



Shadows in the Sun

Travels to Landscapes of Spirit and Desire

Wade Davis

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*Travels to Landscapes
of Spirit and Desire*

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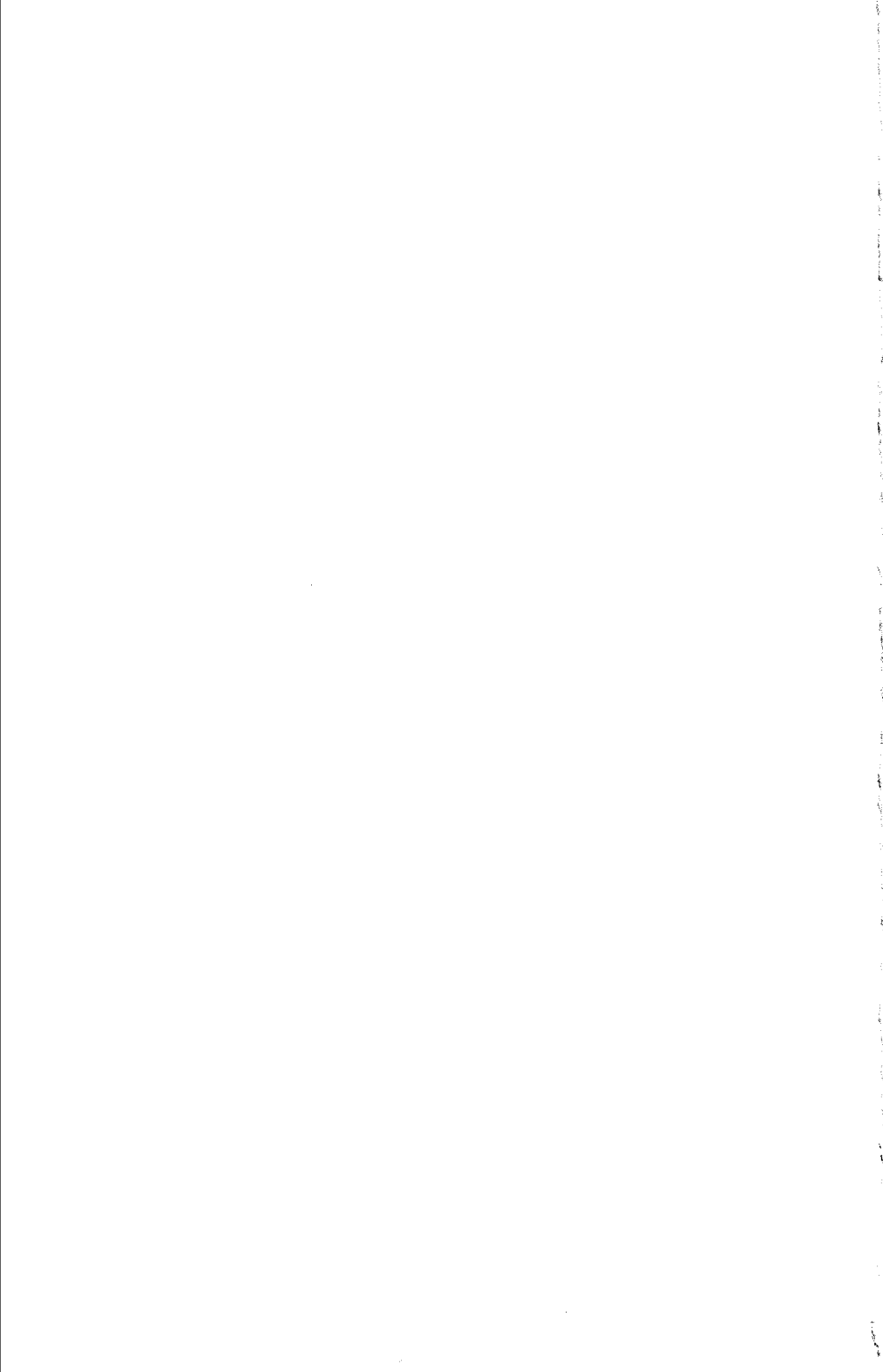
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Shadows in the Sun



Introduction

AMERICANS LOOK west for heroes, but Canadians look north. When winter came to the St. Lawrence, and ice storms shut down the schools in the town where I lived just west of Montreal, my friends and I would gather around a coal-fired stove in a shack on the riverbank and listen as the old priest who tended the fire spoke of his life in the Arctic, in the barren lands of Keewatin, a place, as he put it, of serious cold. He told us of the early years of the country, tracing our history in stories of the *coureurs de bois*, the runners of the woods, the fur traders who traversed a continent in sixty days in canoes made of tree bark. As a boy I memorized their routes, and could recite the portages as effortlessly as an American kid might name ball players. When I was ten, I paddled for two weeks across northern Quebec with a teacher who had been mauled by a bear. His strength and knowledge of the bush impressed me as much as the dreadful scars on his legs.

Growing up in Canada, first in Quebec and later in British Columbia, meant, at least then, that a young person would almost inevitably be drawn to the wild. Summers in the mountains fighting fires, cutting trail, or logging were the backdrop of our lives. My first encounter with a larger world came in 1968, when, at the age of fourteen, my parents sent me to Colombia, a trip that instilled a love of Latin America that has never faded. In the mountains above Cali, on trails that reached west to the Pacific, I encountered the warmth and

benevolence of a people charged with an unfamiliar intensity, a passion for life, and a quiet acceptance of the frailty of the human spirit. At twenty I returned to South America as a student of ethnobotany, inspired by the great Amazonian plant explorer Richard Evans Schultes, the man who sparked the psychedelic era with his discovery in the late 1930s of the sacred mushrooms known to the Aztec as *teonanacatl*, the flesh of the gods. On a journey made possible by Schultes, inspired by him and infused at all times with his spirit, I traveled the length and breadth of the Andes, studying a plant revered by the Inca as the divine leaf of immortality, coca, the notorious source of cocaine.

After eight years of intermittent fieldwork, mostly along the eastern flank of the Cordillera and in the Northwest Amazon, I was sent by Schultes to Haiti to seek the formula of a folk poison reputedly used by sorcerers to make zombies, the living dead. Arriving in Port-au-Prince, I expected to stay a few weeks. Instead, the study consumed four years. In the end I found myself swept into a complex world view utterly different from my own—one that left me demonstrating less the chemical basis of a popular belief than the psychological and cultural foundations of a pharmacological possibility. The zombie phenomenon in all its ramifications could not be extricated from the social, religious, and political matrix of the Vodoun society.

Haiti is a land of transformation, a culture and a people deeply imbued with a sense of the spirit. Living among a dozen tribes in South America, working with shamans, ingesting their sacred plants, had opened my mind to the poetics of culture. A long sojourn in the remote hinterland of Haiti completed the process, shattering the rigidity of my scientific perspective. In later journeys to Borneo and the high Arctic, Tibet and the forests of northern Canada, the swamps of the

Orinoco delta and the deserts of the Middle East, I found myself increasingly drawn to the wonder of cultural diversity, and especially to those societies that have yet to succumb to the forces of modernization.

Indeed, one of the intense pleasures of travel is the opportunity to live among peoples who have not forgotten the old ways, who still feel their past in the wind, touch it in stones polished by rain, recognize its taste in the bitter leaves of plants. Just to know that nomadic hunters exist, that jaguar shamans yet journey beyond the Milky Way, that the myths of the Athabaskan elders still resonate with meaning, is to remember that our world does not exist in some absolute sense but rather is only one model of reality. The Penan in the forests of Borneo, the Vodoun acolytes in Haiti, the wandering holy men of the Sahara teach us that there are other options, other possibilities, other ways of thinking and interacting with the Earth. This idea has always filled me with hope.

Yet the very ease with which we move about this small planet confronts us with a terrible irony. We journey to learn, yet in traveling grow each day further and further from where we began. When the American poet Gary Snyder was once asked to discuss at length how individuals could best help resolve the environmental crisis, he responded with two words: "Stay put." Only by rediscovering a sense of place, he suggested, a commitment to a particular piece of ground, will we be able to redefine our relationship to the planet. For many people around the world, particularly those few still living in small communities unaffected by the frenzy and disappointments of the industrial age, this notion of belonging has never been forsaken.

In the winter of 1982, I was fortunate to live among the Quechua in a small village in the southern Andes of Peru. Though the highland flora was spectacular and the agricul-

tural skills of these descendants of the Inca nothing short of genius, what impressed me most was the daily round, the accumulation of gestures that together spoke of an intimate and profound reverence for the very soil upon which the village lay. The village, of course, was not merely the warren of adobe and thatch houses clustered around the small church. It was the totality of the existence of the people—the ancient ruins that ran away from the village and hung like memories at the edge of the cliffs overlooking the river, the fields cut into the precipitous slopes of the sacred mountain Antakillqa, the lakes on the pampa where the sedges grow, and the waterfall where no one went for fear of meeting Sirena, the malevolent spirit of the forest.

For the people of the village, every activity was an affirmation of continuity. In the morning, before the labor in the fields began, there were always prayers and offerings of coca leaves for Pachamama, the Great Mother. The men worked together in teams forged not only by blood but by reciprocal bonds of obligation and loyalty, social and ritual debts accumulated over lifetimes and generations, never spoken about and never forgotten. Sometime around midday, the women and children would arrive with great steaming cauldrons of soup, baskets of potatoes, and flasks of *chicha*. The families feasted together every day, and in the wake of the meal the work became play, the boys and girls taking their place beside their fathers—planting, hoeing, weeding, harvesting. At the end of day the women scattered blossoms on the field, and the oldest man led the group in prayer, blessing the tools, the seed, the earth, and the children.

This spirit of place, this sense of life as community, manifests itself in ways that are both exquisite and profound. Every February, for example, at the height of the rainy season, the fastest young man in the village dresses up as a woman and, pursued by virtually the entire population, races around the

boundaries of the community's land. It is an astonishing physical feat. The distance traveled is only twenty miles, but the route crosses two soaring Andean ridges. The runners first drop 1,000 feet below the village to the base of Antakillqa, then ascend 4,000 feet to the summit of the mountain before descending to the valley on the far side, only to climb once more to reach the high pampa and the trail home. It is a race, but also a pilgrimage, and the route is defined by sacred places, crossroads and rock cairns, waterfalls and trees, where the participants must stop to make ritual offerings. Warmed by alcohol, fueled by coca leaves, the runners fall away into trance, emerging at the end of the day less as humans than as spirit beings who have fought off their adversaries and reaffirmed for yet another year the boundaries of their land. It is their way of defining their place, of proclaiming their sense of belonging.

This loyalty to the land is perhaps the single most powerful distinction between indigenous peoples and those of us whose ancestors grew up on distant continents across the endless oceans that for so long isolated the Americas. I once attended a public hearing in northern Canada where a number of different organizations and individuals, both native and non-native, had come together to speak out against a proposed hydroelectric development. At the climax of a tumultuous meeting, just after an old native trapper promised to use his pension money to buy dynamite to blow up whatever it was the company intended to build, a young white settler stood up and spoke passionately against the proposed dam. "If they build this thing," he proclaimed in what he took as a gesture of solidarity, "I'm just going to have to leave this country." The next speaker was a Tahltan Indian. With quiet dignity, he turned to the previous speaker. "Partner," he said, "that's the difference between you and me. If they build this dam, I'll still be here."

The essays and stories in this book, though distilled from

travels in widely separated parts of the world, are fundamentally about landscape and character, the wisdom of lives drawn directly from the land, the hunger of those who seek to rediscover such understanding, and the consequences of failure.

Hunters of the Northern Ice

OLAYUK NARQITARVIK is a hunter. As a boy of twelve, he killed a polar bear at close quarters, thrusting a harpoon into its soft underbelly as it lunged toward him. That same year he took his first whale. In winter darkness, when temperatures fall so low that breath cracks in the wind, he leaves his family each day to follow the leads in the new ice and kneel motionless, for hours at a time, over the breathing holes of ringed seals. The slightest shift in weight will reveal his presence; in perfect stillness he squats, knowing full well that as he hunts he is hunted. Polar bear tracks run away from every hole. If a seal does not appear, Olayuk may roll over, mimicking the creature to try to attract a bear so that predator may be reduced to prey.

Ipeelie Koonoo is Olayuk's stepfather, second husband to his mother. Revered as an elder, he too is a hunter. When he killed his first bear at nine, with a harpoon made for him the night before by a favorite uncle, he could not stop smiling. His first seal was taken when he was still too small to lift it from the ice. But he knew that the animal had chosen to die, betrayed by its thirst for fresh water. So he followed his uncle's teachings and dripped fresh water into its mouth to placate its spirit. If animals are not properly treated, they will not allow themselves to be taken. But if they are not hunted, the Inuit believe, they will suffer, and their numbers will decrease. Thus the hunt is a reflection of balance, a measure of the interdependence of all life in the Arctic, a polar desert cloaked in

darkness nine months of the year and bathed in intense luminosity for the short weeks of *upinngaaq*, the summer season of renewal and rebirth.

Simon Qamanirq is both artist and hunter, the youngest of the three men, nephew of Oyaluk's wife, Martha, the matriarch of the extended family. On his accordion, he plays Scottish reels adapted from those of ancient mariners and whalers, and with his firm hands turns soapstone into exquisite figurines of animals, all depicted so powerfully that they seem to move within the stone. "You can't be a carver," he explains, "if you are not a hunter." For some time, Simon lived down south, attended vocational school and played drums in an Inuit rock-and-roll band named "The Harpoons." But he grew tired of the confused ways of people whose "heads were full of a thousand words." So he returned north. "I got nothing more interesting than hunting," he says. "Down in Canada I'm always cold. My body needs blood. Even their meat has no blood."

Three men, three generations of Inuit hunters. Seeking caribou on the open tundra during the cold months of fall, taking narwhal from the ice in July, they replicate through movement a seasonal round that recalls a distant time when all our ancestors were nomads. In living by the hunt they remain apart, utterly different. Every idea and thought, every notion of culture and society, every impulse, belief, and gesture reflects the consciousness of a people who have not succumbed to the cult of the seed. Ideas that we take for granted—private ownership of objects and land, laws and institutions that place one person above another in a hierarchy of power—are not just exotic to the Inuit, they are anathema. If implemented, they would doom a way of life. This is something the Inuit know. "We hunt," Olayuk explains, "because we are hunters."

For most of the year these men and their families live in the small community of Arctic Bay, a fiercely self-sufficient and independent clan, survivors of a century that has seen untold

hardships unleashed upon their people. But for a brief time in June, in the fortnight leading up to the solstice, they make camp on a gravel beach at Cape Crauford, on the western shore of Admiralty Inlet, the largest fjord on Earth, a vast inland sea that cleaves the northern shore of Baffin Island 500 miles north of the Arctic Circle. There, beneath the dark cliffs of the Brodeur Peninsula, on a promontory overlooking Lancaster Sound, the richest body of water in the Arctic, they invite outsiders into their world.

THE JOURNEY NORTH begins before dawn in Ottawa and ends nine hours later on the seasonal ice off the shore of Olayuk's camp. It is a five-hour flight just to the weather station and settlement of Resolute Bay, the highest point in the Arctic serviced by commercial jets, where we switch from a 727 to a deHavilland Twin Otter. North of Resolute lie another 1,000 miles of Canada. It is a place, the pilot remarks, where Canada could hide Britain and the English would never find it.

We fly across Barrow Strait, then over Lancaster Sound. From the air the ice fuses with the snow-covered land. Ringed seals appear as dark specks on the ice. There are no polar bears to be seen, only their silent tracks wandering from seal hole to seal hole. At the mouth of Prince Regent Inlet, east of Somerset Island, the ice gives way abruptly to the black sea. Beyond the floe edge, scores of white beluga whales move gracefully through the water. A small mesalike island rises out of the sea. The plane banks steeply past the soaring cliffs, and in its wake tens of thousands of birds lift into the air. The Prince Leopold sanctuary is just thirty miles square, but on it nest nearly 200,000 pairs of migratory birds: thick-billed murres, northern fulmars, and black-legged kittiwakes. Baffin Island lies ahead, and within minutes the plane roars over the beach at Cape Crauford, turns into the wind, and lands on skis on a smooth stretch of ice half a mile offshore.