the lovers to sign statements that refer to Selby as "Mr. Cartwright's *de facto* wife," Selby is fast to point out: "I never was your wife *de facto*, *de jure*, or in any form ... I am your housekeeper" (271). In the novel English law as practised by the colonizer emerges hardly as a superior achievement, nor as an instrument of truth. Instead it is, like many social structures and institutions transferred to the colonies, a means of power for the male colonizer.

Again, it is the dissenting voice of Selby that exposes Cartwright's abuse of the law. In a similar vein, she argues that the law itself is faulty. Since Selby is critical of English society and its values, she opposes their introduction into Labrador: "We don't have to drag the cruelties of England with us. We can keep the good laws and forget the rest. This is a new place" (174). While she goes to Labrador to be free from the various forms of slavery that exist in England (107), Cartwright wants to keep the English structures and values since these place him at the top of the social hierarchy in the colony.

Apart from doubting the merit of English civilization, Selby realizes that the introduction of it to Labrador will be of little use to the Inuit people, "except to make the Eskimos more acceptable to us" (127). The climate and environment of Labrador demand other skills than the English can offer: their useless knowledge stands in stark contrast to the survival skills of the Inuit. Indeed, Cartwright and his trading post depend on the help and knowledge of the Inuit to survive: the colonizers become a burden to the Inuit, not vice versa.

In his discussion with Selby, the real reason for Cartwright's contact with the Inuit soon surfaces: he does not want to civilize them but to use them as a cheap labour force. He concedes that "Trading with them for furs will be much more practical than doing all the trapping ourselves" (128). When Cartwright prides himself on punishing an Inuit leader for stealing from him,<sup>8</sup> it is Selby who exposes the hypocrisy of his didactic demeanour and draws attention to his mercenary motivations:

... you don't have to pretend to yourself or me that you think it's fair, or that you're serving the cause of civilisation here. What you give them isn't worth one fiftieth part of what you get from them. You know that better than I. So who's stealing from whom? And how does your trade improve them, or your lessons in honesty? I think you'll weaken them, make them dependent and tame. (194)<sup>9</sup>

Selby does not criticize his economic interest; she herself partakes in the exploitation of the Inuit through trade. She is complicit with colonization as an economic enterprise, but she does not hide her interests behind hypocritical humanitarian justifications. It is true that her implication in and simultaneous critique of the colonial project make her into an ambiguous figure. This ambiguity invites readers to read her as "the settler-invader woman" (Tiffin, "Body" 215) who is complicit with the colonial enterprise while it continues to suppress her.

Selby's voice challenges the patriarchal as well as colonial agenda that shaped Cartwright's life and justified the exploitation of foreign regions during the era of British colonialism. She unveils the missionary zeal of colonialism as mere justification for the appropriation of foreign land and the domination of its native inhabitants. The dialogic approach and postcolonial stance of the novel thus converge when the supplementary postcolonial voice confronts the exclusive colonial voice in the arguments between Selby and the fur trader. Through the arguments between the lovers the novel engages colonial ideology in a dialogue and thus participates in the postcolonial revisioning of colonial history.

The dialogic nature of the novel's postcolonial revision also emerges through a conversation in which the Inuit Attuiock counters Cartwright's belief system and perception of the Inuit with his own. Though Attuiock's position certainly differs from Selby's, it also questions Cartwright's colonial concepts and reveals the gaps in his arguments.

Still, the novel's postcolonial revisioning does not occur only in these discussions. Translating the words "Dieu et mon droit" on a silver medal,



Cartwright explains to Attuiok that God's power rests specifically with the British who are to rule the world: "It means 'God and my right' . . . . It's the King's power. The power he gives to the British" (217). Cartwright argues that the colonial enterprise is legitimate since the English are empowered and sent by God. When praising the achievements of the historical Cartwright, Townsend quotes the gravestone inscription according to which the Cartwright brothers "'paved the way for the introduction of Christianity to the natives of these benighted regions'" (xxxiii). Townsend seems to doubt neither the positive effects of colonialism nor those of Christianization. The novel takes a different stance, as it re-evaluates the symbolic content of the medal, it transforms this symbol for English superiority into a symbol for the genocide of the Inuit.<sup>10</sup>

The questionable benefits of English knowledge and government are already hinted at by the fact that John Cartwright gives Attuiok the medal — the symbol for English superiority — only because it has no real value. However, it is not ridicule of British superiority that is at the heart of Steffler's symbolic use of the medal, but a criticism of the negative effects of colonialism.

In 1772 Cartwright returns from Labrador to London calculating that the company of Attuiok and four other Inuit "would make him the leading figure in Labrador trade" (197). He also hopes to correct the Inuit's view of the English "as a small tribe of landless wanderers," so that once they realize "the true proportion of things," they will be more "willing subjects to his rule" (9). While in England, the Inuit contract smallpox that, unlike England's modern achievements, finally forces Attuiok to realize the true proportion of things. Dying, he accuses Cartwright: "you were a soldier all along . . . . Your people are many more than mine" (236). Facing the death of the Inuit, Cartwright himself foresees the danger of genocide: "my influence, my country's influence on [Caubvick], and on all of them, was likely to be much greater than I had imagined, and more terrible" (231). His teachings have already transformed his Inuit lover Caubvick into an unyielding trader who, when Cartwright refuses to marry her in exchange for the smallpox-infected wig of her hair, proclaims: "Then there is no trade" (240). In spite of knowing the disastrous consequences, and contrary to his feeling of kinship with the Inuit, he lets Caubvick return to her people with the wig and the medal.<sup>11</sup> The medal's return to Cartwright coincides with his learning of the extinction of several Inuit tribes due to smallpox. The medal thus becomes a symbol of the disastrous effects that colonization had on the colonized. Connecting the colonial legitimization

with the negative effects of colonization, the novel presents the seemingly innocent legitimization in a different light.

Steffler's construction of this symbol seems a necessary reminder since Cartwright's historical journal only briefly mentions these consequences:

Caubvick must have retained the infection in her hair which she kept in a trunk; and I believe that the small-pox broke out amongst them in the winter, and swept them all off. [Daubeny] also brought eleven beaver-skins, which he purchased from one of the people. A dull morning, clear day, and it snowed and drifted in the evening." (Cartwright v. II, 424)

In comparison to the many hunting excursions and techniques which Cartwright describes at length in the historical journal, the brevity of the note appears casual, even callous: in passing he mentions the deaths of hundreds, framing this event by the results of his hunting and trading. Instead of admitting his own responsibility or emotional involvement, he ends with a weather report.

The neglect of the genocide in the historical journal continues in later appraisals of this journal. Though Townsend praises the journals' value "as they deal with conditions many of which are now passed for ever" (x), he never asks why the conditions are forever passed. Townsend does not make the connection between Cartwright's dealings with the Inuit, their disappearance, and the increased European settlement in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Steffler's novel works against this historical erasure of the consequences of colonization. In the novel, the return of the medal compels Cartwright to recognize the outcome of his decision, just as his afterlife forces him to come to terms with his guilt. In the novel's exposure of the negative effects of colonization, Canadian readers thus face the afterlife of their own historical inheritance and, like Cartwright, learn that "There [is] no final forgetting" (257).<sup>13</sup> The novel "confronts the amnesia of colonialism through the memory of post-colonialism" (Hutcheon, "Circling" 182) as it reinserts marginal groups as well as the negative effects of colonization into Canada's history.

Within the novel, resistance to the "master discourse" of history becomes manifest through Selby's intrusion into the master's discourse, the journals that will later become documents. Consequently, the novel also presents a critique of documents as objective representations of the past.

During his life the Englishman makes himself into the hero of his own narrative, but he also writes because of the significance attached to

writing: "The sense of importance, the ritual ... would hush the others because the master was writing" (22).<sup>14</sup> Selby's written intrusion presents a problem for Cartwright, since it is not only in discord with his own, but suddenly becomes, like his own, a written version. As writing, it enters into the sphere of documents and consequently, historiography.

The supplement contests the authority of Cartwright's document not only because it negates his version but also because it mixes fictional and documentary texts. In the novel, fiction and document also enter in a dialogue when Cartwright himself makes late alterations to his journal. The novel holds that after the fur trader returns to England in 1779, he is unable to secure financial support to return to Labrador. He therefore settles in England and later decides to write a guide to Labrador for "an ideal younger version of himself" (279). However, instead of writing "The Labrador Companion," he begins to edit and add to his journal. Though he makes "no substantial changes to what he had actually written in Labrador" during his nine years of residence (280-81), he makes quite a substantial supplement to it: he invents six years. His extensions portray "subsequent years in Labrador as he imagined they would have been" (280). The protagonist supplements his journal, in order to revise himself from a failure into a successful pioneer. Steffler's fictional protagonist defends his questionable additions to the journal when he publishes his work, "sins and all" (281), by claiming that readers "would find as much truth in his book, and as much instruction and entertainment, as in anything else they were likely to read" (282).

Just as he has invented Selby's revision of the journal, Steffler has fabricated Cartwright's alteration of the journal: the historical Cartwright actually spent the whole period of sixteen years that is covered in his historical journal in Labrador; he did not extend his journal by six fictional years. While in Selby's case the fictional entries pose as part of the historical journal, in the latter case historical entries are identified as fiction. Thus the novel not only adds to the historical document, it also explicitly defines a fraction of it as fiction. In claiming the historical document as belonging to the fictional realm, the novel further blurs the boundaries between fiction and document. It implies that, similar to literary texts, historical narratives are "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found" (White, "Historical Text" 42). Steffler's inversion of fiction and fact exposes the ease with which documents can be changed and the difficulty of evaluating their truthfulness.

The novel further challenges the reliability and authority of documents by framing the quoted material with other narrative strands and

“genres.”<sup>15</sup> The conversation between Selby and Cartwright via the journal is, for instance, continued within the third-person narrative. The oral dialogue between the two protagonists thus supplements the written dialogue and, implicitly, the historical journal. The switch from the written to the oral discussion between the two lovers is also a switch from the supposedly documentary text to the literary text. This move opens a dialogue between the two different narrative voices that repeatedly intersect, continue, and comment on each other.

In the first half of the novel, the third-person and first-person narratives become indispensable complements to each other in their presentation of Cartwright's early life. They are, however, not always in accord with each other. It is the voice of the third-person narrator that warns us early on that there “was always a disagreement between the way Cartwright saw himself and the way others saw him” (42). While Cartwright's entries speak of his courage and honour, the third-person narrative retorts with the depiction of an incident where Cartwright flees from the enemy and prostitutes a woman. The partial thematic overlap of the different narrative strands and their textual propinquity construct a polyphonic, overtly incomplete, and fragmented narrative that reveals the possibility of reinterpreting a monologic document by adding diverse perspectives.<sup>16</sup>

The dialogue in which Attuiock and Cartwright engage provides another movement toward heteroglossia. Since this dialogue lacks framing narrative elements, it reads like a dramatized dialogue; like the historical journal, it constitutes an inserted genre.<sup>17</sup> Just as the historical journal enters into a dialogue with Steffler's supplementary narrative, this insertion — as Mikhail Bakhtin would argue — creates another dialogue between genres.

The different occasions and levels of dialogue — between characters and genres — transform the novel into a polyphonic narrative. Its heteroglossia allows for a reflection of the world “that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror” (Bakhtin 415). Contrary to the monologic voice of the document, the novel presents diverse views of the colonial world.

Again, Steffler is not the only Canadian author who explores the creation and truth value of historical documents.<sup>18</sup> In *Ana Historic* Ana Richards “was writing what would become a record” but she still “could have imagined anything and written it down as real forever” (29-30). Marlat's novel suggests that no historical record is free from the subjective choices of its writer and that truth and reality become contorted in the

process. Since Ana's image of her time is overtly subjective, it "is not history" but "suspect," "inauthentic, 'fictional possibly'" (30). Furthermore, "it's hardly a record of that world ... it's Mrs. Richards' private world ... that's why it's not historical — a document, yes, but not history" (31). As a product of imagination, it departs from the historical realm to the fictional, and as a record of the domestic and private, it hardly covers what is of interest to history. Consequently, it is neglected as ahistoric. Ironically, it is Annie's "pure invention" (55) that rescues Ana and her record from historical oblivion; it is fiction that provides an alternative perspective on history and its workings.

Ana's journal, Annie's comments and supplementary narrative as well as her imagined dialogues with Ina create an increasingly dialogic narrative whose different narrative voices are difficult to distinguish. Annie seeks this dialogue since she doesn't "want history's voice" (48), the monologic, authoritative voice, to prevail. Adding alternative perspectives and voices, *Ana Historic*, like *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, aims for a fictional re-imagining of documents and history on the level of content and form.

The examination of documents through literature is crucial since the content of documents is decisive for the history that we will know: "we only have access to the past today through its traces — documents, the testimony of witnesses and other archival materials" (Hutcheon, "Politics" 39). The inevitable reliance of historians on documents in their reconstruction of the past makes documents an important tool in the interrogation of history.

Steffler's polyphonic and fragmented novel opposes history's objective of recovering the past by joining its traces in a coherent and complete story. The novel forces readers to work as archaeologists finding and interpreting provisional evidence that, according to Manina Jones allows not for a complete recovery of the story but, instead, raises their awareness of the gaps in existing documents and histories (9-10).

Steffler examines the particular history into which historians and biographers have cast the life of the fur trader, "inviting the reader to consider the degree to which the Canadian past has been constructed by historians and biographers, so that ... the present illuminates the past" (Bennett 209). Many historians read Cartwright's historical journal as an entertaining text and as a historical document: they believe his rendition of events. Alan Cooke and Clive Holland state that it "was a standard reference to Labrador for many years" (88); and Paul O'Neill refers to it as "an invaluable document" (45). D.W. Prowse calls the journal "one of

the most remarkable books ever written" (599) and speaks of Cartwright as a "gallant major" (598) who "did immense service ... to English rule" (600). Townsend emphasizes the "valuable information and acute observations" in the document, "all told with a fidelity to truth that cannot be doubted" (ix). He believes Cartwright when he claims "the veracity of [his] narrative" and calls himself "a faithful journalist" who writes the "downright truth" even if Cartwright then proceeds to present Selby as his "housekeeper" (Townsend 5, 11, 15).<sup>19</sup>

For one, historians have read Cartwright's journal as a document and therefore an objective and authoritative representation of the past. Secondly, historians have made his life into a worthy example of colonial settlement, producing a Canadian history greatly influenced by colonial convictions of British superiority and of the positive effects of civilizing the indigenes.<sup>20</sup> Steffler's novel works against this reading of Cartwright's historical journal by exposing that cultural preconceptions and political interests have shaped the writing of this document as well as its interpretation within the frame of Canadian history. This is the aim to which the novel employs its "progressive parody": "a mechanism of literary reception and adaptation of traditional texts used ... in a situation in which the old text cannot or should not be seen ... in the generally accepted way any longer" (Kuester 22).

Cartwright's life and historical journal demands a revision; it calls for an afterlife. The novel's title *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* promises such a corrective supplement: both, the dead Cartwright and his journal, are "taken hostage" by the novel (Kuester 22). The narrative begins 170 years after George Cartwright's death, a period that he has spent as a ghost hunting in and haunting the landscape of his youth. As he continues to write his journal and to travel through time and space, Cartwright questions not only the purpose and meaning of his repetitive and seemingly eternal afterlife but also of his past life: he enters into a dialogue with his earlier self.

Just as the fur trader keeps revising and adding to his journal, so Steffler rewrites and supplements Cartwright's life with an afterlife. For this purpose, he, like his protagonist, uses the historical journal as an object and tool of revision. The protagonist's examination of his own past accordingly mirrors the novel's interrogation of history. The novel supplements Cartwright's life with an afterlife, and historical writing with literary writing. It thus interrogates the form and structure of history and questions the contents and themes of Canadian history in particular. Joan Strong's argument that the novel allows the Canadian readers to distance

themselves from their colonial past (118) is contradicted by Cartwright's afterlife: this afterlife proclaims the continued, haunting presence of colonialism in Canadian culture and the need to examine Canada's present as well as its history. Though Steffler's dialogic use of Cartwright's journal is "a distancing process from the original directedness of the parodied text," once "we recognize a parody, this has an effect on our reading of the original" (Kuester 22, 18).<sup>21</sup> Steffler's novel changes the seemingly self-evident original meaning of the historical journal when it reads this journal as well as the related histories through today's lenses of post-colonial discourse.

Selby's intrusion, Cartwright's additions, and the dialogic narrative structure expose the possibility of falsification and omission in documents while they also subscribe to the novel's supplementary revision of Canadian history. The conversation and conversion in which the novel engages history is thus present at all levels of the narrative.

The dialogic form of the novel results in an overtly constructed, fragmented, and incomplete representation of the past: "In Canada we insist on the archaeological sense of narrative. We find, in our experience and in our psyches, fragments, traces, possibilities, remains, shards" (Kroetsch 182). Through its dialogic approach the novel criticizes the construction of a single, exclusive Canadian experience — namely, that of the male colonizer — in the historical journal and, by extension, in Canada's history. It argues that this experience alone did not create or constitute Canadian society. Bakhtin suggests that dialogism and consequently heteroglossia, "will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among other cultures and languages" (370). In Canada the quest for a unified national identity and culture has increasingly become a matter of dispute and in recent years has been abandoned in favour of a more multicultural or polyphonic view of Canada. The dialogic form of the novel embodies this notion of diverse Canadian psyches, identities, and cultures.

That the novel participates in postcolonial discourse has become evident in this essay. Steffler's novel questions the reality legitimized and rationalized by monologic documents and consequently works against the lingering colonial mentality in Canadian history and society. Since this colonial mentality constitutes a problem not only for the indigenes in Canada, I disagree with Tony Tremblay's negative evaluation of the novel's historical revisionism as a "White, Western construction ... appropriating non-White postcolonial language and theory" (160). I believe that to perceive postcolonial discourse as "non-White" is to subscribe by extension

to the notion that colonial discourse is a solely “White” discourse. In my opinion, neither colonial nor postcolonial discourse belong exclusively to colonizer or colonized as, for instance, postcolonial theories on complicity and hybridity make plain. Making postcolonial discourse exclusive is to limit its political impact from the outset.

Furthermore, the novel is more self-reflexive and aware of its signifying practices than Tremblay admits: it, for instance, does not privilege fiction as superior to history, nor does it pretend to “solve the problem of history” (Tremblay 162, 170). Linda Hutcheon argues convincingly that historiographic metafiction — and I would include Steffler’s novel in this category — is highly self-reflexive and challenges not only reality but, more importantly, how we know reality (“History” 173). The novel thus attacks not only the effects of “primary culture-forming assumptions that ground the White system” (Tremblay 166) but also the construction of knowledge and power itself.

The question that remains is whether the novel in its tampering with history is also tampering with *the* truth. Coming across Selby’s second entry, “Cartwright shut his journal with a bang” and admonishes her: “Mrs. Selby, I want you to stop tampering with my journal!” (157). Cartwright is insulted by her “tampering with [his] journal”; meaning she adulterates or debases his account by mixing it with something of less worth: her own version of the past. Many might believe that history is similarly debased by the intrusion of literature into the realm of document and history. They might argue that Steffler too carelessly cites, changes, and thus distorts his primary material.<sup>22</sup> But one of the novel’s effects is that it certainly makes readers aware that “history as narrative account . . . is always textualized, always already interpreted” (Hutcheon, “History” 170): any historical writing is already a particular textualization and interpretation of the past. Instead of setting up its own version as the final, complete, and truthful representation, the novel discloses the processes employed by the group in power to establish a version of history reflecting its own interests rather than the truth. The omissions and falsifications in Cartwright’s historical journal fashion a Canadian history engendered and written exclusively by British men. The novel reveals that this strategy serves to consolidate their power, while denying other groups access to power.

Responding to Cartwright’s accusation, Selby claims that his account needs correction since he is “tampering with the truth” (158). Selby’s fictional journal entries reveal that documents, instead of providing an unbiased representation of the past, are “tampering with



the truth,” since they can only be subjective fictionalization instead of objective representations of the past. “Truth-value is both implied and blocked, used and abused” (Hutcheon, “History” 174) in the novel’s dialogic use of the historical journal. Consequently, the novel cultivates a distrust in all historical writing that pretends to be coherent, whole and truthful. In the “Author’s Note” at the end of the novel, Steffler explicitly states: “What I’ve written is fiction, not history” (294). Though the novel aims toward an alternative, less false history by opening the document to further voices, it does so without claiming to present the truth with a capital “T.”

The concept of truthful representation might differ in history and literature “but the image of reality which the novelist ... constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less ‘real’ than that referred to by the historian” (White, “Fictions” 22). It is this relatedness of literature and historiography that invites an interrogation of historical writing by its fictional counterpart. *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* demonstrates, in structure and content, that literature can be a valid and powerful voice in the dialogue with history.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the journal as published in 1792 and 1911 as the “historical journal” and note the relevant edition for quotations.

<sup>2</sup> Even though Wilfred T. Grenfell, who introduces Townsend’s edition, notes that the journal depicts the life of a sinner, Cartwright’s “derelictions” do not taint Grenfell’s image of Cartwright as a “gallant Captain” (Townsend vii-viii).

<sup>3</sup> This observation on the use of James Cook’s journals in Lionel Kearns’s poem *Convergences* is to illustrate the technique of the “documentary-collage,” which also fits Steffler’s novel.

<sup>4</sup> Steffler, like Rudy Wiebe in *A Discovery of Strangers*, had the difficult choice of either appropriating or absenting the indigenous voices. Their voices do not enter the journal but primarily speak through the third-person narrative, making explicit that they are even further marginalized in Canadian history than “white women.”

<sup>5</sup> Marlatt’s use of Ana Richard’s diary and her mother’s scrapbook also aims to recover these as long neglected documents. In Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure For Death By Lightning* (1997) her mother’s scrapbook presents just such a source of reference for the protagonist and a female historiography of domestic labour.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Rompkey observes that Cartwright’s poem “Labrador: A Poetical Epistle” (1785, 1792) similarly “legitimized English enterprise in a remote corner of the expanding Empire” (50). Like the journal, it nearly effaces the presence of the indigenes (46).

<sup>7</sup> Compare with Peter Jaeger 46.

<sup>8</sup> This episode stems from the historical journal (Cartwright v. I, 239-40).

<sup>9</sup> Selby's critique stands in contrast to Townsend's evaluation: "Cartwright's tact and judgment in dealing with the Eskimos" were "admirable" compared with the previous treatment of just killing the Inuit (ix). Compare with Prowse 598-600.

<sup>10</sup> This re-evaluation can also be read as a dialogic process in which, according to Bakhtin, the later meaning enters into dialogue with the prior meaning and changes it (324-328).

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen McConnell argues that the complex relationship between the colonizer Cartwright and the indigenous woman Caubvick manifests itself as "cultural cross-dressing" in their "hybrid clothing" (96, 102). McConnell notes Cartwright's inner struggle between escaping and preserving the English social structures (McConnell 100-101) that surfaces repeatedly in the novel (43, 124, 151, 174, 261-264). Depending on his state of mind, he sees the Inuit either as "his natural company" (9) or as mere workers and subjects to his rule (102, 128, 196).

<sup>12</sup> This connection is made in part by Zimmerly who observes that "European/Eskimo relations had been so improved by this time that European settlement was now feasible. Factors responsible for this improved climate included Cartwright's reasoned treatment of the Eskimos plus their declining numbers brought about through the scourge of smallpox" (55). Though Zimmerly had knowledge of this particular episode, he does not infer that the smallpox was introduced by colonizers like Cartwright. Only O'Neill links Cartwright's return with Caubvick to the genocide: "The fifth [Inuit] carried the germ of the disease to Labrador and died later" (45).

<sup>13</sup> In *Ana Historic* a character remarks that the trouble with "past history" is that "it never is [past]" (132).

<sup>14</sup> That Cartwright wrote his journal not as a mere "record of [his] commercial affairs" (157) but with a readership in mind emerges from his claims to protect Selby by erasing her from the journal.

<sup>15</sup> Again this is a recurrent method in contemporary English-Canadian literature. The dialogues between the murderess Grace Marks and her doctor in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, for instance, are framed by diverse documents, poems and letters. Still, all these texts do not add up to a complete and reliable history, but reveal opposing views, possible falsifications, and fragmented histories.

<sup>16</sup> Jones similarly argues that the displacement of the document into the literary text may lead to "a textual level of productivity and dialogue" instead of a merely referential reading (16).

<sup>17</sup> The letters that Steffler uses in the novel (39-41) constitute another inserted genre.

<sup>18</sup> Other famous examples of a literary revision of Canadian history that criticizes the monologic voice of documents and official history are Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*.

<sup>19</sup> David William Zimmerly's *Cain's Land Revisited* offers further information on Cartwright (51-55).

<sup>20</sup> The genocide, for instance, remains largely uncommented on. Similarly, Townsend cuts all entries concerning the sawyer Williams. Both erasures allow for a more positive version of Cartwright's history.

<sup>21</sup> I will from now on refer to Steffler's use of the journal as dialogic rather than parodistic, since, in my view, parody is only one way to engender dialogue.

<sup>22</sup> Others might argue that Steffler's use of the historical journal is too extensive. Some entries are to a great extent copies of the original historical entries (121-22, 143, 148-49; Cartwright v. I, 35-38, 58, 74). Steffler also uses material non verbatim (193-94; Cartwright v. I, 239-40). In some cases, Steffler summarizes a longer episode (119; Cartwright v. I, 27-28). Steffler also uses information from the editor's introduction and Cartwright's preface to the journal. Townsend, for instance, mentions that Cartwright was referred to as "Old Labrador" (278; Townsend xxx) in his years as barrack master.

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