Man Facing West
by Don Gayton

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Don Gayton is a writer and ecologist from the BC Interior who has published some six books of non-fiction in the personal “nature writing” genre. He is a Canadian by choice, attached to place, but someone who has also lived and explored elsewhere. California, Mexico, Colombia, Washington State, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia all appear in this volume although, as the title Man Facing West suggests, the locations are centrally “western.” Ecology and botany are passions that Gayton has crafted into careers in agriculture, forestry, and rural development. As both a biologist and a writer, he sees connections which he translates into stories about person and place. In the writer, and in his work, there is the organic link between cultures (plants growing together) and cultures (humans nurtured in a landscape). His persona suggests that of the contrary, challenging both peers and authority figures. He states in the Prologue, “In my case, resistance to an unjust war transformed into a passion for rural development and then morphed again into an all-consuming bond to natural landscapes” (10). As a scientist and writer, he still insists on pointing out the answers to the questions we don’t want to ask (9). Luckily for readers of this collection, the answers are proffered in the form of a variety of stories.

Man Facing West inspired me to want to read more of Gayton but the local library system (barely 200 km from his hometown) lists only two titles, and not the one I wanted, Landscapes of the Interior. I did read and enjoy his Okanagan Odyssey: Journeys through Terrain, Terroir, and Culture, in which he looses his love of words, expanding from the origins of the word “landscape” to his own definition, “a tract of land, hopelessly entangled in aesthetics and culture” (OO, 67). He explains the use of the word “terroir,” stressing the link between land, grapes, and wine. I like this thought that ideas grow from real specific things attached to the real world of earth, water, and sky. I like the way he does not hide his romanticism: “Wine transforms ordinary confusion into an ecstatic form of wonder. . . . We still crave place, and wine is our surrogate for it. . . . We imbibe, and for a moment we feel connected. Wine is a message in a bottle” (OO, 60–61). But the fact that libraries seem to prefer to emphasize circulation and “pop culture” is disappointing. Learning more and more about where we live, which writers like Gayton help us to do, seems to me a necessary way to develop attachment to the land, which in turn will lead to acts of caring and conservancy. Unfortunately, BC is still a province where economics seems to trump environment every time.

That phrase, “entangled in aesthetics and culture,” applies to Man Facing West. My one problem with this collection is with its aesthetics, with Gayton’s deliberate and celebrated (should I say contrarian) attempt to meld fiction and non-fiction. The fact that the reader is given no clues as to which stories are fiction or “invented memory” and which are non-fiction creates problems with credibility. Did the cub-scout leader in “Flag Day” really strip the boy of his badges and banish him? Or is this story fiction, with the leader a handy symbol of authority who creates cognitive dissonance in a child by an inappropriate overreaction to an accident?

Anger and punishment are inappropriate in the story’s situation; modelling the proper reaction, the protocol, to an accident causing a fallen flag would have been a teachable moment. Trust the tale
but not the teller. But not being able to trust the teller is a problem when it comes to his attempting to shift the paradigm. Not being able to trust the scientist is an easy out for those who do not want to listen. Even clumping the fiction and non-fiction into units would have helped. I did enjoy the stories that were obviously fiction – about the botanist’s assistant, “Humboldt and Bonpland,” and the chariots-of-the-gods story of time travel in Saskatchewan, “Gliding in the Pleistocene.” But did the writer and his once-estranged father really look for ancestral graves together, as in the story “A Schooner in Memory”? Or is it a case of “invented memory,” of “victim,” heal thyself? Come to think of it, did the former teammate and Vietnam vet at the high school reunion really say: “Gayton, I did the right thing, and so did you” in “The Fracture of Good Order”? (226) A benediction, certainly, and one I would like to believe was truly given.

Man Facing West is enjoyable, especially because many of the locations are familiar and it pleases me to read about them in books. It is also interesting to learn about the background of a conscientious objector, the lessons demonstrated to us by the people we are sent to educate, the possibility of using imagination to bandage family wounds, the potential of all narrative to heal and to teach. 

J.M. Bridgeman writes from the Fraser Valley.

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