A READER'S JOURNAL

Lewis Creek Lost and Found
by
Kevin Dann

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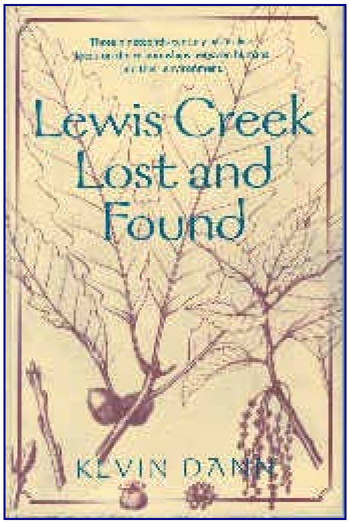
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2002



The Waubanakee name for Lewis Creek is Sungahneetuk which translates into the "River of the Fish Weirs." A bit more descriptive than the current name which contains the name of a French king. The author's last name "Dann" means "River" and if one applies the two ur-names, one arrives at "River of the Fish Weirs" by Kevin River. Rather appropriate then that the author says in his Acknowledgments, "My role as writer of this book has been much like that of a river: I've acted as a conduit for the anecdotes and thoughts of the countless people who in a sense are the tributary streams of this story."

Names, Dann recognizes, are ephemeral products of the naming game in the long view of time:

> **[page 186] What names will future generations call Bristol Pond, Monkton Pond, Lewis Creek? At this moment, ten generations removed from the first English and French settlers who coined these names, we still find satisfactory names whose associations lie far across the Atlantic Ocean. "Lewis Creek" is known to more Americans today than ever, not because of the celebrity of the Champlain Valley stream, but because its name has been borrowed for a line of sportswear. One hundred years hence, this association may be more familiar to those who cross the Creek on Route 7 (just above the falls that it its Abenaki name) than its intended commemoration of a French king. Whatever future names are bestowed on these bodies of water, we can take heart that they will speak of their time as surely as the current names speak of our own.**

Names are composed of words, and words, Emerson once said, began as lively metaphors. Dann points out on page 66 the etymological evolution of "creek" that leads through the Norse "creke" to the Vikings' "krokr" to the Old English "cradol" or in essence "cradle" to the Old High German "kratto" for basket.

> **[page 67] With "cradle," the seemingly understated and insufficient epithet "creek" comes full circle, encompassing through its etymology the idea of sheltering, nurturing, rearing. The creek becomes cradle; it is a place of origin, of birth. Lewis Creek has cradled them all: the Paleo-Indian ghosts who hunted mammoths in spruce-fir forests and whose utterings of names for the Creek or any other place we can only imagine; their descendant men and women — the Abenaki — who came to call the Creek "Sungahneetok" . . .**

In my review of Steiner's *The Principle of Spiritual Economy* I wrote:

> **In relating the life of Moses, the story of his unusual birth is always told, but it is rarely explained why the story is important. With what we have learned of the origin of Moses's etheric body from Zarathustra, we can now relate why the infant Moses was placed in a basket woven of bulrushes and floated on water alone for a long time before he was found - the purpose was to awaken completely the Zarathustran etheric body of Moses. Rightly understood, this event was the genesis of Genesis.**

In a basket, a cradle floated on a creek, we encounter an experience which may have led to the very origin, the birthing cradle of the Bible. From the wonderful phrase written by Dann, "The creek becomes cradle" on page 67, I was led to write the following poem, "Ark of Ages" (refrain adapted from Rock of Ages by Augustus Montague Toplady):

Ark of Ages, Cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.

The creek becomes cradle
The bulrushes rocking
And Moses my dear one
'arken to my heart.

Ark of Ages, Cleft for me
Let Thee hide myself in Thee.

The sacrifice forestalled
the Angel rushes in
Abraham father of Isaac
'arken to my heart.

Ark of Ages, Cleft for
Let Thee hide Thyself in me.

The cradle becomes cross
Holy Ghost rushes in
And Jesus my dear one
'arken to my heart.

Ark of Ages, Cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in me.

One of the men whose stories wind through this book like Lewis Creek through the Champlain Valley is Rowland Robinson. If you've ever seen an episode of Star Trek: Voyager in which they visited via the holodeck the Irish town of Fairhaven, one could take heart that, in the 23rd Century or sooner, the area of Danvis may come alive again in a holodeck where people may once more walk through, smell, and taste Vermont the way Rowland Robinson did. Robinson's writings were characterized this way by John Spargo in 1936:

> **[page 14] "So realistic are these descriptions in fact that, if some great convulsion of nature, or some display of human madness triumphant, were to wipe all of Vermont out of existence, obliterating every trace of it, the discovery of a set of Robinson's books somewhere — perhaps on the shelves of some library in China — would make it possible for scientists to construct from them a faithful and dependable picture of Vermont as it was in Robinson's day. It would be possible to depict realistically the characteristic scenery, the homes, the occupations, the tools, the dress and the speech of the people."**

Robinson bought the diaries of Joseph Rogers, which Dann says, "were filled with the most wonderful commonplace: March 6, 1870. Near dark meet Reynolds the meat man for a few moments — he does not know why we have Sunday on the first day of the week, only by tradition and education and custom." The question of why Sunday is the first day of the week goes back to Genesis when God made the first day and said, " Let there be light" That light was the light of the Sun[1]. The order of the days of the week are Sun (Sunday), Moon (Monday), Mars (*mardi)*, Mercury (*mercredi)*, Jupiter (*jeudi)*, Venus (*vendredi)* and Saturn (Saturday), and certainly of those seven astronomical or heavenly bodies, the Sun comes first. The great Sun Being, the Christ, came to Earth, and, as a man He died on Golgotha in a great mystery to redeem humankind from its Fall from grace. In all of these thoughts, the Sun comes before all others, and thus, Sunday as the first day of the week is not a thought to be taken lightly or treated as some accident of tradition, education, or custom.

Wild flowers are the most wonderful of all flowers, in my opinion. They grow unplanted, flourish unfertilized, and bloom unbidden, and all we as humans have to do is to notice and appreciate them. I find it an interesting paradox to find signs in the median of interstate highways that proclaim, "Wildflowers Planted by Greenfield Horticulture Society" or some such oxymoronic agency who undertakes the human planting and cultivation of *wild* flowers. Thanks to the author, I have now become aware of *wild* apples.

> **[page 75] "Volunteer" apples haven't always been called that. Rowland Robinson, who orcharded twenty acres at Rokeby, spoke once of his orchard trees' "plebeian kindred, the 'common' or 'natural' apples." For Robinson and his generation, another natural philosopher — Henry David Thoreau — had immortalized the trees, as "wild apples." Indeed, on Wednesday afternoon, September 25, 1850, Thoreau and his friend William Ellery Channing had passed this very spot, on Thoreau's sole venture out of the United States, to Canada.**

Thoreau, as the next passage indicates, pursued the *wild*.

> **[page 76] His autumn walks brought him upon wild grasses, wild house cats, wild muskrats, and wild men, to a pursuit of what he called "the wild." That autumn brought him also to the wild/volunteer apple trees of New England.**

What was the difference between the cultivated apple and the wild apple?

> **[page 77] The cultivated apple represented Thoreau and his fellow Americans who had let the landscape naturalize them. It was with the last that his loyalties lay. . . . Thoreau said it plainly himself: "*Our* wild apple is wild only like myself, perchance, who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from cultivated stock." . . . [Thoreau's] prophecy was that "humanity would fulfill their destiny not by exploiting the American landscape, but by letting the land take hold of them."**

Last night I watched a beautiful story of the Amish people on the Hallmark Channel called *Harvest of Fire* in which the local sheriff tells the female FBI agent that she will find her truth in her investigation not by pulling the truth out of the people, but by letting the truth, the flavor of the people enter and take hold of her. When cooking my seafood gumbo I must allow time for the flavor of the gumbo, which is the flavor of land, to enter and take hold of the flavor of the sea in the shrimp, crabs, and oysters that I add to it.

If we were to let the flavor of this land we call America take hold of us we might we might learn to live in harmony with it, to have a love affair with it like the natives of this land. Robinson wondered if the native wild apple, like the native people of this land, wouldn't ultimately survive the interloping settlers like himself. So he wrote a story about Sam Lovel who tried to become one for a while.

> **[page 78] I hev wished I was an Injin, but I don't naow. An' I've tried it tew, for a fortni't runnin', up t'other Slang. An' it beats all haow easy a man settles daown tu that way o' livin', an' I b'lieve a man's consid'able like a tame fox — oncte he gits loose he gits**

> **wild ag'in mighty easy.**

Dann's work sparkles with wonderful quotations of other writers and the one of Gilpin is my favorite:

> **[page 80] Thoreau's alertness to the visual came from his reading of John Ruskin and William Gilpin (the latter having expressed a tenet central to the work of both Thoreau and Robinson: "Language, like light, is a medium: and the true philosophic style, like light from a north window, exhibits objects clearly, and distinctly, without soliciting attention to itself."), while Robinson's sprang from his vocation as an artist.**

Dann's eloquence jumps from the pages into the reader's heart at times, such as when he talks of Thoreau or of wild apples. If we let this next passage take hold of us we can feel the flavor of the wild in our own lives. Dann, like Thoreau and Robinson, is an American wild apple.

> **[page 89, 90] As wild apples, "naturalized" lovers of the untamed landscape like Thoreau and Robinson were struck through with self-cultivation. Robinson's blindness, like Thoreau's own personal losses, only increased the depth to which he tilled the soil of his inner self. The scruffy orchard near the railroad trestle over Lewis Creek tells us that we too are wild apples, and that although most of us may escape the challenge of the loss of our physical eyesight, each of us daily risks losing our larger vision. The land, like personal tragedy, calls us home to ourselves, and in going there, we stay the course between a comforting past and a frightening future. Rowland Robinson's prophecy of a depauperate fauna at the Lewis Creek marsh has thankfully passed unrealized, but his subtle warnings of an inner poverty — personified in the literalist language of the young boy who sees nature a bit too scientifically — remain poignant. Like the wild apple, we moderns who have survived A. D. 1950 and have just moved into a new millennium must express our finest qualities, offering our fruit to the future as those wild apples before us have done.**

Another man whose stories wend their way through this book is John Bulkley Perry, who melded the fields of theology and geology, heaven and earth, if you will.

> **[page 141] The earth for Perry was covered with the tracings of God's finger, and he saw it as his mission to come to know these *works* of God as well as his *word.* On his twenty-third birthday, he wrote in his diary: "If my life is spared, I trust that I may some day be able to reconcile the sciences with each other, and especially with religion. I am beginning to look upon that as the great work of my life."**

Perry's goal closely matches my own goal in life, and in my quest for knowledge I came upon someone who had already done the work of reconciling science and the spirit in his spiritual science. Rudolf Steiner, who managed this prodigious feat, was born about 12 years after Perry wrote the above words in his diary.

From the sublime to the less-than-sublime, in my steamy but brief relationship with my second wife, we had a favorite song, *Orchids in the Moonlight*. Imagine my raised eyebrows when I realized the etymology of the word *orchid*.

> **[page 165] The Greek word for testicle, "orchis" came into use among Greek authors over 2000 years ago. They were excited and curious about the resemblance of the little tuberoids to testicles, since they lived in an age when a plant's medicinal properties were thought to be indicated by the shape of its various organs.**

Moving along Lewis Creek, we finding what has been lost as we progress along its banks. We move further and further up the creek as we move towards the back of the book, ending up around Starksboro and Hillsboro. And we find ourselves learning about a now-defunct science that flourished once in the milieu of Lewis Creek: *eugenics*.

> **[page 197] There were two key reasons that the Eugenics Survey met with little professional criticism. First, the "science" of genetics was a fledgling science at best, born only two decades before when in 1900 Gregor Mendel's 1866 paper on crossing sweet peas was rediscovered. Before Mendel, there had been no organized eugenics program — the vestigial belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics and other archaic notions of inheritance stymied the principles of eugenics. But after 1900, Mendel gave the eugenics movement its biological mechanisms and its experimental method.**

The thought that Mendel made the *sweet* peas *cross* struck me as humorous and led me to write the following couplets:

> **Gregor had a sweet demeanor**
> ** when he made the green bean greener**
> **But this deed left me at a loss:**
> ** he went and made the sweet pea cross.**

Robinson's fear of a completely impoverished fauna of Vermont has not come to pass, as lands no longer farmed have been returned to forest and the denizens of the forest flourish again. In place of the Robinsons, Perrys, and Thoreaus who strode the land to make discoveries of immense benefit to science, amateur and professional naturalists of today, like Kevin Dann, come to discover the land anew.

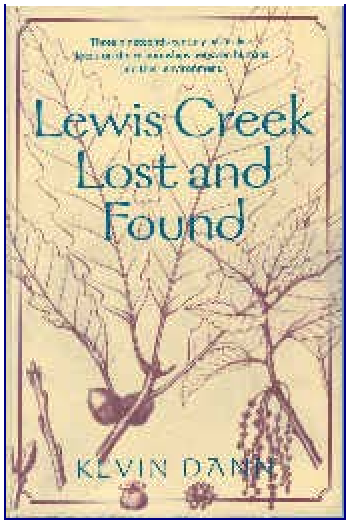
> **[page 210] Our discoveries — of a new location of a rare plant, an otter's den, or a Paleozoic fossil — are much more likely to be recreational sources of personal satisfaction than practical contributions to scientific knowledge. But our finds can also now be deeply *re-creational* as well, for each act of physical discovery more than ever brings us to psychic and spiritual renewal.**

We have traveled the author's river from its finial rivulet, down past its headwaters, and have reached its delta. We are at the last page of the book — but, at the very end, in its ultimate sentence, we find that we are being poured out into the limitless ocean of the cosmos.

> **[page 210] Sometimes finding, sometimes losing, onward we run like the river to the sea.**

-------------------------------*footnote*---------------------------

1. To be completely accurate, the sun was not created till the 4th day. The first day created light, but not the light of the Sun. The first day, as attested by the Hebrew week that Moses brought from "Ur," was Saturn's Day. Christianity (not Genesis 1) brought in the idea of Sunday as the first day of the week, with Christ being born on the day the Sun is born. [This footnote thanks to Edward Reaugh Smith.] Return to text below footnote.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