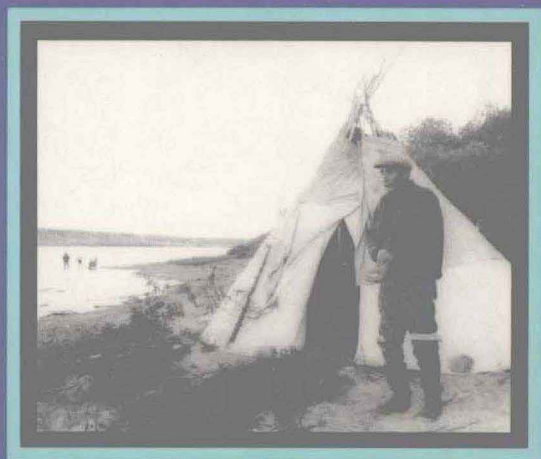


# **STRANGERS DEVOUR THE LAND**



**BOYCE RICHARDSON**





# STRANGERS DEVOUR THE LAND

BOYCE  
RICHARDSON

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For  
Willie Awashish,  
who should have inherited  
a great tradition

. . . YOUR LAND,  
STRANGERS DEVOUR IT IN YOUR PRESENCE,  
AND IT IS DESOLATE,  
AS OVERTHROWN BY STRANGERS.

—*The Book of the Prophet Isaiah,*  
*Chapter I, verse 7*

When the dams are built where will the animals go? The caribou won't know which way to go.

—Samson Nahacappo, Cree hunter, Fort George

We are not thinking only of ourselves but of all those young kids who are just starting to hunt, and those that have yet to be born.

—Mary Bearskin, wife of a Cree hunter, Fort George

If you set fire to the land, the land remains, and life returns to it. If you set fire to a piece of paper, like a dollar bill, it burns away to the end, and nothing is left.

—Charlie Gunner, Cree hunter, Mistassini

We are told that we own the land. But really nobody can own it, the land. For eventually everyone dies.

—Sam Blacksmith, Cree hunter, Mistassini

It is the white man who has the money, and on the other hand the Indian has the land. The white man will always have the money and will always want to have the land.

—William Rat, Cree hunter, Fort George

There will never be enough money to pay for the damage that has been done. I'd rather think about the land and think about the children. What will they have when that land is destroyed? The money means nothing.

—Job Bearskin, Cree hunter, Fort George

Objectively, unemotionally, one can state that the development of James Bay will set Quebec on a new road to progress. It is an undertaking which once again will furnish tangible proof of Quebec's vitality and spirit of enterprise, for the development of James Bay is the most daring project in Quebec's history. James Bay is the land of tomorrow.

—James Bay Development Corporation initial-phase plan



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For a white man to penetrate into the world of a Cree hunter is not easy. Ideally, one would wish to be inside the mind of a hunter as he walks through the bush, able to see his universe as he sees it—an impossible feat. But I would not have been able to achieve even the incomplete understanding that I have without the help of very many friends to whom I am deeply indebted. First among these I must mention Philip Awashish, who through five or more years has borne with and encouraged my curiosity, and has been most generous in opening my way into Cree communities, translating for me in more ways than the obvious. In these communities I met many hundreds of people, young and old, too numerous to mention, who have responded sometimes with enthusiasm, sometimes with patience, but always with great courtesy, to my persistence. I am indebted to Chief Smally Petawabano, of Mistassini, for the patience with which he bore my many visits to his people's village; to Buckley Petawabano, of Mistassini and Montreal, for making available transcripts of interviews with his father and other hunters; to Glen Speers, manager of the Hudson's Bay Company in Mistassini, for helping smooth my way many times on journeys into the Cree lands. I am also grateful to James O'Reilly, of O'Reilly, Alain and Hudon, Montreal, for having made available to me the voluminous transcripts of the evidence in the case of Robert Kanatewat *et al.* versus the James Bay Development Corporation and others; and to the anthropologists Harvey Feit, Adrian Tanner and Ignatius LaRusic, who have often shared with me their profound knowledge

of the Cree world. These men have done much to restore the good name of anthropologists, for they have repaid the Cree people in devoted labor on their behalf. Dr. John Spence, of Montreal, has helped me with valuable environmental advice, and it was Noel Mostert, of Tangier, who, when I had given up the idea of writing a book, persuaded me that I must make the time to commit to paper the material I had gathered. Without his urging I would never have got going again.

Naturally, the views expressed in the book are my own, and should not be attributed to any of the above-mentioned people. Finally, I will never be able to repay adequately Job Bearskin, of Fort George, and Sam Blacksmith, of Mistassini, who welcomed me on their land, and looked after me, and taught me that life has other dimensions than those I had previously comprehended.



## FOREWORD

As I sit at my desk I can almost see the shore of James Bay—ten miles downstream from the island of Moose Factory in the Moose River. Almost Arctic Ocean beachfront, some would say, yet I'm coming to think of it as a Hydro viewpoint. As a matter of fact, if all the plans go ahead I may no longer live on an island but on a peninsula of the mainland overlooking a huge freshwater reservoir, where presently I've become accustomed to the saltwater of James Bay, which at the base of Hudson's Bay is the largest bay and estuary system on the continent. Dams upstream from this small village promise to lower water levels and change the ecosystem permanently. And amazing as it may sound, a powerful group of engineers has a proposal to place a dike over the mouth of James Bay to create a vast reservoir of fresh water to sell to cities in the southwestern U.S.

There are many things Cree people have taken for granted over countless generations: that the rivers will always flow, the sun and moon will alternate, and there will be six seasons of the year—yes, six. That is how time is counted here in the North, in seasons based on the migrations of caribou, geese, sturgeons, and other relations, and on the ebb and flow of ice and water. The Cree also have assumed that there will always be food from the land, so long as the Eeu, the Cree, do not abuse their part of the relationship to the animals and the land. Now, the rivers do not always flow, the animals are not always there, and strange as it may seem, there are no longer six seasons in some parts of this land. Hydro-Quebec has made sure of that.

In *Strangers Devour the Land* Boyce Richardson provides an intimate



look into the people and communities of James Bay, particularly the Cree of the east coast of James Bay, those most heavily affected by the first stage of the Hydro-Quebec project. This book, originally published at the onset of James Bay I, is the testimony of people and the land. Richardson brings the reader to the hunting territories, the traplines, and the powerful rivers that are the lives of these people. The book is a moving chronicle of the resistance of people to the dams, the story of James Bay I, and how Hydro-Quebec came to begin the largest single hydroelectric project in North America.

This is also a story about all of us, about how industrial society is consuming the lifeblood of this continent. Unfortunately, we must now tell not only the story of James Bay I, the project which devoured the traplines and hunting territories of many of the people written about in this book, but we must tell of the proposal of James Bay II.

As people contemplate the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, global warming, "the greenhouse effect," and other climatic changes, this \$60 billion mega-project brings it all home to U.S. and Canadian consumers. The new dams, water diversions, and hydroelectric projects at issue will, according to the National Audubon Society, "make James Bay and some of Hudson's Bay uninhabitable for much of the wildlife now dependent upon it." Audubon senior staff scientist Jan Beyea reports that the Society is "convinced that in fifty years [this entire] . . . ecosystem will be lost. . . ." The ecosystem at stake is as large as California, and includes the central flyway of most of the migratory birds in North America, the drainage of most northern-running river systems in the central part of the continent, a number of endangered species of animals, and Inuit, Cree, and Naskapi/Innu people, who have lived here for at least nine thousand years.

There are no longer "strangers" who devour the land. They are entrenched in the North, in the form of Hydro-Quebec, which put 4,400 square miles of land under water and wreaked ecological havoc in an additional 67,954 square miles. Hydro-Quebec and its counterparts in Ontario and Manitoba are taking a vast territory notable for running water, and essentially proposing to turn it into a vast territory of stagnant reservoirs—virtual toxic sinks.

Already there is spreading mercury contamination from James Bay I. Methane from decomposing plants and trees, which have been drowned in the flooding, converts the inorganic mercury already present in the soil into organic methyl mercury, a lethal poison. Because the process is enhanced in acidic conditions, the mercury levels in the reservoir system are up to six times the level considered safe for humans.

In the village of Chisasibi, downstream from one set of reservoirs (LG 1-4), scientists tested for mercury poisoning several years ago. Two of every three people were found to have excessive levels of methyl mercury already present in their bodies—30 milligrams per kilogram of body weight. Some elders registered twenty times the level deemed acceptable, and had developed symptoms of mercury poisoning such as shaking, numbness of the limbs, loss of peripheral vision, and neurological damage. Hydro-Quebec advised the Cree to stop eating river fish and instead to harvest fish from James and Hudson's bays. These fish, which are still relatively free from methyl mercury, are frequently contaminated with PCBs, a result of other "development" projects in the region and contamination now moving into the arctic food chain from industries to the south.

The Cree call it *nimass aksiwin*, "fish disease," and no other two words could have such a devastating effect on people. "*Nimass aksiwin* strikes at the very heart of our society. It's like being told that armageddon has started, and people are scared as hell," says George Lameboy, a Cree fisherman and trapper. "The scientists come in here and tell us we're getting better [by eating less fish], but hey, you can't measure the effects of *nimass aksiwin* by taking hair samples. How can you measure a man's fear? How can you measure your way of life coming to an end?"

As if the methyl mercury were not enough, the change in water levels in the rivers had devastating results in at least one case. Normally rivers run highest in the spring melt and lowest in winter. Since the flow of rivers is now determined not by nature but by the electrical demands of southern consumers, the order has been reversed; many times, it is increased or decreased dramatically to respond to the "power grid" of the south. In 1984 a sudden release proved deadly, as water was released out of the Caniapiscau Reservoir (now the largest lake in Quebec at 1,865 square miles) precisely during the seasonal migration of the George's River caribou herd. Ten thousand caribou drowned. Hydro-Quebec officials called the disaster "mainly an act of God."

The ongoing environmental problems have solidified Cree opposition to any more development in their territory, and strengthened their calls for a comprehensive environmental review of the first phase of the project prior to construction of any new dams. The Cree call to halt the project is now supported by a growing number of local, national, and international environmental and consumer groups who are deeply concerned about possible long-term consequences of the development. The Cree and other groups have joined in extensive and seemingly endless legal challenges to the project, which at this point have resulted in a court

decision calling for an environmental inquiry. Unfortunately, neither the scope of the review nor its weight (that is, whether findings will be binding to the utility) have been determined, leaving many Cree and environmentalists frustrated and skeptical.

The Cree and other groups have consistently called for federal intervention. Cree Chief Mathew Coon Come points out the irony, saying, "When you have the largest project of the century in your backyard, and no environmental assessment . . . not one person monitoring the impact, there is an obvious failure of federal responsibility. . . ." Bill Namagoose, of the Cree Regional Authority, echoes his words, calling the federal sidestepping of the issues "environmental racism." Can you imagine a man who has lived his whole life in Paris — and one day awakens, looks out his window, and Paris is underwater? It just wouldn't happen. The Cree, Inuit, and Innu are far away, dark and different. That is one reason this project, like the exploitation of the Amazon and other rainforests, is planned to go ahead. If Hydro-Quebec proposed to flood the villages, farms, homes, and gravesites of thousands of French-speaking white people, well, it just wouldn't happen.

If the second phase goes ahead, the new dams would greatly accentuate the present environmental damage. At Great Whale, four smaller rivers will be diverted into a single large one. On the Nottaway, Broadback, and Rupert river systems, eleven dams would be built — with the Nottaway being diverted into the Broadback, then the Broadback into the Rupert. In total, the reservoirs will cover more than ten thousand square miles, an area the size of Lake Erie. The project, according to the National Audubon Society, "is the northern equivalent to the destruction of the tropical rainforest."

What is worse is that the Quebec dams are only one set of proposals for James Bay. Another huge hydroelectric project has been put in place on the Nelson River in northern Manitoba, draining into Hudson's Bay, and an undetermined number of dams are planned for the rivers in northern Ontario. Virtually every single river flowing into James and Hudson's bays is now proposed for some hydroelectric or diversion scheme.

This worries not only the native people, but also environmentalists and other people to the south. For although an environmental impact assessment is pending for the Quebec projects, there is no proposal as yet for a cumulative impact assessment for all projects in what is essentially one, unified ecosystem: James and Hudson's bays. As Alan Penn, an environmental advisor to the Grand Council of the Crees of Quebec points out, "There is no precedent for the manipulation of a subarctic

watershed elsewhere in the world on the scale proposed here. The project represents a natural experiment, both ecological and sociological, on a massive scale.”

Perhaps most horrendous is that this massive experiment is all about making money. Hydro-Quebec is the provincial government’s chief economic tool for capitalizing its economy. Although the 125,000 jobs promised never materialized from James Bay I, Hydro-Quebec has all in all done well from its huge investments. In 1970 Hydro-Quebec had 12,000 employees, assets of \$3.5 billion, and debts of \$2.6 billion. Today the provincial utility has 23,000 employees, assets of \$34 billion, and a debt of \$23 billion. This corporation accounts for 20 percent of all new investments in Quebec.

A great portion of the scheme is designed to service electrical markets in the U.S. A number of U.S. utilities have accepted Hydro-Quebec’s promotion of its power as a cheap, clean alternative to coal and nuclear generating. New York, for instance, has purchased Hydro-Quebec power, and the purchase has accounted for about 9 percent of the state’s electricity supply since 1970. This figure is expected to rise to 30 percent by the year 2000. Seven U.S. utilities—the New England Power Pool, the New York Power Authority, Vermont Joint Owners, Massachusetts Power Authority, Citizens Utilities, Consumers Power, and Detroit Edison—have entered into long-term contracts with Hydro-Quebec and Ontario-Hydro to secure power for the next twenty years or more. These contracts, of course, enhance the utility’s ability to raise the huge investments required for the new phase of development. In other words, U.S. consumers are clearly implicated in the destruction of this ecosystem.

Canadians, however, are far from innocent. According to Tom Adams of the Toronto-based Energy Probe, “We are the single most inefficient consumers of electricity in the world. We are twice as inefficient as even the next in line—the U.S.” And that inefficiency is buttressed by low rates: industries in Ontario, for instance, pay six times less for electricity than would their counterparts in Japan. Not only do provincial electric corporations subsidize the “hidden costs and dis-economies” of power production, but these very “cheap” rates discourage conservation and undermine any incentive to plan realistically. Energy analysts like Amory Lovins have frequently pointed out that conservation of electricity would make the dams not only unnecessary for projected demand, but cost a great deal less in hard cash. It is outrageous that “cheap electrical rates” are a justification to destroy an entire ecosystem and way of life.

As politicians, environmentalists, and economists speak of the future, “sustainable development” is the phrase most in vogue. While the mean-

ing of that phrase varies with the person using it, the concept has validity for me. Some days I listen to my father-in-law talk when he has come in from his trapline—which is, incidently, just west of the proposed Nottaway–Broadback–Rupert (NBR) project. He explains that he walked five miles one way to check his rabbit snares and his traps. And he tells me of reaching his hand into a beaver house, to count the number of beavers in the house. There is even a word for this counting in Cree. The point of the counting is so that no person will take more beavers than should be taken from a certain area. There is no word for this in English, only a long description. And it makes no sense whatsoever to explain to a Cree the concept of “sustainable development.” My father-in-law and his ancestors have been harvesting and hunting this same area for thousands of years. It appears to me that “sustainable development” and a “sustainable economy” are scheduled for destruction only so that twenty years from now some southern expert can “reinvent” a sustainable economy for this region.

The problem is not Hydro-Quebec, Ontario-Hydro, and the U.S. energy contracts. The problem is “development,” and the structure of Canada’s (and for that matter, the U.S.) industrial economy. The Canadian economy has always been based on the exploitation of raw materials and resources from the “frontier.” The North has always been the frontier, and continues in that role today. The Canadian economy requires this exploitation to prosper. The James Bay dams and diversions are only a small set of many such mega-projects presently underway or proposed for the North. All share a common denominator—a development policy based on capital-intensive, resource-extractive industries. The promise is jobs and prosperity but, as evidenced in James Bay I, the reality is stark and destructive.

At some point, there will be no more “frontiers” to conquer. There will be no more resources to mine, rivers to dam, trees to fell, or capital to invest. As we approach the year 2000, those who have an interest in surviving to the next century would say that point in time is now. And as I sit on my Arctic Ocean beachfront I think about that. I think about the testimony that is in this powerful book, and I hope that by a collective act of conscience, sanity, political and economic change, James Bay will remain saltwater and free of methyl mercury.

Winona LaDuke Kapashesit  
*Moose Factory, Ontario*  
*January, 1991*



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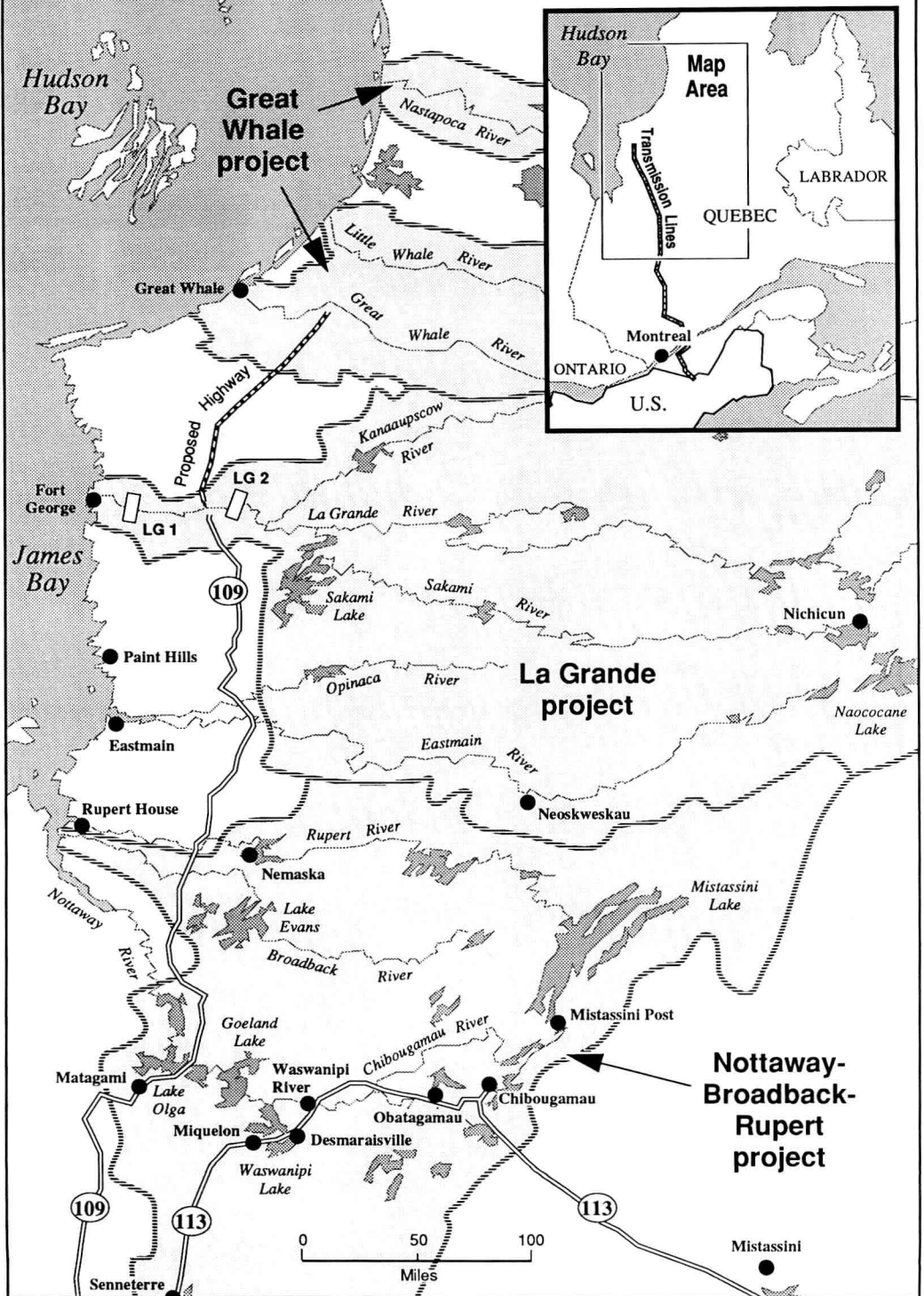
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# The James Bay Development Project







# ISAIAH AND HIS SONS

The rock is north, as far as the mind can stretch. Until 8,000 years ago this rock was covered by ice that for millennia had ground and creaked painfully and slowly over the rock, scratching, gouging, advancing, retreating, advancing again, creating with its irresistible force the depressions which today form millions of lakes. When the ice retreated for the last time, plants and trees migrated north, drawing sustenance from the meager earth that lay on the rock. They were followed by animals and fish; and finally men, hunting men who fed themselves from the other animals. Together, men and animals clustered around the lakes and the great rivers that drained the land.

It is the same today. In the spring when the sun melts snow and ice, the water runs everywhere, flowing across the rocks in every direction, filling every depression, scouring every slope, finally gathering into mighty rivers which roar across the rocks, lifting the remaining ice from the shorelines as they beat their way across the land toward the sea.

This is the awesome wilderness of northern Quebec. Rocks, trees and lakes, stretching north for 1,000 miles from the flood plain of the St. Lawrence valley into a wilderness at first marked here and there by roads and towns, the so-far feeble scratchings on the surface of the land by the white man and his omnivorous, devouring civilization, but soon running off into the mysterious silence, far north until the trees diminish in size and number as the earth becomes thinner, finally giving way to the springy, soft muskeg, the rootless lichen plant which, abandoning the