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Grey Owl

He became famous as a half-Scot, half-Apache defender of wildlife, and some believe he should rank with John Muir and Rachel Carson in the environmentalists' pantheon. But he was not exactly what he seemed

by [Kenneth Brower](#)

THE trail to Grey Owl's cabin began among aspen under a big prairie sky. In late September, when I set off in pursuit of the old Indian, the aspen -- poplar, he would have called them -- were nearly leafless, all their green turned yellow-gold, all the gold fallen to the ground. The beaked hazel had dropped its leaves too. The rose hips and high-bush cranberries displayed themselves on naked branches. Puddles in the trail were covered with half-inch panes of ice. On the 1,200-foot escarpment of Riding Mountain, summer is abbreviated, ending a few days before its conclusion on the Manitoba plains below.

An elk had crossed the trail in one spot, and in several places moose. They had left deep tracks, which last night's freeze had set as

hard as fossil hoofprints in stone. The moose tracks were the larger and more pointed. They were a day or two old, yet each time I passed a set I took a nervous, reflexive look into the forest around.

Here and there pocket gophers had pushed mounds of black tailings from their burrows onto the trail. In passing I nudged a mound with the toe of my boot. It had no give. It had lost the fine, airy lightness the mounds have in warm weather. Now and again my boots detoured for the pocket-gopher mounds. They did so because of the same powerful obligation that caused them to veer occasionally and tramp on those first panes of autumn ice. I dutifully kicked a few mounds apart. They were black with moisture on the outside, gray on the inside. The wet black exteriors gave the impression that this prairie soil was even richer than it was.

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My trip to Grey Owl's cabin was part hike and part pilgrimage. I went in curiosity and a certain embarrassment. Americans know so much less of Canadian history than Canadians know of American. I had grown up in a California household where environmentalism and its poets and heroes made most of the table talk, yet before coming to Manitoba I had never heard of Grey Owl. No man was more important to Canadian environmental consciousness, or to the environmental consciousness of the entire British Commonwealth, for that matter. If his deeds had been done at a slightly lower latitude, we all would have

heard of him. In the pantheon Grey Owl belongs with Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson -- or perhaps with Lewis Mumford and Joseph Wood Krutch, on the level just below.

I was curious about Grey Owl because he is doubly now a fossil. He has been dead in a personal way for half a century, and he is said to be dead as a type.

In the environmental movement of the 1970s and 1980s bureaucratization has been the trend. Those old clarion voices in the wilderness and from the wilderness -- Thoreau's, Muir's, Leopold's, Grey Owl's -- have done their job in alerting mankind to the environmental threat, according to the new wisdom. The day now belongs to pragmatic, reasonable men who know the art of compromise and can work effectively with Congress and Parliament. The era of the "stars," those seminal, charismatic, flawed, larger-than-life characters whose eloquence and example brought the natural world back into the world; is finished -- or so the bureaucrats themselves assure us.

The trail to Grey Owl's cabin, in more than one sense, was cold.

He-Who-Flies-by-Night

BY his own testimony, Grey Owl was born in Hermosillo, Mexico, in 1888. His mother was Katherine Cochise, of the Jacarilla Apaches, his father George

MacNeil, a Scot who had served as a scout in the Southwestern Indian wars. MacNeil was a good friend of another old Indian fighter, Buffalo Bill Cody, who in 1887 invited the MacNeils to join the Wild West Show that he was taking to England for Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Grey Owl's gestation, curiously enough, was in England. Their son's birth imminent, the MacNeils returned to the New World. From Mexico the family moved north. At the age of fifteen, the boy parted company with his parents and set off on his own into Ontario. He learned woodcraft from the Ojibways, who adopted him, and he became a trapper and a river guide. The Ojibways called him *Wa-Sha-Quon-Asin*, He-Who-Flies-by-Night, or Grey Owl. The Ojibways appear to have been shrewd judges of character. He-Who-Flies-by-Night would prove the perfect name for Grey Owl.

As the years passed in the north woods, Grey Owl saw less and less of whites and more of Indians. At times he refused to speak anything but Ojibway. He was a man given to dark moods, and occasionally to violence -- from time to time he was in trouble with the law -- but for the most part his backwoods friends, both Indian and white, found him a humorous man and a good companion. In 1915, when he was twenty-six, he enlisted in the Canadian Army, and he fought as an infantryman in France. Temperamentally unsuited to military life, he made an indifferent soldier until his platoon commander realized that

his solitary nature, his obsession with field craft, his gift for immobility, and his skill with a rifle were all the makings of a good sniper. Grey Owl spent the remainder of the war attempting to shoot enemy soldiers one by one. He was wounded in the wrist and in the foot -- one toe had to be amputated -- and his lungs were scarred by mustard gas. By all accounts of the backwoodsmen who knew him, he returned to Canada a more melancholy man.

He was not cheered by what was happening to the north woods. The forests of his youth were fast becoming overlogged and overhunted, and he had trouble making a living as a trapper. By 1925, at the age of thirty-seven, he was on the run from the law, pursued by a nemesis, one Inspector Jordan. His crime was not very serious -- he had punched a station agent -- but Grey Owl was not the sort of man who wanted to spend any time at all in jail.

Traveling with him was the love of his life, an Iroquois girl named Anahareo. Anahareo, a partly acculturated Indian, disliked the cruelty of trapping. It was a sensibility new to Grey Owl, and one that slowly began to tell on him. One day, near the lodge of an adult beaver he had trapped, Grey Owl rescued two beaver kittens he had just orphaned. He took them to his cabin -- "two funny-looking furry creatures with little scaly tails and exaggerated hind feet," he would later write. It was the beginning of the end for the trapper in him. He and

Anahareo named the kittens McGinnis and McGinty and learned how to care for them.

"They seemed to be almost like little folk from some other planet, whose language we could not yet quite understand," he would write. "To kill such creatures seemed monstrous. I would do no more of it. Instead of persecuting them further I would study them, see just what there really was to them. I perhaps could start a colony of my own; these animals could not be permitted to pass completely from the face of this wilderness."

In the winter of 1928-1929 he started his first colony. The country he chose for it proved to be poor in game, and to make ends meet he had to write. One northwoods article was accepted by *Country Life*, which liked it enough to commission another. His beaver-colony scheme had a temporary setback when McGinnis and McGinty returned to the wild, but from an Indian friend Grey Owl acquired a new female beaver kitten, whom he named Jelly Roll, and later he rescued a male, Rawhide, from an otter trap he had set. He travelled to Métis-sur-Mer, a resort town on the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in the hopes of earning some money lecturing, and was eventually invited to speak to the Ladies' Club. He began that talk, he would later admit, "like a snake that has swallowed an icicle, chilled from one end to the other," but by the middle he had found his stride, and the ladies of Métis-sur-Mer loved him. A collection was taken at

the end, and it earned Grey Owl \$700, more than he and Anahareo had made in that whole season of trapping. His reputation grew. He continued to write articles. In September of 1930 the National Parks of Canada made a film of his work with beaver.

In April of 1931 Grey Owl boarded the train in Quebec with Jelly Roll and Rawhide -- Anahareo had left him, as she would often in their life together, to go prospecting -- and he and his beaver traveled west to Riding Mountain National Park, where they were to start a new career. The government had decided to support Grey Owl and his beaver colony: he would be working at Riding Mountain on salary. The park superintendent tried to direct him to Lake Audy, a large body of water near the southern boundary of the park. The lake had plenty of aspen and balsam poplar of the right size for beaver, and a history of beaver habitation, but Grey Owl rejected it. Lake Audy was too close to the park boundary, he said. The streams flowed directly out. In springtime the young male beaver would migrate away from the park's safety and would be shot or trapped. Grey Owl chose Beaver Lodge Lake instead. In the vicinity of that smaller lake the creeks ran north, tributaries to no waterway flowing out of the park until they joined the Ochre River. Grey Owl liked the smaller lake's isolation and the shape of its shoreline. The superintendent surrendered, and a cabin was built for Grey Owl on the shore of Beaver

Lodge Lake.

"I once spent a season in the great high oasis of Riding Mountain," Grey Owl later wrote, "with its poplar forest and rolling downs carpeted with myriad flowers, that stands like an immense island of green above the hot, dry sameness of the wheat-stricken Manitoba prairie that surrounds it."

There is no better summary description of Riding Mountain. One of the mysteries of Grey Owl is that a half-breed boy raised by Ojibways could have composed it. How, in the backwoods of Ontario and Quebec, could the author of a phrase like "the hot, dry sameness of the wheat-stricken Manitoba prairie" have developed his style?

Grey Owl's fondness for the great high oasis of Riding Mountain quickly soured. He did not like the park's waterways, which did not permit the free canoe travel he loved. He concluded that the encircledness of Riding Mountain was wrong. The hot, dry sameness of the beaver-hostile country surrounding the national park was inimical to his rebeavering scheme. He requested a transfer, which was granted. In October of 1931, six months after arriving at Riding Mountain, he took his beaver and their new kittens and moved to Ajawaan Lake, in Prince Albert National Park, Saskatchewan.

Grey Owl was gone, but his influence persisted. The authorities at Riding Mountain National Park liked his beaver

reintroduction plan and they stuck with it. Beaver, decimated in the eighteenth century by Assiniboine, Cree, and Sauteaux trappers, began to multiply in the park.

In November of 1931, the month after he came down from Riding Mountain, Grey Owl's first book, *Men of the Last Frontier*, was published in London; the next year it came out in Toronto and New York. At his new cabin at Ajawaan Lake he wrote a second book, *Pilgrims of the Wild*. The Canadian government produced more films on his beaver. His fame spread on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1935 his English publisher arranged a tour in Britain. Grey Owl arrived at Southampton, wearing a blue serge suit, moccasins, and a gray sombrero, his face lean and ascetic, his black hair braided in two plaits. He lectured and showed his beaver films, first to small audiences but soon to packed houses, with policemen controlling the queues. He was a sensation.

"Europe had not heard such a voice as his since the eighteenth century and the beginning of the industrial revolution," his publisher, Lovat Dickson, wrote years afterward, attempting to explain Grey Owl's impact on the England of 1935. "Suddenly here was this romantic figure telling them with his deep and thrilling voice that somewhere there was a land where life could begin again, a place which the screams of demented dictators could not reach." The tour was extended to four

months, in the course of which Grey Owl gave two hundred lectures to more than a quarter million people. *Pilgrims of the Wild*, which had already been reprinted five times in the nine months since publication, was reprinted again every month of his tour. He had come to England with his belongings in a knapsack; he left with eight large pieces of luggage full of gifts for himself and his family. He was presented, as he embarked on the ship home to Canada, with the check representing his earnings from the tour. Grey Owl seems to have been a man genuinely uninterested in money, and never once in England had he asked how the tour was profiting. He was returning to his beaver a rich man.

Grey Owl as Writer

AS a writer, Grey Owl had many voices -- too many voices, some might argue. "And it is reflections such as these," Grey Owl wrote, in the preface to his *Tales of an Empty Cabin*,

that finally aroused in me a distaste for killing, and brought a growing feeling of kinship with those inoffensive and interesting beasts that were co-dwellers with me in this Land of Shadows and of Silence. So that ultimately I laid aside my rifle and my traps and like Paul, worked for the betterment of those whom I had so assiduously persecuted.

And yet just pages later, in a chapter called "Cry Wolves!" this same Paul of the wilderness wrote,

The tall snow-covered trees along the shore seemed to stare down on me kind of dour and grim, like I had butted in where I wasn't wanted. And man! she was cold. ... Anyway I picked off up the lake and saw a wolf alright enough, out of shot, and screeching blue murder. I sneaked up onto a point and saw the rest of the lake and say, it looked to be just covered with wolves.

Later still, in a chapter called "A Letter," Grey Owl gave us a note we are to believe he wrote in 1918, from the Canadian woods, in his semiliterate days, to the nurse who had tended him when he was recovering from war wounds in an English hospital. "Dear Miss Nurse," he began.

Nearly four months now the Canada geese flew south and the snow is very deep. It is long timesince I wrot to you, but I have gone a long ways and folled some hard trails since that time. The little wee sorryful animals I tol you about sit around me tonight, and so they dont get tired and go away I write to you now. I guess they like to see me workin.

Grey Owl was in chronic violation of the seventh rule of the nineteen that, according to Mark Twain, govern literary art. In his essay "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," Twain, after noting that Cooper, in the space of two thirds of a page of *The Deerslayer*, committed 114 offenses against literary art out of a possible 115 -- a record -- proceeded to state those rules. Rule 7 requires "that when a personage talks like an illustrated, gilt-edged, tree-calf, hand-tooled, seven-dollar Friendship's Offering in the beginning of a paragraph, he shall not talk like a negro minstrel in the end of it."

Grey Owl himself would have shrugged off any attempts to defend his style. Internal evidence suggests that he owed something to Twain -- his rhythms are more Huck Finn than Ojibway -- but otherwise he and Twain had different tastes. Grey Owl *liked* James Fenimore Cooper, though he misspelled his name, and he was also an admirer of Longfellow. In his essay "The Mission of Hiawatha," Grey Owl wrote, "It has become a pose of modern ultra-sophistication to scoff at those works of Fennimore Cooper and Longfellow that portray the life of the North American Indian. Those who do so are, not infrequently, equipped with little or no knowledge of the subject."

Of the literary rules on Twain's list, Grey Owl periodically violated the eighth as well. Rule 8 requires "that crass stupidities shall not be played upon the reader as 'the craft of the woodsman, the delicate art of the

forest." Grey Owl habitually violated rule 9, which requires "that the personages of a tale shall confine themselves to possibilities and let miracles alone; or, if they venture a miracle, the author must so plausibly set it forth as to make it look possible and reasonable."

In the "Cry Wolves!" chapter, Grey Owl violated rule 9 in a miraculous encounter with wolves on thin ice:

I got a whiff of the strong musky smell these animals make when they mean business, and I saw right away I was up against it; no fooling this time. The wolves came towards me, spreading out, and commenced to snap and snarl and worry at the air, for all the world like a bunch of dogs baiting a cow. I was right out on the weak spot, and as they crept up on me, the ice commenced to groan and crack with the extra weight, and I could see myself being soon measured for a harp and a pair of wings unless things took a change. This time I had the thirty-two special, and felt right at home. I didn't stop to do any figuring, but let go a few with the old artillery. The light was poor, and although I pass for being pretty handy with the hardware, I saw only two of the lobos fall. The rest backed off into the dark and commenced to

howl, but it wasn't long before they came back for more. They fanned out like troops under fire.

...

These suicidal maneuverings, in an animal as intelligent and man-wary as the wolf, may not be technically miraculous but they are certainly preternatural. They are in violation of the spirit of rule 9, if not the letter.

Fifty-eight wolves, at the latest count, reside in Riding Mountain National Park, and for several years a scientist named Paul Paquet has been studying them. When I described Grey Owl's account to Paquet, and later to Ludwig Carbyn, the Canadian Wildlife Service research scientist who was overseeing Paquet's work, the two men just laughed. Wolf scientists everywhere, I have found, are accustomed to this sort of exaggeration and are surprisingly charitable toward its perpetrators. Many grew up reading Ernest Thompson Seton and will admit to a fondness for that whole school of wolf writing. Grey Owl certainly was not the last popular Canadian nature writer to invent adventures with wolves.

Grey Owl's best book, *Pilgrims of the Wild*, is an account of the transformation at the heart of his life's drama -- the story of his flight with Anahareo through the slash and burn of ruined country, his realization that the day of the trapper was in twilight, his rescue of the beaver kittens, his

metamorphosis from trapper to advocate of animals. In Pilgrims he finds a single voice, one that seems to be his own. There is a nice symmetry to his cast of characters: two human beings and two beaver. Grey Owl is at his best when writing about the beaver. For page after page his beaver observations are sharp, humorous, and entirely believable.

Their hands -- one can call them nothing else -- were nearly as effective as our own more perfect members would be, in the uses they were put to. They could pick up very small objects with them, manipulate sticks and stones, strike, push, and heave with them and they had a very firm grasp which it was difficult to disengage.

Each had a special liking for one of us, and continued faithful to his choice. ... They would generally lie on our bodies, one on each of us, the favoured position being a rather inconvenient one across the throat.

At three months of age they ceased to be of any further trouble to us save for the daily feed of porridge, an insatiable and very active curiosity regarding the contents of provision bags and boxes, the frequent desire for petting that seemed to fill some great want in

their lives, and the habit they had of coming into our beds, soaking wet, at all hours of the night.

They were hostile to anything they deemed to be an intruder and became very angry at the continued visits to the tent of a weasel, one of them eventually making a pass at him, the agile weasel, of course being in two or three other places by the time the blow landed.

They were ... gentle and good natured, they gave out no odour whatever, and were altogether the best conducted pair of little people one could wish to live with.

THE trail to Grey Owl's cabin descended from the negligible elevations to which it had climbed, and now its lowest stretches were flooded, owing to beaver dams. I was able to pick my way around most of the wet spots, but finally, halfway to the cabin, the path dipped to a swampy place where all detours were under water. Most beaver ponds in autumn are tea-colored. Here the volume of the flow was such that the tea had clarified. The path became a clear, cold stream flowing shallowly over a bottom of golden leaves. The margins of the stream, in all directions, for as far as I could see, were marshland under a half inch of ice. There was nothing to do but ford.

Grey Owl's beaver-seeding scheme succeeded better than he ever dreamed. The topographic maps for Riding Mountain National Park are all a little off, because surveyors have trouble traveling far in any direction without running into a beaver pond or marsh. Beaver are doing so well in the park that population pressures continually force excess animals to move out. In summertime beaver are a principal food of the park's wolves, but the wolves can't eat enough of them. The expatriate beaver invade the wheat farmland around the park's periphery, just as Grey Owl predicted they would. They dam streams on private land, irritating the farmers, who trap and shoot them -- just as Grey Owl predicted -- and they present park authorities with a big public-relations problem. Park wardens are not supposed to interfere with beaver, but occasionally they do blow a beaver dam, just so human visitors can keep their heads above water. Grey Owl's "little people," if left to their own devices, would turn the escarpment of Riding Mountain into a high reservoir in the middle of the Manitoba plains.

The aspen forest opened up into sedgy meadows and a connected system of beaver ponds. I passed a dry pond. Sedges and willows were taking it over from the outside in, and the remnants of the old lodge made a mound in what was now meadow. The lodge was the slightest of swellings, but it was artifice, and that caught the eye, just as

the artifice of Indian middens does. I saw the cabin ahead. It stood on a slight prominence above what had to be Beaver Lodge Lake. When I crossed the marshy outlet to the lake, the long grasses there were still in shadow. It was nearly noon, but the tussocks lay this way and that under the weight of frost, as if by scythe. The frost-mown grasses were crunchy underfoot.

A few yards from the cabin I came into the light. The sun was warm on Grey Owl's porch. I pulled off my daypack and set it against the logs of the cabin wall. The signs said GREY OWL'S CABIN. PLEASE RESPECT THIS NATIONAL HERITAGE and CABANE DE GREY OWL. AIDEZ-NOUS A CONSERVER CE PATRIMOINE NATIONAL. For the most part visitors had done as the signs asked, carving few initials on the logs, inside or out. I searched the walls for some mark of Grey Owl's, and found none.

THE CLIMAX OF GREY OWL'S SECOND TOUR OF ENGLAND, in 1937, was a command performance at Buckingham Palace. The original plan for his palace lecture had Grey Owl and the other guests waiting in the reception hall. The footmen would throw open the doors, and the King and his family would enter. Grey Owl and the other guests would stand, and Grey Owl would begin his lecture.

Grey Owl, democrat and showman, insisted that the protocol be reversed. King George

VI, good-humored, agreed to be seated first. The footmen threw open the doors, and there, in his buckskins, stood Grey Owl.

He saluted the King and said, "*How Kola*," and a few more words in Ojibway. "Which, being interpreted, means 'I come in peace, brother,'" he explained to the King. The King smiled and acknowledged the greeting. Grey Owl began his lecture. The Queen, the Queen's parents -- the Earl and Countess of Strathmore -- and much of the palace staff were in attendance that day, but the true Grey Owl fans at Buckingham Palace were Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. The command performance had been arranged mostly for them. Grey Owl, the canny performer, was quick to understand this. After the first minutes, he directed his speech exclusively to the smallest but most enthusiastic members of his audience. He gave what Lovat Dickson, who was on hand, considered one of his most inspired performances. At the conclusion Princess Elizabeth jumped up. "Oh, do go on!" she cried. For the future queen Grey Owl did a ten-minute encore.

Afterward, the King came up to Grey Owl, Elizabeth on one arm and Margaret on the other. Troubled by what he had just learned about the possible extinction of beaver, King George asked questions about the beaver situation, and Grey Owl answered. Lovat Dickson watched his author proudly. "I was admiring Grey Owl's attitude," Dickson has written.

He was more than ever the Indian, proud, fierce, inscrutable. Those fringed buckskins, the wampum belt, the knife in its sheath at his side, the moccasins on those polished floors, the long dark hair surmounted by a single feather, were all in such contrast with the trim, neat figure of the King, with the fair, reddish hair characteristic of the House of Windsor.

When the time came to go, Grey Owl extended his right hand to the King. He touched a royal shoulder lightly with his beaded buckskin gloves. "Goodbye, brother," the Indian said. "I'll be seeing you."

Grey Owl's Secret

GREY OWL spoke truer, and falser, than anyone in the gathering could have guessed. Grey Owl was brother indeed to the King -- or, rather, subject and countryman. Grey Owl's real name was Archibald Belaney, and he had been born in Hastings, England, forty-nine years before. He had never been to Hermosillo, and his mother was not Katherine Cochise or any other Apache. "More than ever the Indian," Dickson had mused. Never, in truth, the Indian at all.

Immediately upon Grey Owl's death in Saskatchewan, on April 13, 1938, the truth

hit the papers. "GREY OWL HAD COCKNEY ACCENT AND FOUR WIVES," one British headline read. "GREY OWL ENGLISH BOY," read another.

Archie Belaney's father was not George MacNeil, Indian scout, but George Belaney, scoundrel and rotter. George Belaney was a scam artist, bigamist, pedophile, drunk, and lecher. His one real talent was in shaking down his widowed mother. At the age of twenty he succeeded in getting her to set him up in a tea and coffee business, which he quickly brought to the verge of ruin by leaving for half a year of big-game hunting in Africa, and then finished off by departing again for a month of hunting in Suffolk. At twenty-one, George impregnated the fifteen-year-old daughter of a tavern owner, secretly married her, and then, on the birth of their child -- a daughter -- abandoned them both. With a girlfriend, Elizabeth Cox, he traveled to Florida and spent two years hunting and practicing amateur taxidermy. At Key West, Elizabeth was delivered of their child, a daughter, Gertrude. The three were forced to return to England, Elizabeth having become violently ill from arsenic poisoning.

Arsenic is used in taxidermy, and Elizabeth's exposure could have been accidental. George Belaney may have had nothing to do with it. It is worthy of note, however, that George's great uncle, James Belaney, himself an avid hunter, the famous author of *A Treatise on Falconry*, and a

bachelor until middle age, was arrested and tried for killing his young wife with prussic acid. The *Times* and other journals were certain of his guilt, but James had an excuse for possession of the poison -- in his case not taxidermy but indigestion, which prussic acid was used to treat -- and he was acquitted.

Elizabeth Cox recovered, at any rate. George Belaney talked his mother into setting him up as an orange planter in Florida, and he and Elizabeth returned to that state, this time taking along her twelve-year-old sister, Kitty. Elizabeth died within a year, even as their orange plantation was going under. George fell into drunkenness and delirium tremens, and then pulled himself together sufficiently to marry Elizabeth's sister, now thirteen. It was this child bride, Kitty -- Katherine Cox -- who in Grey Owl's revisionist history of himself became Katherine Cochise of the Jacarilla Apaches. George sold his orange grove, left his three-year-old daughter, Gertrude, with a Florida neighbor, and returned with the pregnant Kitty to England. On September 18, 1888, Kitty gave birth to Archibald Stansfeld Belaney.

George Belaney was unable to keep a job or mend his ways. When Archie Belaney was four, the family solicitor persuaded George to sign a document agreeing to voluntary exile. On the condition that he never set foot in England again, he was to receive a small income for life. He and his son parted in

tears. George Belaney would die twelve years later, somewhere in Mexico.

Archie Belaney was brought up in Hastings by his grandmother and his maiden aunts. He was a loner, a reader of weekly serials on Indians, an animal lover who kept a menagerie in the attic. He had frogs, mice, a snake he called Rajah, and later a defanged adder that he liked to bring to school in his pocket or shirt. He was a good actor, with a talent for parody. His trademark was hooting like an owl. He spent his free time wandering the sea cliffs at Hastings or in St. Helen's Woods, a preserve north of the Belaney house, and in the wan English summertime he grew almost swarthy. (Later, as a grown man in the long summer days of the Canadian north, he would tan even darker. Unsatisfied, he would be driven to dye his skin darker still. One of his biographers has speculated that this habit may have begun in his English boyhood, his pocket money in Hastings going to cheap dyes.)

"A third eccentric joined the School," his grammar school's history noted of his arrival in September, 1899.

This was Archie Belaney. He did not conceal firearms in his pockets, but just as likely might produce from them a snake or a fieldmouse. Born eleven years before, and living at 36 St. Mary's Terrace, he was a delicate boy but

full of devilment; and fascinated by woods and wild animals.... What with his camping out, his tracking of all and sundry, and wild hooting, he was more like a Red Indian than a respectable Grammar School boy.

In his teens Archie grew more and more like an Indian. His dream was to go to Canada and live among Indians, study them, maybe write an anthropological text. His aunts tried to dissuade him, but he persisted. In 1906, when he was eighteen, his way was paid to Toronto, with the understanding on the part of his family (if not himself) that he would study farming. No one knows what happened to him next. He would return several times to England, but in Canada he had already begun to disappear into the myth of his own making.

THAT Grey Owl's secret could have gone undetected by his English and American audiences seems, in hindsight, odd. It required of those audiences a willing suspension of belief in the laws of genetics. Dark eyes are a dominant trait. A blue-eyed Scot and a black-eyed Apache are unlikely to produce a blue-eyed son. It required a romantic ignorance of how American Indians dress in the twentieth century. Buckskins, wampum belts, braided hair, and feathers still had some ceremonial use in the 1920s and 1930s, as they have now, but Grey Owl, in the photo sections of his books, is shown *hunting* dressed like that.

The acceptance of Grey Owl as an Indian required, as well, considerable naiveté about the nature of literary art. A small boy taught his three R's by an Apache aunt in dusty Indian encampments on the Mexican desert -- with the first R subsequently polished, over long winter nights in boreal forests, by reading descriptions of bear traps and shotguns in mail-order catalogues -- does not learn to write in the several mannered styles of Grey Owl.

Grey Owl's frontispieces alone should have tipped off the public. Nearly every one of them is a scowling portrait of the author in braids and buckskins, his brows knit darkly, the corners of his mouth turned down. Some scowling Indians can be seen in the old daguerrotypes, but most nineteenth-century Indians -- most nineteenth-century Europeans, for that matter -- stared into the new machine with a stony absence of expression. Grey Owl overdid it.

From the very beginning, in fact, some people saw through Grey Owl. The Ojibway knew he was not Indian or part-Indian. Many of the white people of the Canadian backwoods knew Indians well enough to know that Grey Owl wasn't one of them -- not the way he played classical music. "If you're an Indian, I'm a Chinaman," a Quebec man once told him. The rivermen of the Mississippi River took him for a white man with maybe a streak of Indian blood. Grey Owl demonstrated his knife-throwing talent for them -- this was supposed to be an

Indian skill -- but he also recited Shakespeare. Rumor was that he was a McGill man, the prodigal son of a rich Montreal family.

Not even all the English were fooled. On Grey Owl's first English tour, one of the stops on his lecture circuit was Hastings, Archie Belaney's home town. Grey Owl spoke to a packed theater at the White Rock Pavilion, not far from St. Helen's Wood -- his first hunting grounds. Among the listeners was Mary McCormick, one of twelve children who had lived in the house next door to the Belaney place. Mary's younger brother George had been Archie Belaney's friend and classmate. It had been Archie's habit to signal George and her other brothers by hooting like an owl. Occasionally he would climb the roof and appear at the boys' window before dawn, awakening the brothers with his owl call, and once he had built a wigwam on the McCormicks' lawn. Mary McCormick was middle-aged, like the tall Indian in buckskins at the podium. Thirty years had passed since Archie Belaney's departure from England. At the conclusion of the lecture, as she left the theater, McCormick turned to a friend. "That's Belaney, or I'll eat my hat," she said.

Conviction Triumphant

FOR the first days after Grey Owl's death, the English press had fun with him. People love a hoax, and the Archie

Belaney in Grey Owl had been uncovered. Within a week or so the press began to have second thoughts about him. On April 22, 1938, nine days after Grey Owl died in Saskatchewan, an editorialist for *The Times* arrived at what for me is the correct view of him: "Tu-whit tu-who-hoo-Who was he really, this mysterious Grey Owl? ... The strange bird seems to be acquiring as many birthplaces as Homer, as many wives as Solomon. ... Was he Grey Owl at all, or another gentleman of the same name, like the author of Shakespeare's plays?"

"He ... gave his extraordinary genius, his passionate sympathy, his bodily strength, his magnetic personal influence, even his very earnings to the service of animals."

Grey Owl did give those things, and that is what does matter.

In the initial gusto with which the English press went after Grey Owl, there was surely some envy. For all he was not, Grey Owl was in fact a competent trapper. He was a good shot with rifle and shotgun. He could throw knives accurately -- a useless talent of the sort that no boy grows old enough not to admire. Grey Owl really did have troubles with the law, and spent part of his life as a fugitive. It's hard not to look up to him secretly for that.

In Hastings the twelve-year-old Archie Belaney had amazed his aunt Ada with his knowledge of Canadian Indians. He showed

her a map on which he had marked in the linguistic groups of aboriginal Canada, the Athabaskan-speakers in the northwest, the Iroquois in the south, the Algonkian in the east. He showed her how the Algonkian-speakers, the group that interested him most, were divided into tribes: Ojibway, Cree, Naskapi, Penobscot, Micmac, Algonquin, Têtes de Boules, and Montagnais. His penny novels on Indians were illustrated in the margins with drawings he had done of Indians fighting white men.

It happens that my own illustrations at that age were of Indians fighting white men. They were drawings full of carnage, the Indians always winning, the cavalymen riddled by arrows and spears. I was a twelve-year-old expert on Indians myself. My specialty was the Western tribes, and of those, I liked best the Apaches -- Grey Owl's putative maternal line. I know, for example, that his "Jacarilla" Apaches should be spelled "Jicarilla." I can still tell you the date Geronimo surrendered: September 4, 1886, just two years before Grey Owl's birth to Katherine Cochise in Hermosillo, Mexico -- or, if you prefer, just two years before Archie Belaney's birth to Katherine Cox in Hastings. At ages nine to twelve I dreamed of being an Indian. Little Archie Belaney had actually gone and done it.

Margaret McCormick, another sister in the clan that had lived next door to the

Belaneys, put an interesting twist on the Grey Owl question when she was interviewed after his death. Had Archie Belaney become Grey Owl, she wondered, or had Grey Owl become Belaney? The real wonder of his life, she suggested, was that the physique, the proclivities, the temperament -- the soul -- of an Ojibway had found its way into an English schoolboy.

It is a truism that fiction is often truer than truth. Grey Owl was a walking, talking fiction who made real to his urban audiences, as a less false man could not, the plight of beaver and bear and lynx. His fictive gift, his fictive impulse, laced his readers and listeners into his buckskins, strapped them into his snowshoes with him. His unmasking -- his defeathering -- did not diminish him but over time has only made him larger, deepening his mystery.

Grey Owl was full of imperfections, yet was one of those Thoreau called "men with the seeds of life in them." Today's environmental bureaucrats seem to be correct that Grey Owl's type is in eclipse, their own type in ascendancy. It is also true that tropical forests are vanishing at an accelerated rate, toxic wastes are multiplying, the oceans are dying, holes are appearing in the ozone layer, the Ontario lakes that Grey Owl paddled are going dead and fishless under acid rain. Reasonable, politically astute men and women are fine. They make good soldiers in any movement.

They are useful for chores and follow-up.
But what we need more than ever are men
and women who capture our imaginations.

FROM Grey Owl's front porch I walked down to the lake. An abandoned beaver lodge stood close to shore. The lake had receded somewhat since the days when the lodge was in use, and nothing but a twelve-foot moat of marshy grass separated the lodge from dry land. A wolf or coyote, splashing across, would scarcely have got its feet wet. The lodge was no longer a safe place for beaver.

The grassy mound of the lodge was all overgrown with fireweed gone to seed, and the cottony tufts were blowing away on the wind. The wind had bite, despite the noon brightness of the sun, and what was left of the lake's ice had blown to the eastern end. Watching the tufts -- smoke of fireweed -- sail on the wind, I thought about Jelly Roll and Rawhide. Had this lodge been theirs? It did have the look of a lodge abandoned for about half a century.

Back on Grey Owl's porch I leaned against the logs of the cabin, opened my daypack, and took out my lunch. I had bought it quickly from behind the glass of the counter at the Wasagaming Hotel, and no dietician would have approved. From the paper bag I brought out peach yogurt, a doughnut, and *a jelly roll*. I stared down, stunned, at that last item. Until this moment I had not understood the eerie, coincidental rightness

of my choice.

"To Jelly Roll," I said. I raised the jelly roll in a toast to the forest. My voice was hoarse, not my own, for I had not used it all day. The gesture at the forest felt theatrical, but that had a rightness too. The original tenant of this cabin was a theatrical type.

"To Jelly Roll," I repeated. "To the little people. To Rawhide, and Grey Owl, and the whole gang."

Kenneth Brower is a writer specializing in wildlife and ecological issues, and a frequent contributor to *The Atlantic*. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Starship and the Canoe* (1974), *Wake of the Whale* (1979), and *A Song for Satawal* (1983).

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