

Invisibility of choice

Madison Ellis

Biological Sciences

Supervisor: Dr. Lyn Baldwin

Abstract:

The purpose of this essay was to explore how dams have affected and shaped the town of Revelstoke, BC. In this piece, stories of long-term residents are juxtaposed with those of more recent immigrants to raise universal questions surrounding how all actions, big or small, field-planting or dam-building, resound with both benefits and detriments. Within the historical context of dam-building in a small mountain town, food security provides an especially vivid lens with which to consider our personal values as well as our obligations as local and global citizens. This creative nonfiction essay encapsulates both the author's research and personal experiences.

When I first visited Revelstoke, I had no reason to go other than my best friend Chelsea's grandmother lived there, and I'd never been. It was January. Excitement fueled the 215 kilometre drive east of Kamloops. Arriving, we found ourselves nestled into the cloud at the base of the surrounding mountains. There was something alluring about Revelstoke. I can think back to crystalline moments so palpable in my memory—the ones that would later pull me to return: snowshoeing along the Columbia River, the water flowing beside us as the only

sense of time passing; meeting new friends who were our age, but pursuing something less tangible than a university degree; cooking local food dinners alongside five others in a kitchen meant for two. And there were many other instances of stillness and chaos, adventure and misadventure. Thinking back, I remember these moments as bits of happiness. But at the time, these were just moments—the accumulation of which led me to move to Revelstoke that following May.

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Cathy, curator of the Revelstoke Museum and Archives and self-proclaimed cynic, said that the construction of the dam at Castlegar “was selling the river down the river.” We were sitting in her office in late August on one of my last days of work. Over the last few months, I’d come to know Cathy as a composed person. Her neutral expression was calm and she nearly always spoke with intent. Her brown hair fell neatly to her chin, framing her face as her bangs brushed across the upper rim of her rounded glasses. She moved between speaking with me and searching occasionally on her desktop computer for more information. Cathy is originally from Castlegar—a surprise, as she’s a walking encyclopedia of Revelstoke history. Though she should be, she’d tell you, after being museum curator for 33 years. In the summer and winter, she hosts bi-weekly brown bag lunch talks where she chooses a theme and delves into a short history lesson of Revelstoke. Cathy had welcomed me into her office to talk about the agricultural history of Revelstoke, my interest in which began with a photograph.

There it stands. Rows of white wooden planks stack atop one another forming the siding. The front stretches into the sky until reaching its tallest point, a cross. Vivid flames creep up behind the cross from the engulfed left side of the structure. I can almost feel the warmth of the destructive fire, and I imagine the church must have fallen right after this photograph was taken. This photograph is

a relatively small part of a larger panel tucked around a corner on the first floor of the museum. But of the museum's eleven exhibits, it hits me the hardest. On the panel, the image is situated below a large map that shows the flood-line of everything submerged, and consequently lost, with the construction of the dam. The Hugh Keenleyside dam, intended as water storage, was constructed in Castlegar in 1968 as part of the Columbia River Treaty—a transboundary water management agreement between USA and Canada (Government of BC 2017). The dam is a little over 250 kilometres away from Revelstoke. I've never actually seen it, but I found a photograph: from the vantage point of a nearby hill, it looks down onto the wall of concrete and metal grates that spans the width of the river. On their website, the BC Government highlights the benefits of the dam: flood damage reduction, power generation, economic stimulus and Canada's entitlement to a share of the downstream benefits and power (Government of BC 2017). In the photograph, the mountain immediately behind dwarfs the concrete dam, and water sits placidly on either side as if still whole, uninterrupted. From this perspective, the dam seems hardly invasive at all. But on the website, reading further down the Government document I find a list of impacts: flooding 60,000 hectares of valley land including traditional First Nations' sites, agricultural and forestry areas, displacing 2300 people in a dozen communities from their homes, and altering indefinitely fish and wildlife habitat (Government of BC 2017).

Back in Cathy's office, it didn't take long for the history of agriculture to intersect with that of the Hugh Keenleyside dam. The dam is as much a part of Revelstoke's history as its first strawberry exports. Included among the dozen of communities displaced was the Mount Cartier community of Revelstoke. Mount Cartier, Cathy told me, was established primarily by Ukrainian settlers between 1906 and 1914. Before the dam, Mount Cartier was a vibrant community with its own school, church, post office, cemetery, band and choir. Farming had largely been the settlers' livelihood. However, with the decision to build the dam and buy

out the community, most of Mount Cartier's buildings were burned or dismantled—the wooden church included. Some residents moved above the high-water mark, while others moved into town. In effect, the Hugh Keenleyside dam washed away the Mount Cartier community. Cathy acknowledged that for the community of Revelstoke, it was not only a loss of heritage, but also a loss of culture.

Later, I read the transcripts Cathy had emailed me of three interviews recorded with former residents of the Mount Cartier community in 2010—nearly 50 years after losing their homes. As each interviewee sifted through their memories, uncertainty emerged: whether the money from the burned down church went to the cathedral in town; whether any benefits came to those who went to court for fair compensation of their homes; whether one's dog had tried to swim, but drowned trying to return to his familiar birch tree. One resident shared his vivid, recurring nightmares. Water, he said, would rise up the walls and the windows of his home and flood the road until an “I can't get out” fear would wake him.

Reading the transcripts, I'm enthralled, but left with my own uncertainties. BC Hydro claimed the dam would bring prosperity, but the residents of Mount Cartier described only loss.

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During a lunch break one afternoon late in August, I grabbed my bike and peddled the three blocks from the museum to the Community Connections office. I had first come across the Revelstoke Local Food Initiative at a booth during a Street Market in early June. “Cultivating a vibrant, resilient local food system” taglines their webpage, overtop of a photograph of a sunflower in full bloom. Their mission states that “Through education, facilitation and advocacy we will empower the community to enhance local food production and utilization.” Earlier in the week I had contacted the coordinator, Jenna Fraser, and she'd

invited me to her office at Community Connections. Once in the building, I learned that Jenna shared her office with Revelstoke's Food Security coordinator, Mel Hemphill. I joined them in their narrow office, sitting on the pink exercise ball between them.

Mel begins to explain the broad range of programming that the Local Food Initiative provides to target all audiences, acknowledging that "food affects everybody." I ask them if any of the young children in their Little Sprouts program are aspiring farmers; Jenna tells me rather of their Farm-to-Table educator, Jesse. Jesse, she says, is in her 20s, working at the local farm in town, and aspires to own her own one day.

Despite the variety of programming, there's a daunting feeling of "preaching to the converted" that the organization seems to continually face. "It's a community that's too involved," Mel explains. People readily support local vendors at the weekly farmer's market. But people will as readily spend an afternoon mountain biking, even if it means missing a Garden Guru workshop. This leaves Jenna faced with the continual challenge of seeking to fund events for people who are interested in localism but may be too busy too often to attend. And I was left to wonder about the need for balance: it's undeniable that the choices we make shape the world around us; how, then, do we navigate balance while adhering to the diligences of being both local and global citizens? In Revelstoke, Mel says "the community is vibrant, but local food is not [its] backbone." Not to mention, Revelstoke has a unique way of operating that favours independent—rather than collaborative—localism. Just the week before, Mel had seen a "raspberries to pick" advertisement on the local Classifieds' page. In this independent atmosphere, localism depends on personal relationships that often bypass the Local Food Initiative.

Whether the local culture acknowledges it or not, food in Revelstoke depends upon more than who you know. One evening—not long before I had met

with Jenna and Mel— I had to leave my very full Save-On shopping basket on the cold grocery store floor; the bellowing winds outside had cut the power to the grocery store. I didn't think much about it. But I returned the following day to find mostly empty aisles. All food that had been deemed unfit for consumption had been sent to the landfill. I felt naïve to have considered food such a right, but I had never lived in such a small town. I wondered whether the only other grocery store in town a mere few blocks away had been affected too. When I told Mel about my experience, she shuddered—thankful she had been out of town during the power outage. “It simply shows our food insecurity,” she remarks. And I was left to contemplate the irony: was power not the deliverable that the dam had promised?

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The street sign reads “Mount Begbie Rd.” and I pull left. I've been to the part of the Terra Firma farm that sits alongside the main road, but I've never come this way. I'd never even realized there was a second part to the farm until Jesse—the aspiring farmer—had invited me to visit. I park and see Jesse waving both arms in the air in the field below. Once I wave back, she drops back down, disappearing amidst the crops. The sun warms my exposed skin as I make my way down to her, carrying my black notebook, a pen, and my phone to record our conversation. The scent of cedar from the newly constructed wooden home lingers in the air. Once past the home, the full view opens: lush farm fields below, a blanket of green pines behind, and the mountains climbing and falling in blue hues in the distance. I've lived in Revelstoke for four months now, but its wild landscape continually overwhelms me. The farm is peaceful and quiet, apart from the lively chicken coop on my right.

As Jesse and I talk, we gradually move down the row so as to not interrupt her weeding. During her undergrad years, topics of agriculture and climate change inspired her to pursue a seven-month organic farm apprenticeship in Cawston,

BC. Before coming to work on the Terra Firma farm, Revelstoke had been a come-and-play destination for her. When the opportunity arose for Jesse to collaborate with the Local Food Initiative, she felt qualified and eager. With the Farm-to-Table education program created and underway, she then pursued more farm work. In jean shorts, a sports bra and a baseball hat, she looks up at me from her weeding, blue eyes squinting in the sunlight: “I’m, like, Tara’s sidekick,” she says, describing her work here. Jesse says that the owners of the Terra Firma farm, Rob and Tara, have “no other passion than the work they do, which is crazy and I don’t agree.” Although Jesse feels farming’s allure, she also recognizes the attitude of workaholicism she’s witnessed on farms as a real obstacle in starting her own. She enjoys the versatility of farming: being outside, listening to podcasts while weeding, planting or harvesting, or having friends (or strangers) come visit. “Urban farming would be great,” she exclaims, indicating her belief that a work-life balance would then not be so compromised.

In Jesse’s words, I hear the echoed desire for balance that Mel and Jenna spoke of. Sitting in the Terra Firma field, I can’t help but wonder what Revelstoke would have looked like today if the dam at Castlegar had never washed away nearly 200 farms. I know Mel and Jenna worry less about the farms lost to the dam than about the modern problem of land ownership. How do you get young people with little to no money land to farm? I think back to Jesse weeding in front of me, wondering if land and balance will intersect for her.

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I’ve been back in Kamloops since September. Today I find myself in the library again. Interview notes, museum pictures and previous drafts sprawl across the table. Amidst the disorder, I stare at the blank page on my laptop. Not for the first time. Even in the silence of the library, I struggle to find the words to conclude what it all means. If this is a story, then where is its ending? I start to recount what I know to be *true*: I’ve felt happiness in a place that was once so

unfamiliar; I've learned of its losses; I've seen its tensions and its resilience; and I've read headlines about different communities threatened today by similar circumstances. Perhaps there are not always endings, but there are always choices. There are the dams and there are the fields. And there are choices interwoven so subtly in our day-to-day lives that they become invisible to us. If it is our choices that shape the world around us, then is it our stories that are meant to steer us? I don't know. But I know that before there is change, there is choice.

References

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