A Review of Geoffrey James and Rudy Wiebe: *Place: Lethbridge, A City on the Prairie*

(Vancouver/Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre; Boston: David R. Godine; Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 2002)

Paul Tiessen

Novelist Rudy Wiebe and photographer Geoffrey James engage each other in this volume with a startling lightness of touch. Neither artist makes any overt demands on the other; indeed, each seems almost to ignore the other! Yet their joint appearance in this volume – thanks to Southern Alberta Art Gallery curator Joan Stebbin – turns their combined texts into a single playful performance, a conversation of sorts.

The outside front cover of this elegant volume carries a one-word title in large white print – *Place* – a title unencumbered by the subtitle that fleetingly claims our attention only on the fifth page: *Lethbridge, A City on the Prairie*. Filling the visual field of the cover is an austere black-and-white photograph: a straight dirt road running between wheat fields to a vanishing point along the perfectly horizontal line of land where smudges of mountain peaks are just barely visible. The sky, sitting flatly above that horizon, occupies over half the picture. We are invited, then, into a visual world presented in bare terms.

In James's work inside the book, we find a Lethbridge that is there very much as "place," with townscapes virtually devoid of human figures. The apparently enervated town points to a provisional quality in any human habitation, to a kind of spatial and historical arbitrariness expressed so strongly in the Lethbridge region, invested as it is by a dramatic terrain that precedes human intervention and promises to outlast human influence.

James gives us no captions. What he does provide are words internal to some of the photographs, words that guide us in fixing meaning. Contemporary fantasies like "A Better Way Of Life" (59) marking (with an unintentionally ironic tongue) a subdivision on a flat plain, contrast with the merrier "Top Hat" (55) and "Bow On Tong" (29, 100) that hoot from some of the commercial establishments. The marker for the "The Chinese National League" (27) is one of several reminders of the ethnic and racial layering in the historical experience and identity of the town. External to the photographs are only the titles of sections: "Approaches," "In the City," "A Better Way of Life," and "Paradise Canyon and Beyond."

Although the abstract idea of "place" is poignantly anchored in a series of particular manifestations of "Lethbridge," we are invited to see it also as a parable of the twentieth century's urban encounter with the land in western Canada. Civilization's progress is presented in muted terms, with nostalgic recollections of urban rhythms from decades ago juxtaposed to satiric evocations of contemporary strivings.

We can note, too, that this photographed world speaks often through what James withholds, whether by cutting down on, or even suppressing, a picture, a topic, a theme. His forty-six black-and-white photographs, the bare images all the more luminous as a consequence of his stark approach, are by implication set in the dramatic architectural context of Erickson's university and the city's Japanese gardens. But we do not see these famous Lethbridge landmarks, even though James mentions them in his Preface.

Thus, in not showing what we might most want to see, James prevents our pursuing his work as though it belonged to a more "touristic" genre; he prevents us from taking ready-made approaches. Instead he pursues a different rhythm and purpose in foregrounding less-acknowledged encounters between the human architectural and the grand primordial. There is in his approach a persistent undertow of uneasiness about what we seem to be trying to do with the natural world. When he does acknowledge that human effort has produced a rugged glory of its own, he goes back to the industrial era's heroic achievement evident in the girders and trestles, the foundations and footings, of the High Level Bridge (21, 95), its steel sections alive in the strong reflections and shadows that play on the river and the cliffs.

The absence of "people" from James's images of "The West" eerily undercuts the possibility of a personal intimacy in his work, and pushes it instead in the direction of a monumental abstractionism. It is as though James seems to find in the empty public spaces of the book an echo of ghost towns. However, people are there in the tracings that they leave in the wake of their striving and their dreams, as in the forlorn lostness of decaying industrial sites (45, 47). They are there in the naive carelessness of modern sand traps and golf greens, inscriptions of their desire for contemporary pastimes in the-great-out-of-doors. These inscriptions are etched into the fissures and slopes of the ancient landscape (in a new neighborhood that comprises, as Wiebe puts it, "the ultimate Lethbridge double-garage-facing-the-street-with-golf-course suburb of Paradise Canyon" [123]) that stunningly still marks this world along the Oldman River. And people are mirrored, too, in the wistfulness of the faces of quirky one-of-

a-kind houses: an art deco house, for example (37, and outside back cover), or one with a skull attached to the front facade (43).

It is only when we are over two-thirds of the way through the book that James's photographs – serving in one sense as overture or preface to the prose – gently give way to Wiebe's written text. The segue from image to written text is gradual, a handful of photographs continuing to make their way down the last thirty pages, where Wiebe's text dominates. Wiebe's prose at first reinforces our impression of only a loose kind of referentiality between prose and picture. In the end, we might feel as though the layers of Wiebe's prose are filling in the many unpeopled and largely uninscribed spaces of James's expanses.

What Wiebe presents are eight tender meditations (hovering between essay and story) that carry the air of recollection: wistful, nostalgic, sweet. Wiebe gives the impression of being in warm and easy conversation (e.g., 93-94) with the geographic forms that make up Alberta, including the drama of the land around Lethbridge, and so he travels lightly through what is the world of his teenage years. Sometimes, lurking in his texts, he does give us reminders of today's more troubled world (e.g., the Kosovos of page 94) beyond the narrative and visual currents that carry us along here. At the start, Wiebe's pieces somehow feel lighter than James's photographs, more airily open and speculative in their treatment of place and time. Especially whimsical is Wiebe's essay on pages 113-16, a hilarious send-up of the dynamics and politics of naming, as Wiebe playfully runs over details of Lethbridge's past.

In Wiebe's stories/essays, unlike James's photographs, the presence of people, starting with the engaged narrator, is pronounced, not carefully excised. Not surprisingly for Wiebe, those who peopled the past now make their presences known. Thus, we discover that the golf links of James's photographic eye overlap with the sites of the 1870 Cree versus Blackfoot battle that Wiebe recalls. It is as though Wiebe is giving us new layers of irony in what James's eye has already beheld. Together, Wiebe and James ask: What are realities that we suppress by the lives we pursue, by the truths we construct?

There is a general title that announces the lyrical quality of Wiebe's tone, and Wiebe's preoccupation with history and place: "Where the Black Rocks Lie in the Old Man's River" (90). Each of the subsequent vignettes begins with a sentence presented partly in bold, enlarged type, as though providing a special point of entry. These caption-like statements hold in place various possibilities: for example, of lightness and movement – "It is bright

spring, and we have been travelling" (93), or of a narrator's child-like wonder at the contradictions that were Lethbridge in 1947 – "The first time I saw Lethbridge" (97) and "When my parents, my sister and I" (101), and so on. Sometimes the caption is particularly poignant and ironic in unexpected ways: the topic "'Lethbridge was happiness'" leads to a survey of official and unofficial racism in Lethbridge (and Canada), particularly as it affected first the Chinese and then the Japanese (117-20). Wiebe tells us, too, that through the effects of Canada's Homestead Act, even his forebears the Mennonites, arriving from Ukraine, were forced into what was for them an unfamiliar societal mould – "the sometimes devastating isolation of single farmsteads" – that brought its own cruel hardships (122).

Wiebe's world is a place animated by spirits that we tend to keep at bay by mechanisms at our disposal (93), but that seem to be there nevertheless, "leading you away on an endless stream like thinning memory" (126). Here Coyote once lent his song to Cree warriors, thus bringing sweet peace to a valley that had been in bloody battle. Wiebe seems quite sure (though of course – in true Wiebean fashion – he cannot absolutely say) that the Coyote's song is still there, in what is now called Lethbridge, though certainly it cannot be heard "between the endless auto roar of one bridge and the grinding thunder of a possible long train crossing the other" (111).

Even more palpable and enlivening than the presence of spirits for the narrator is the presence of words: coulee, chinook, cottonwood, sage, cactus, Napi-ooch-a-tay-cots (in Blackfoot), and prairie (101, 103, 105). The Lethbridge that the narrator recalls leads him to incredibly beautiful reverie when he explores memory itself amidst the words and stories, the names and naming, familiar and strange languages and books, the "shelves and shelves of books" that he encountered as a child (103), the books that map memory. It is a world that Wiebe was born into when he was twelve years old, after his family left the northern Saskatchewan bush where it was words like "slough" and "muskeg" that filled his universe. At twelve he entered a place where Blackfoot and Cree stories were to become "as evocative to [him] as those of Moses and Odysseus, Shakespeare and Goethe" (103). At twelve, he had moved "from an isolated bush farm and a single-room log school to sidewalks and electricity and coal mines half a mile deep and sugar beets and libraries with shelves and shelves of books" (103). He had moved into a world defined by *this place* called Lethbridge.