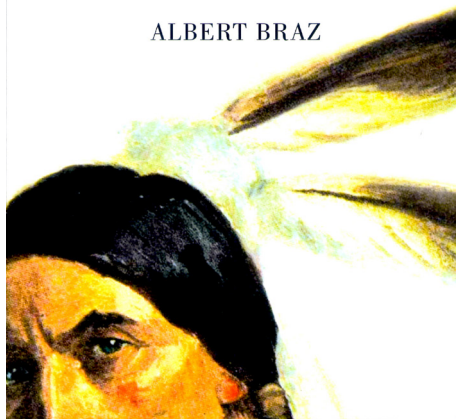


Apostate Englishman

Grey Owl the Writer
and the Myths

ALBERT BRAZ



BRAZ, Albert. *Apostate Englishman. Grey Owl the writer and the myths.* Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 2015. 190 p.

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Submetido e aprovado em 10 de abril de 2016.

Albert Braz, who is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of

Alberta, has presented us with a thoroughly comprehensive look into a subject formerly quite well explored, Grey Owl's life and writings and his role in Canadian conservationism. But the title, *Apostate Englishman*, reveals the underlining concern of the author with the damages to Grey Owl's reputation both as conservationist and as writer, after his death, when it is revealed, or confirmed, that Grey Owl was in fact the Englishman Archie Belaney.

Braz opens with a Preface that goes to the source of the story, "Archie Belaney's transformation into Grey Owl". But begins with his death (1938) and the scandal the revelation that he was an Englishman "gone Indian" caused in the intellectual and scientific communities, as well as in his readers, for he had committed

“cultural apostasy” and they felt betrayed or defrauded by a man that had “forsaken European culture” to adopt the Anishinaabe people of Beaver island. Grey Owl first became a trapper, but noticing the predatory increase in the activity came to be a protector of the beaver after he rescued two puppies and raised them. This event and his consistent observation of the puppies and of nature produced many essays and one children’s book that earned him a reputation as the first conservationist in Canada to be taken seriously enough to be employed to establish a beaver preservation program in a park created for that purpose, Prince Albert National Park.

With detailed information about Grey Owl’s several marriages, the influence of his wives on him, his ambivalences about his writings, the core of book is his writings, the

critical and editorial discussions around them, which exhausts the existing bibliography on the subject and provides a model book research, for it is as fascinating as it is thorough without letting down on objectivity.

In the essays publish in *Illustrated Canadian Forest and the outdoors* (from 1930 on), Grey Owl established his expertise on the wild side of Northern Canada and established his reputation as a conservationist, with *The men of the last frontier* (1931) the collection of essays where he summons Canadians to protect their forests and their animals. The fact that he usually addressed his audiences in full Indian regalia left no doubt about his desire to be perceived as Indigenous. And when he published essays in *Country life*, he requested his editors to be referred to “as an Indian writer”.

Chapters one, two and three follow his book publications as well as his personal transformations, always closely linked. *Pilgrims of the wild* (1935) can be considered Grey Owl's memoir and covers both his transformation into an ecologist and into a writer, which Braz calls his "dual conversion". His children's book *Sajo and the beaver people* (1935) take his back to the two beaver kittens that had changed his life, is also pervaded with undisguised autobiographical traits. And in *Tales of an empty cabin* (1936) and its literary essay, *The mission of Hiawatha*, full of praise for Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* and its allegorical qualities, similar to his own, Grey Owl takes the opportunity to stress his "modern Hiawatha" appeal.

Chapter four moves on to "the idea of Indian transparency"

and Grey Owl's relationship to his most influential wife, Anahareo, who wrote about it in *My life with Grey Owl* (1940) and *Devil in deerskin: my life with Grey Owl* (1972), where it is revealed she considered him her hero and she was aware he was not an Indian, for "an Indian can tell", but she considered him one for his respect and understanding of Indian culture.

Chapter five looks into the posthumous image of Grey Owl, despite some praise and eventual tribute, was deeply affected by the revelation that he was not Indian, not even a mixed breed, as he sometimes identifies himself. The concluding chapter goes back to the proposed thesis for the book, "Grey Owl as a Caucasian apostate", which opens with a quote from Fernando Pessoa: "If people get tired/Of being in the same place,/Why shouldn't

they tire/ Of having the same self?” (BRAZ, p. 163). As a Portuguese descendent, Braz recognizes Grey Owl’s real heteronymous selves, not only in his writing but in his life as well. The problems with Belaney’s choice of alternate self was to deliberately transforming himself into a member of a culture and a lifestyle considered inferior to the European. Braz demonstrates how, regrettably, the racial and cultural identity issue leads critics miss the

relevance of Grey Owl’s writing for Canadian cultural and literary history. The book also comes with a bonus of 10 plates with beautiful black and white photos of Grey Owl, who also showed a keen interest in photography and documentary film.

Note

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