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Editorial 03: Through the Past Darkly

The worst part of the struggle at Burnt Church is not that one side has a necessarily correct version of the events, or of the future, and is being overrun by the other. It is rather that the government has, once again, with its unyielding incompetence allowed a creeping problem to become a three hundred pound gorilla. Defining the term, "a modest income" seems to be a logical starting point, perhaps then we can avoid a future of blood shed. The agencies and representatives, on all sides, have been myopic, and sadly uninterested in a solution that will allow all to prosper. The native council, led by band chief Phil Fontaine, agreed this past week to ask their members to stop setting traps for thirty days while a solution could be agreed upon by both sides. The natives, who have lived for decades under the stigma that they would not, or could not, work effectively in society, have refused to comply with their leaders agreements, effectively refusing to stop working. No surprise that the native people have poor representation, we are all the same in that regard. There seems little doubt that the fishermen will need to relinquish some of their hold on the Atlantic market and allow some measure of cooperation with the natives. It will also be necessary for the natives to fish inside the boundaries agreed upon in whatsoever deal is made. The whole thing reminds one of man's great folly.

Man believes he can protect nature; divide her; and make her sustainable, yet milked, for all times. Man struggles with bomb shelters and dried food to avoid nature (and man's) wrath, and we watch the news to predict her (nature's) next move, feeling that somehow the information alone will make us stronger for the knowing. No dice Jack. We live at nature's whim, and by her grace do we survive. All the governmental deals in the world will not stop the fish from swimming, nor the sky from crying. There is nothing so strong as the feeling of utter helplessness one gets when one is surrendered to a fate of submission to the natural world. What would Wordsworth think of fishing rights and the division of the ocean, as if it were so much rental space?

I am straying wildly off the point. The Burnt Church crisis was truly shown to me by my friend Tim who told me of a story he had read in a book called The Afterlife of George Cartwright.

To wit, a group of soldiers are fishing for trout and other things all along the banks of a waterway. They are taking massive amounts of fish out of the water with their lines and nets, when they notice a group of natives arriving at their camp with spears, wanting to take their share of the catch.

The commanding officer explains that the rights to this waterway were given to him by the king and therefore the fish are his. The natives seem puzzled and ask again for their share. Once again the soldier explains that he was granted the rights to this water and all the fish therein. Whereupon the leader of the natives stares blankly at him and says,

"but these fish are for everyone."

The art of art, the glory of expression, and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. -Walt Whitman