

## Secrets of the Tribe: John Steffler's *The Grey Islands*

Adrian Fowler

[One of Canada's most accomplished writers, John Steffler has received critical acclaim for his poetry and fiction, and been honoured with numerous literary awards. In 2006, he was appointed Parliamentary Poet Laureate for Canada.]

John Steffler's narrative poem, *The Grey Islands* (1985), depicts an encounter between an urban planner from the city of Toronto and the people who inhabit the coastal hinterland and fishing communities of Newfoundland. The poem has been praised as a classic of Canadian wilderness writing, to be set beside the work of the nineteenth century American naturalists, Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, and their contemporaries, Annie Dillard and Aldo Leopold. Recently, this view has been tempered by the argument that the poem merges ecocritical concerns with post-colonial theory, as the narrator strives "to locate a stable identity within both a rural culture and a pastoral environment." My paper re-frames this argument within a theoretical context utilizing concepts of the outsider developed by Julia Kristeva, Alfred Schuetz and Georg Simmel, examining by close reading the protagonist's experience of "culture shock" and alienation, his "decision" to confront the "other" within himself, and his destabilizing journey towards reconciliation, acceptance and identification. According to this interpretation, *The Grey Islands* demonstrates one way of reading Simmel's notion that the stranger may access secrets of a culture normally denied to the indigenous members of that culture. While acknowledging the insights of both the "naturalist" view of *The Grey Islands*, and the "ecocritical / post-colonial" compromise, my paper challenges these perspectives by arguing that culture – specifically coastal rather than generically "rural" – is the primary site of conflict and growth in the poem, and that the implacable and forbidding natural environment – more Darwinian than "pastoral" – is construed as a key to unlocking the human.

The unnamed narrator of *The Grey Islands* has come to Millikin Harbour like a missionary to save the natives, but four years later he feels like a tourist, not having left the motel. His disillusionment is professional, personal and profound, but a chance conversation unleashes a force that propels him down the highway of Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula to a remote island, populated only by voices, ghosts and one remaining human settler, thought to be insane. The narrator is seeking a way to corner himself: "Some blunt place I can't go beyond. Where excuses stop." But although the journey brings him up against the landscape and seascape of Newfoundland, more importantly it plunges him into the culture of the people who hold this natural world in their heads, whose "bloodlines" make "a human net to keep these capes and islands in."

Images of compulsion, drowning, disorientation, intimidation and madness define the narrator's willful and will-less de-centering. Encounters with local people release stories, recalled and imagined, that counterpoint the narrator's desperate inner musings – a kind of dialogic confrontation that is by turns hilarious and terrifying. The littoral environment, extreme and unforgiving, effaces everything – boundaries and landmarks – on a daily basis. Shattered by the experience, the narrator begins to comprehend what it takes to live in this world, achieving an identification with the people he had scorned and grasping the power of the place, a power from which he imagines he can draw strength as he reconstitutes his personal and professional life.