

Nature and Creativity

By Brian Baetz

Nature is the enduring elegance in the background of our lives, giving much but asking very little from us, only respect. Nature has always inspired creativity. In this article, I will cover examples of a number of creative manifestations that have been inspired by local nature.

Nature and Painting

The natural landscape has inspired many painters for several centuries, across the globe. One of the very best local landscape artists was the late Catherine Gibbon, who grew up in Hamilton and made local nature the focus of many of her works. Cathy was famous for taking her students out to paint “en plein air”, and had special arrangements with many private landowners to allow access to some very special spaces. My students interviewed Cathy for the film on the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark (see details in the videography section), and the conversation became deeply philosophical. Here are some of her most thought-provoking quotes:

“We have great potential as human beings, and I think that our minds work in very different ways. I think that that one part of our brain consciousness is definitely the intuitive one, which if you don't develop that you're missing out on a whole range of your potential, and I think your happiness and balance. Nature is the clue to that intuitive side, I believe, because your ego is kind of nullified when you are in nature. You're open, you go out and you are so interested and stimulated by the sights and sounds that you kind of drain out your ego self and you let something else come in. You let the stimulus come in and that's what gives you the inspiration side of your Consciousness.

I think that experience of just being able to have that otherness of nature so close by is fundamental to my creativity as an artist, but I would say it's essential to having a balanced life. It's also very important to have an undisturbed area that you can go to... I think when you go into those kinds of natural areas you experience a shift of Consciousness that is quite profound. As a family going for a walk or a hike you will experience a different feeling but if you pursue that feeling and ask questions about it, and experience it more and more and more, you're going to find yourself going into something deeper and deeper. It's a thing that that will just give you endless stimulation and happiness.

I have always felt that the reason why I love nature so much is that I know that all my questions about being a person, about being an individual, about being part of this experience of Life...all those questions are there and they're answered in the natural world. The importance of nature in our lives goes beyond just experiencing that other, it's developing a relationship with it that feeds back. So I see nature as a Consciousness that links in with ours, and I see being in nature as a reciprocal relationship. It's not just me, it's something where we're blending together, and I get an experience of something huge.”

Cathy had many beautiful pieces in chalk pastel, and arguably her best pieces were from areas around Cootes Paradise. The sample below is from the Carnegie Gallery website, which can be clicked on to learn more about Cathy and her amazing work.



<https://carnegiegallery.org/estate-of-catherine-gibbon/>

Nature and Music

I was elaborating on a project I was planning to undertake with the HNC with a friend and former colleague of mine, Deborah Smaluck. After a modest amount of brainstorming we agreed it would be interesting to create a song that would be synonymous with the various roles nature plays in our lives on a daily basis. But how to create lyrics that would be meaningful, impactful and describe the indescribable? And then how do we add music and have an artist sing the song? This was way out of my league, so I gave the challenge to Debbie to go within and write some lyrics from the heart. In very short order, she came back with the following lyrics that were inspired by the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. My only contribution was suggesting the title, which I borrowed from a quote from the renown Hamilton poet, John Terpstra. John had been expanding on some points relating to the C2EP and succinctly said “It’s not exactly wild, but it’s wild enough!”

Wild Enough

*I wait for you beyond the concrete walls,
My green magnificence breath-taking to behold.
Creatures scurry about, rivers turn into falls,
We prepare for our day to unfold.*

(refrain)

*I want to thrive, I want to survive,
I want this earth to stay alive.
Once gone I am forever lost,
Will you speak for me, protect me, and honour me at any cost?
Honour me at any cost?*

*All are welcome, in harmony we play,
Run, climb, swim, discoveries abound.
The birds in chorus will sing the glory of the day,
We share a trust you'll leave us as you found.*

(repeat refrain)

*In times of sorrow or doubt, you seek me out
Wrapped in my embrace, I hold you tight.
Show you my vistas, turtles, trees and walk you about,
Once soothed I release you, encouraged to shine your light.*

(repeat refrain)

*Born 10,000 years ago,
Infinite creatures, roaring rivers, lush flora and trees.
Survived rain, ice, drought, and snow,
Now you have brought me to my knees.*

*I want to thrive, I want to survive,
I want this earth to stay alive.
Once gone I am forever lost,
Will you speak for me, protect me, and honour me at any cost?
Honour me at any cost?*

As a special gift to his Mom, Debbie's son Pete had a friend of his, Rory Lavelle, create the music for the Wild Enough lyrics and record the combined work. Rory's amazing vocals have a distinct John Lennon vibe, and Rory sings it with the passion that you would expect from a committed environmentalist. If you are interested, the song can be heard at:

https://www.brianbaetz.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Rory_Lavelle_Wild_Enough.mp3

Nature and Writing

Local nature has inspired many authors to pick up their pens, or their keyboards, and entice us to get outside in Hamilton and explore the treasures that are so abundant at the Head of the Lake. I'll feature three of my favourite authors who have made Mother Nature their Muse. The four books summarized below are available through the Hamilton Public Library, and are also available from local bookstores as a thoughtful gift to someone in your family or circle of friends who loves nature:

Marg Heidebrecht's lovely book, *In the Shade: Friendship, Loss and the Bruce Trail*, captures the majesty of the Niagara Escarpment along with the practical realities of an end-to-end Trail hiker. The HPL description is as follows:

"Lyrical and insightful, these essays will engage anyone who loves nature and people, who prefers moving ahead to sitting still. People who hike, on local or distant trails will relate to the specifics of contour maps, shuttling, buying the right size boots. ties accompanied by a good friend will relate to the bond that develops and deepens"

Publication Details: Victoria, BC : Friesen Press, 2019; ISBN: 9781525560156

John Terpstra's *Daylighting Chedoke* is a really interesting book that highlights an under-appreciated local natural asset. John is an award-winning poet, and he brings a poetic flair to describing the history and hydrology of this little creek that rises in the middle of Hamilton Mountain suburbs. The HPL description is as follows:

"Chedoke Creek is one of six creeks that weave their way through Hamilton, but it is the most hidden, lost to culverts and concrete. Its waters are seen only in a couple of waterfalls as it flows over the edge of the Niagara Escarpment and in a short canal where it runs alongside Highway 403. He weaves the history of the creek with the lyrical observations of nature and humankind's connections to nature that he is celebrated for, while also examining the reality of our contaminated waterways. *Daylighting Chedoke* is a meditation on how urbanization and

industrialization has literally buried our natural environment, and what it would be like to free our creeks and perhaps, while doing so, free our society.”

Publication Details: Hamilton, Ontario : James Street North Books, 2018. ISBN: 9781928088721

One of John Terpstra’s other books is *Falling Into Place*, which beautifully details the ecology and history of the Burlington Heights sandbar. The HPL description is as follows:

“This book is what happens when one person becomes completely enamoured of the landscape in the city where he lives-especially if this person, like John Terpstra, engages the world with the imagination and curiosity of a poet. Terpstra's investigations centre around the Iroquois Bar, a giant glacial sandbar which lies beneath one of Hamilton's busiest transportation corridors. Combining history and geology with gumshoe work and poetic intuition, Terpstra puzzles out just how much the physical and social geography of the area has changed since the sandbar was formed. This close study is nested inside a broader consideration of modern society's constant and often ill-considered alteration of landscape. Terpstra's acute focus on his neighbourhood offers insights of global value in a book that is both provocative and entertaining. Listed as one of the Hamilton Spectator's "Best books of the year" in 2002 for its appeal to "aficionados of history, geography, geology, poetic language, fine prose and the landscape around us. With illustrations by Wesley Bates, and maps by Glenn MacDonald.”

Publication Details: Kentville, N.S. : Gaspereau Press, 2011;ISBN:9781554471102

Daniel Coleman’s *YardWork* is a lovely homage to his backyard in West Hamilton. Daniel is a great writer, to be expected for a McMaster English professor, but he really shows his hidden talents as a historian and as a civil engineer in the related details contained within his book. The HPL description is as follows:

"Daniel Coleman is looking to find a home. After a childhood that left him feeling placeless, he ended up in Hamilton, Ontario, one of Canada's most polluted cities at the time. Yardwork is his attempt to put down roots in a place he never expected to be. Coleman decided he wanted to truly know and belong to a small piece of land, his patch of garden on the edge of the Niagara Escarpment, to deeply understand its ecology, landscape and history. Starting with the creation myths and geology, moving through the settler era and up to the present, Coleman pours his considerable talents into learning, and sharing, as much of the story of the land as possible. Most books on ecology focus either on protecting the wilderness or analyzing a toxic dump. Most books on gardens focus on plant health or landscape design. Most books on Indigenous-settler relations focus on politics or social inequities. Yardwork meditates on the sedimentary layers of ecological, cultural and political stories that make up Hamilton, the escarpment city at the Head

of the Lake. Along the way Coleman strives to build a new awareness of the place where he lives as sacred land."

Publication Details: Hamilton, Ontario : James Street North Books, 2017; ISBN: 9781928088288

Nature and Photography

Nature inspires many of us to pick up a camera or a phone and capture the magic unfolding before us as we hike or simply stand and observe. There are many celebrated nature photographers in the area, and I chose to highlight the works of Pete Hurrell. Pete lives in the Pleasant View area of Dundas and is a tireless advocate for the preservation of this area, dating back to the OMB hearing in the 90s where he and his wife stuck their necks out and became appellants along with the Conservers Society of Hamilton and District (Dundas Chapter). Pete not only stands for what he stands on, he is quick to take out his camera and take a shot of what he sees on his property or when he is out helping the Turtle Watch folks. The following photo montage illustrates the wide range of nature co-habiting with humans in the C2EP:



Groundhogs



Piebald Deer



Coyotes



Wild Turkeys



Turkey Vulture



Buck



Red Fox



Deer



Snapping Turtle

Nature and Videography/FilmMaking

My son Cyrus Baetz is an indie film director, but I had never thought of directing a film until Mark Chamberlain called up and offered a helicopter and pilot and camera technician to go up and capture the beauty of the C2EP from the air. With that aerial footage in hand, I asked Glen Prevost and Wade Genders to shoot some terrestrial footage, along with a bunch of interviews with local thought leaders. Then my wife Rashne Baetz joined me in writing the script, which was narrated by the charming voice of Julia Kollek, and we wove in original music by McMaster's Matt Woolhouse to produce a 42 minute film which can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r570AvEpyrs>

For the latest fundraising by the HNC for land acquisition in C2EP, the amazing Wade Genders came back in with masterful editing to produce a 10 minute film, which can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIZyrV3jRnA>

Concluding Remarks

Nature has infinite dimensions, that reveal themselves to us as we immerse and connect with its beauty. Humans are part of Nature, and our creative side is nurtured and stimulated by its mystery and depth. As the above examples of human creativity illustrate, conservation of local nature is important for many subtle yet profound reasons.

<Brian Baetz is the Director of McMaster's W Booth School of Engineering Practice and Technology, and is working with fellow Club members John F. Evans, Kevin Empey, Jen Baker and Brian McHattie on fundraising for land acquisition in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System>