

WAYNE GRADY &  
KEVIN PATTERSON:  
*Waters & wilderness at risk*

# LRG

LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA

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CHARLES FORAN

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*Reading's future in an algorithmic age*

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# Focusing on the Small Picture

*A new book looks at the communities that will be affected by the Northern Gateway pipeline.*

KEVIN PATTERSON

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## The Oil Man and the Sea: Navigating the Northern Gateway

Arno Kopecky

Douglas and McIntyre

256 pages, softcover

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**T**HE COASTAL TEMPERATE RAIN FOREST that stretches for a thousand kilometres north of Vancouver is a kind of geographical basilisk. It simply stalls anyone who pauses to study it. Eventually, one has to look away. Orcas plunging through schools of salmon; cedars the size and age of European cathedrals; saw-toothed mountains like the borderlands of Mordor—even a measured attempt to describe the preposterous beauty of the place lapses into self-parody. There is more loveliness here than there are words. Fjords stretch for hundreds of miles, humpback whales herd hundred-ton balls of herring together with bubble curtains: if the place is anything short of idyllic, it is just that it is so baroque. Too many notes. Too rich. Too few spare sightlines with which to view it in perspective.

This is a real criticism, actually. We have all known men and women who are excessively beautiful. This coastline has the same problem being taken seriously. It does not generate art commensurate with its magnificence. Alistair McLeod writes about Cape Breton and every one of us knows Algonquin Park in figurative form. Smaller trees fit more easily into frame.

Basilisks are best viewed indirectly; travel writing about an overwhelming place often profits from starting somewhere else—an artifact, like Chatwin's uncle's stuffed Patagonian beast, or an idea, as in Byron's Persian architecture obsession, or a mood, like Theroux's grumpiness in everything he has written. Arno Kopecky has chosen, for his wonderful new book about the North Coast, *The Oil Man and the Sea: Navigating the Northern Gateway*, to explore the debate around the proposed pipeline project.

It is a useful device; polarizing debates are deeply revelatory. The Great Bear Rainforest, stretching from Johnstone Strait, half way up Vancouver Island, to the Alaskan panhandle, is the heart of Kopecky's interest. To explore it, he makes common cause with a photographer and, for a time, another adventurer. Together they take a sailboat from southern Vancouver Island north through the Salish Sea, up in the inland passage to Kitimat, where the tar sands oils are proposed to be piped onto tankers bound for Asia. Neither Kopecky nor

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*Kevin Patterson has sailed the British Columbia coast for 19 years. His last book was the novel Consumption, published by Random House in 2010.*

the photographer has done a great deal of sailing before. The cheerful bonhomie with which they approach their inevitable difficulties sets the tone with which Kopecky teases apart the intricacies of the pipeline proposal.

Not that his mind is entirely open; this is not dispassionate reporting. "We do kind of have a message," he concedes to the retired schoolteacher named Ed, while berthed in Comox. Ed weighs the fact that the Enbridge shares in his retirement fund have doubled in two years while alternative energy stocks have "taken a real beating." In a perfect world, Kopecky continues, some of the profits of the fossil fuel giants would be steered toward research into renewables to get new energy infrastructure up and running before it is too late. "Yeah," Ed replies, "in a perfect world."

Kopecky knows what he thinks—but he does not depict people who think differently as idiots. His refreshing manners go a long way toward winning sympathy for his larger point. Which is that the essence of the North Coast's beauty lies in its complexity. Tens of thousands of islands large and small dot this coast, tidal currents rip in and out of here with uncommon force, and the fragility of the salmon and whales is as evident as their fecundity, if they are left unmolested, that is.

That complexity is best apprehended by the people who live closest to it, and the sailing vessel *Foxy* makes a sinuous pilgrimage en route to Kitimat through biological research stations and, especially, First Nations communities. In Alert Bay, he visits the now-closed residential school:

The decrepit structure was sleepily foreboding, but the surrounding scenery was bucolic. An acre of green lawn spread out before the main entrance, with a single enormous cedar planted in front of the stone stairs. Under the branches a five-year-old Namgis girl was swinging from a rope while her grandmother pushed her, both of them giggling uncontrollably. Their laughter broke St. Mike's brooding spell more effectively than any bulldozer.

The residential school was locked and barred to visitors, but not so the beautiful new building of cedar and glass that crouched beside it: this was U'mista. U'mista meant "the returning," a term formerly used to describe slaves being returned to their home villages.

Kopecky is alluding at the same time to the horror of the residential school systems that played such an important role in the deracination of these tribal communities and to the relief of oppressed people freed from their captors, European or otherwise.

It is in his explorations of the indigenous communities of the coast that Kopecky is at his

best, and it is among them that the pipeline debate becomes very charged. Kopecky's own indignation at the way supposedly objective assessment and consultation processes have been subverted by the Harper government is exceeded only by that of these people, who saved the 199 survivors of the *Queen of the North* sinking, and will themselves be the survivors of whatever havoc is wreaked by the Northern Gateway project, when those ships founder, too.

Marilyn Slett, chief councillor in Bella Bella, discusses a visit by Enbridge executives in August 2010:

It was a beautiful day like today so we asked them if they had ever been out here in the winter, because of course conditions are not like this for most of the year. We get ice storms with hurricane winds quite frequently. In the fall, the fog is often so thick you can barely see your own hands. We told them we were extremely worried about oil tankers attempting to pass through our territory in those kinds of conditions.

They said don't worry, there will be two tugs on each tanker to make sure there's no accidents, and even if there is, all tankers will have double hulls. They said they would insist on all the latest technology. And we said if you look at the history of marine accidents around here, it always comes down to human error. It's rarely a problem of technology.

The results of a spill would be "our nightmare," she adds. "If we lose our access to the sea, we cease to be Heiltsuk."

Which is the point of Kopecky's environmental screed disguised as travel book. The opposition to Northern Gateway is not a matter of the "junk left wing science" that Harper has called climate change, or of any other sort of science or political point. It comes down, rather, to individual lives and communities. The only way imperilling these people and this coast could be contemplated would be if one simply did not know them, had not seen them.

The Harper government will tell us: All wild country has its partisans, after all, and all development everywhere will be opposed by someone. Think of the big picture.

But tragedies happen in the small picture; oil spills happen in one inlet, one community at a time and must be understood that way. The industrialization of this coast will destroy the loveliest place on the planet. It does not matter that it will prompt the spending of \$6.5 billion to build this pipeline, or that it will bring jobs to Kitimat (about 50). Not after one has sailed and fished in these mountain bays and listened to the people who live here. Not after one has read Arno Kopecky's fine book. LRC