



ARMAND GARNET RUFFO

GREY OWL

THE MYSTERY *of* ARCHIE BELANEY

– *A New Edition* –

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A NEW EDITION

ARMAND GARNET RUFFO



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& WYNN

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*For Judith, who gave me the time,
and in memory of my mother, Babara Espaniel-Ruffo.*

The Trail, then, is not merely a connecting link
between widely distant points, it becomes an idea,
a symbol of self-sacrifice and deathless
determination, an ideal to be lived up to,
a creed from which none may falter.

GREY OWL

THE MEN OF THE LAST FRONTIER

. . . an Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself. And it is a moral idea, for it accounts for the way in which he reacts to other men and to the world in general. And that idea, in order to be realized completely, has to be expressed.

N. SCOTT MOMADAY
“THE MAN MADE OF WORDS”

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Archival memory.
Paper brittle as autumn, unearthed
across the desk, files scattered.
Words floating like smoke
smell of moccasins you are wearing
warming the bright neon,
carrying you on
to the beginning.

It is past midnight, everyone
is gone, except uniformed security
and you – What is it you are digging for
exactly?

Note: Archie writes that a beaver's diet
consists of poplar and birch leaves,
shredded bark, lily roots and slim branches cut
into macaroni-like chunks; they also have a taste
for potatoes, apples and rice.

Transformation and Journey.
Archibald Stansfield Belaney,
and Grey Owl, Wa-sha-quon-asin.

The people. The names.
George his absent father; Kittie his bullied mother;
Ada and Carrie his spinster aunts; wives and lovers,
Angele Egwuna, Ivy Holmes, Marie Girard, Gertrude Bernard,
Yvonne Perrier; children, Agnes, Johnny, Dawn;
friends and acquaintances, George McCormick, Bill Guppy,
John Egwuna, Bill Draper, Jack Leve, Lovat Dickson,
Betty Somervell, Ken Conibear; adopted family, Alex and
Annie Espaniel, Jimmy and Jane.

The geography.
England. Hastings, a seaside village, his place of birth
at 32 St. James's Road; the move to 52 St. Helen's Road,
near the woods he played in; to 36 St. Mary's Terrace,
where he watched the ships move out to sea; Highbury Villa
and his menagerie of pets.

Canada. Toronto, where he worked in Eaton's department store;
Temagami, Bear Island, where he began trapping and married Angele;
Biscotasing, meeting the Espaniels and becoming
a riverman; Doucet, Gertrude and his first two beaver;
Cabano, where he began to write; Ajawaan, where he completely
became Grey Owl.

Writing to Gertrude, Archie tells her to find out if Alex
is up there. Alex will give her some, quote,
very wise counsel. Heed him, Archie advises.

The mention of family spills inward
that last portrait together in front of the station.
(Taken with Archie's Kodak, your grandmother said.)
As you turn to the light-blackened window to see
your face transparent as a lens,
and with the click of pen
you find yourself stepping from a train,
through a white hiss of steam,
a snowbound lake vast as ocean,
North,
and there is no retreat.



BEGINNING

INFLUENCES

You must speak straight so that your words may go as sunlight
into our hearts. When God made the world he gave one part
to the whiteman and another part to the Apache.
Why did they come together? I am no longer Chief
of all the Apaches. I am no longer rich; I am but a poor man.
The world was not always this way. I have no father or mother;
I am alone in the world. No one cares for Cochise,
that is why I do not care to live
and wish the rocks to fall on me and cover me up.
– *Cochise, 1866*

After school, rather than go directly home to his grandmother
Belaney's at 36 St. Mary's Terrace, Archie, 11 years old and alone,
walks for miles along the grassy cliff overlooking Hastings
and the English Channel. Come sunset, he heads
for a favourite bluff where he sits with his arms around his knees
and looks west, out past the waves and rising fog,
and dreams of America, of a long-lost father
who in Archie's mind is living somewhere out there
among the Red Indians. The books Archie carries, *Great Chiefs
of the Wild West* and *Two Little Savages: Being the Adventures
of Two Boys Who Lived as Indians and What They Learned*,
tell him what he already knows, that he too can do it,
and that his real life will begin when he joins his father
and like him is also adopted by the Apache.

With Cochise's words memorized and piercing his heart,
Archie plans his escape, whittles the days into wood.
Lost in a white starched world he cannot understand,
rejected and abandoned, he too wonders,
why things are the way they are,
and wishes deeply with all his will and green strength
for the sea to carry him away. Yes, Apache,
Archie will become an Apache!

Let his classmates jeer as loud as they want, because up here
on this cliff he can see how small they really are, and
he no longer cares what they say about him or his father.
His mind made up, this he reconfirms
as he repeats the words of his hero Cochise,
his thin legs hurrying him back to his grandmother's before
his aunts miss him and decide to punish
him with a strapping or, worse,
lock him indoors.

ARCHIE BELANEY, 1899

From St. Mary's Terrace you can see the ocean,
dream the real world, America, like the books say,
out there far beyond Hastings beach
where the candy-striped cabins
are rolled out on their wooden wheels,
and a procession of people take turns changing
into their blooming bathing suits,
bathers tiptoeing at the water's edge.
It makes me want to laugh.

Laugh out loud at the crowd gathered along the boardwalk
staring at the brave few who manage to make it in.
You should see them, parasols and all.
The ladies look like they're going to church
where everyone will be sure to see them,
long dresses and fancy feathered hats,
and the men, they're wearing ties and dark jackets,
imagine, in this heat.

And when it rains, with the wind lashing the trees,
thunder and lightning waking the sky,
then they make sure to lock themselves indoors
like little mice snug in their nests.
While I take to the window and down the drainpipe,
and over to a neighbours' house where I settle in the yard
and hoot and howl ever so faintly
but loud enough to make them stir in their beds.

Why don't I go down to the beach?
Because I'd rather go to St. Helen's Woods.
There I can make camp beside the creek
and practise with my knife or my rifle,
track whatever animals I spot.
I can pretend that I'm savage and free
and not trapped amongst strangers too afraid to get wet.
Why don't I go to the beach? Because when I finally do,
it will be to board one of those ships
and never return.



STORIES

The Belaney ladies want to know everything.

In their sheltered and proper lives, their Archibald becomes the centre of gravity. The moment he walks in, the room falls together in a setting of cups and saucers as they hurry him to the table to loosen his tongue with tea and sweets.

Archie goes along (he really has no choice) and tries to remember all that happened during the day, much to the delight of his busy spinster aunts.

And when there is nothing to tell, to keep them happy, he begins to make up stories, a whole life of friendship and adventure, finally stopping only for breath.

AN IMAGINED COUNTRY

See this portrait of Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, age 12,
posing stiffly in his dark woollen Sunday suit,
beside his aunt's collie.

(Never does he suspect
that one day
you will catch him
like this.)

A boy and a dog. Seems pleasant enough. But take a moment
to look into the boy's eyes and ask yourself what you detect.
For this is the same boy who has the ability to see himself
(as you see him) clear across the ocean, all the way,
into the heart of an imagined country called Canada.

SQUAW MAN, 1900

It's the name the boys at school
give him.
He tells them he has Indian blood,
and they say he's cracked.
Call him a Squaw Man.

At first he challenges them
to follow him through St. Helen's Woods;
when this fails, he retreats
into his own wilderness
and locks himself away
on the top floor of Highbury Villa,
his menagerie of snakes,
 frogs,
 mice,
 rabbits
becoming his sanctuary, his refuge
from the collar of Edwardian England,
the cackle of spinster aunts.

His father, his mother,
his grandmother (who dies on him)
and finally his classmates, including
his best friend, Hopkin, who prefers
the pursuit of girls to animals,
all abandon him.

And so, with no one, he creates himself
companionship and dreams for hours
of the life he will lead
among his brethren in America.
Though, never, not once,
despite an ache for someone as big as a country,
does he ever imagine
four or five wives.

AUNT ADA, 1903

Not like that, Archibald! How many times must
I tell you? Now do it again, this time properly.

Each morning Ada makes Archie practise the piano.
Ada breeds collie dogs and believes in strict obedience.
She believes in the old adage: Spare the rod, Spoil the child.
So while Archie plays *Moonlight Sonata* for the tenth time,
Aunt Ada stands over him with a cane ready to crack his knuckles.
Archie will become a gentleman, even if it kills him.
She will make him everything his despicable father was not.
Their mother had bowed to George's charm and good looks.
She had financed his trips to Africa and America and for what?
Only to have the apple of her eye fester and rot.
Archie too has the Belaney looks.
But Ada will see to it that his upbringing is different.
What is required is discipline. Unrelenting discipline.

If there's one thing I will not tolerate, it's disobedience.
Are you listening, Archibald? One, two, three. . . . Now begin again.

ARCHIE BELANEY, NOTEBOOK, UNDATED

I never went to university, I was grounded
by an ever-blessed aunt. I built on that
by sheer study, but only after many years
of speaking little but Indian.