

The Curve of Time

Melanie Cove is a wonderfully protected small inlet, embedded in the wilderness just south of Desolation Sound. It is about 500 m long by 150 m wide, 4 to 8 m deep, and the bottom is 'sticky mud', as the cruising guide puts it. Sticky mud is a good thing, because it means that an anchor is not likely to drag. The entrance, to the east, is sheltered by Eveleigh Island, and one gets there from the north by navigating a serpentine channel between Eveleigh, Scobell and the William Islands, watching the chart very carefully. There is no road access, and nothing to see but treed slopes rising on all sides. We have been there in sunshine and in rain. Last month we were there with the mist curling on the slopes and storm clouds racing by overhead. In summertime, the waters are warm and comfortable to swim in. It is as perfect a place to shelter as one can imagine.

Muriel Wylie Blanchett writes of Melanie Cove in her memoir, *The Curve of Time*. When she knew it, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Cove was occupied by a homesteader, 'Mike Shuttler', who had been fending for himself for 30 years in a log cabin he'd built there. He planted apple trees, hand-logged timber for cash, and read philosophy to occupy his days. He had a neighbour, Phil Lavigne, who lived a similar though less intellectual existence off neighbouring Laura Cove. Today, these lands and waters are part of Desolation Sound Marine Park and all that remains of Mike and Phil and their works is a trail between Melanie Cove and Laura Cove.

Ms Blanchett writes of her first encounter with Mike:

He wouldn't come aboard, but he asked us to come ashore after supper and pick some apples; there were lots of windfalls. We could move the boat farther into the cove, but not beyond the green copper stain on the cliff. Later, I tossed a couple of magazines in the dinghy when we rowed towards where we had seen him disappear. We identified the copper stain for future use, rounded a small sheltering island, and there, almost out of sight up the bank, stood a little cabin – covered with honeysuckle and surrounded by flowers and apple trees. We walked with him along the paths, underneath the overhanging apple-branches. ...

Except for down at the far end, where the little trellis-covered bridge dripped with grapes, the land all sloped steeply from the sea and up the hillside to the forest. Near the cabin he had terraced it all – stone-walled, and flower-bordered. Old-fashioned flowers – mignonette and sweet Williams, bleeding-hearts and bachelor's buttons. ...

He had made one terrace behind the house first – piled stones, carted seaweed and earth until he had enough soil

for the first trees. From there, everything had just gradually grown. Down at the far end, where terraces were not necessary, the trees marched up the hillside in rows to where the eight-foot sapling fence surrounded the whole place. “The deer jump anything lower,” said Mike, when I commented on the amount of time and work it must have undertaken. Then he added, “Time doesn’t mean anything to me. I just work along with nature, and in time it is finished.”

The green stain and the little island are still there. The cabin, apple trees, flowers, grapes and little trellised bridge are gone. Nature worked with Mike while he lived, and afterwards it gently erased what they had made together.

Ms Blanchett, whom everyone knew as ‘Cap’, is gone too, as is much of the world and all of the people she describes in *The Curve of Time*. It was a long time ago, except that it wasn’t really. She was just slightly older than my grandparents, whom I knew well, and she lived an unexpectedly adventurous life. She was widowed in her early 30s with five children, when her husband went out on their boat, the *Caprice*, and never came back. The boat was recovered, floating free with no one aboard. Though she doesn’t say – she tells us a great deal about parts of her life and nothing at all about the rest – she must have been left with enough money to raise the family in comfort, if not in style. Though one gathers she made her own style. She tells us just enough about her loss to let us know that it was real and profound. One might have thought that she would turn her back on the *Caprice* as a symbol of what was lost. Instead, she built a life for herself and her children aboard it, spending all of their summers roaming the challenging and sometimes treacherous waters off the southern and central coasts of British Columbia. Winters were spent on a forested property on southern Vancouver Island, where she home-schooled her children.

The *Caprice* was built of cedar, 25 feet long and only 6 and a half feet wide, a motor yacht with a diesel engine. She writes:

At times we longed for a larger boat; for each summer, as the children grew bigger, the boat seemed to grow smaller, and it became a problem how to fit everyone in.

There were not only the six of them, but sometimes a dog as well and she writes that ‘everything had to have its exact place, or no one could move’. Having spent time on a larger boat with fewer people, I can only imagine. But she maintains:

We were very comfortable in the daytime with everything stowed away. The cockpit was covered, and had heavy canvas curtains that fastened down or could be rolled up. There was a folding table whose legs jammed tightly between the two bunks to steady it. And it was camping – not cruising. We washed our dishes (one plate, one mug

each) over the side of the boat; there was a little rope ladder that could be hung over the stern, and we used that when we went swimming.

We may have grumbled about the accommodation; not about the boat itself. Lightly built (half-inch cedar) and well designed, she never hesitated to attempt anything we wanted her to try. She was uncomfortable in much of a beam sea, so for all our sakes we humoured her by working crab-fashion along the coast, first one way and then the other. But it was a following sea that she loved best; and after a long, tiring day it was never by her wish that we would give up and slip in to the sudden calm of a sheltered anchorage, where she had to lie, all quiet, and only gently stirring ...

Initially published in 1961 by an English publisher and never well promoted, *The Curve of Time* became known by word of mouth among those who still, tentatively or obsessively, explore these waters today. It is not so much the descriptions as Cap Blanchett's voice that attracts. She offers a vivid account of episodes from an extraordinary life. As with all good literature, she preserves and brings home to us things that would otherwise be lost or unknown. She writes of gales and difficult nights at anchor, engine troubles, medical emergencies, orcas, and fishermen. She describes climbing a mountain with her children and getting lost in the fog at the top. She tells of abandoned native villages, disappearing back into the rainforest. Hers is a world both familiar and distant. No radio, no cell service and no GPS, hardly another person or boat in sight for days or weeks, but all recognizable, just ... different. We are left with the sense that we have lost as much as we have gained.

She tells of taking refuge from a gale in a little cove of an island called Mistaken Island, realizing that the cove might dry up at low tide, and staying up the night, wrapped in a sleeping bag, getting up and gradually edging her boat closer and closer to the edge of the roaring wind and waves as the calm water ebbed under her keel. She writes, 'Just how long can one night be?' She remembers a story she's read by Dunsany, of a western traveller watching his eastern companions all fall on their knees to pray to their various gods, and she thinks:

I think this idea of having special gods for special things was very sound. Some religions have special saints who, I expect, look after the practical end of things. Tonight, for instance, I feel the need of a specialized deity – one experienced in nautical matters. The west coast Indians had various gods they prayed to for certain things. Ha-we-im, for good hunting; Kwayetsim, to cure the sick – much used by the medicine men. And in bad or dangerous weather at sea they prayed to a Queen Hakoom, who lived above or beyond the seas. They would shout to her, asking

her to cause the waves to calm down. They probably still shout to her in times of stress ... like tonight. I don't think I would care to intrude – much less shout, if that is necessary. But a small prayer to that very old God – the one that hasn't been prayed to for a long time – no one could object to that. This old God must miss the prayers he no longer gets – and might be glad to lend a hand. I feel a gentle but definite jar through the boat. I do not need to be told what it is – “Old God, get busy!”

She pushes with a pole and oozes the boat off the mud and a few feet closer to the storm waters. and falls back into a fitful sleep. When she next wakes up, the tide is rising again and the storm has died. She decides ‘That old god must have been out of practice – or perhaps, very wise.’

Anyone who has kept an anchor watch in uncertain conditions will recognize this story, and some of us are not yet so modern as to be beyond calling on the help of an old god in such circumstances. Magical thinking still has its place.

Yet the old gods are mostly gone (with apologies to my neoPagan friends) – that is a part of the point of the story – and Cap Blanchett's world is fading. How are we to deal with this? How bends the curve of time?

Ancient Persian and Jewish folktales share a story of a king who asked an assembly of sages to create a ring that would make him happy when he was sad. They did so, but the ring had the unexpected and unfortunate side-effect that it made him sad when he was happy. It was a simple gold band inscribed with the words, ‘This too shall pass’. Both our sorrows and our joys are bitter-sweet.

Though I had not yet come across the folktale, I became acquainted with the aphorism in my late teens and it struck me then as a profound truth. This day, this life, this church, this city, this planet, the very sun and the stars above us in the sky, all shall pass away: the cloud capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself, yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve ... leaving not a rack behind.¹

Less poetically, scientists and engineers tell us that the ‘this too shall pass’ is a fundamental property of the physical world, summarized in the four laws of thermodynamics. They are numbered, confusingly, from zero to three, and the language is cumbersome, but they claim the authority of scientific Truth (with a capital T).

The zeroeth law states: If two thermodynamic systems are each in thermal equilibrium with a third, then they are in thermal equilibrium with each other.

The first law states: Energy can neither be created nor destroyed. It can only change forms.

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 4, Scene 1

The second law states: The entropy of an isolated system not in equilibrium will tend to increase over time, approaching a maximum value at equilibrium.

The third law states: As temperature approaches absolute zero, the entropy of a system approaches a constant minimum.

Or, as C.P Snow put them in terms we can all understand: ‘you can’t win, you can’t break even, and you can’t quit the game’. Or, even more simply, things wear out and there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Here on earth, we live with apparent counter-examples. We see that living things grow and become more complicated over time. What makes this possible – what makes all life on earth possible – is that the earth is not an isolated system, but receives a constant bath of radiant energy from the sun. When the sun wears down, say 4 or 5 billion years from now, all life on earth will die. In this bleak and uncompromising vision, the curve of time bends towards death and eternal darkness for the entire universe.

I’ve described ‘this too shall pass’ as a profound truth. The physicist, Niels Bohr, said:

There are trivial truths and the great truths. The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true.

Is ‘this too shall pass’ a great truth?

So far as I am able to understand it, theoretical physics indulges in a great deal of arm-waving at this point. Notwithstanding the force and relative simplicity of the laws of thermodynamics, it is hard to speak definitively of the end of the universe when we are not entirely clear on what got it started in the first place. Our most fundamental theories – general relativity and the standard model of particle physics – contradict one another and each fails to account for observed phenomena. So there may well be a way in which the laws of thermodynamics are untrue or, more precisely, incomplete.

But the fate of the universe is not really the point, anyway. We don’t live our lives on the scale of stellar time, or even geological time. We live in human time. We view decades as significant, we build most large objects to last less than a century, and we collectively struggle with phenomena such as climate change, which reveal themselves more slowly than we can individually perceive. And for most of us, the truth of ‘this too shall pass’ is a truth about the meaning we assign to our lives and the world around us. We are in the realm of literature, poetry and allegory as much as that of factual analysis. We are in the realm of religion.

I grew up in the Anglican Church. In every service, we recited the Creed, which includes these words, taken from the 1959 Book of Common Prayer I was given by my godmother on my communion in 1972:

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, and the Life of the world to come.

While it seems to me that I believed these things at one time, I no longer do. I am an Anglican apostate. By the time of my maternal grandfather's funeral, I had joined this church and I listened to his funeral service with discontent. Following the exact words of the service in the Book of Common Prayer, we were told that he would have resurrection and life eternal, and I did not think so. Almost nothing was said about my grandfather, a gentle man who graduated from UNB with a forestry degree and ended his career as New Brunswick's Chief Forester, who possessed a deep curiosity about the weather, his garden and all natural things that he retained until the very end of his life. I thought about the memorial services I have attended in this sanctuary, featuring music and words from people who loved and remembered the deceased, and I wished I'd had an equivalent opportunity to say goodbye to my grandfather. With the sense of having crossed a threshold I had not known was there, I thought that we do these things better.

Ours is a religion with optimistic roots. Universalism began with the belief that all shall be saved. No one goes to hell, and all can go to heaven. In more recent times, the focus has shifted from heaven to other eternal verities. In the mid-19th century, Unitarian preacher and theologian Theodore Parker first expressed the view that the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice. It is a view that continues to be expressed from this pulpit from time to time. It sounds odd now, but in the late 19th century James Freeman Clark famously stipulated as a touchstone of Unitarian belief, 'the progress of mankind onward and upward forever'. Some of our hymns still assert that such progress is possible. The social justice traditions of this faith remain grounded in a belief that society can be made better and fairer.

A sanguine belief in progress has not worn well as we make our way into the 21st century. This is despite many improvements in our circumstances and our abilities. The things that I learned to worry about as I came to know the world were nuclear annihilation, the cold war becoming a third world war, the 'population bomb', race riots and the breakdown of civil society in the United States, armed insurrection by the FLQ in my hometown of Montreal, and the poisoning of birds documented by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*. In many ways, the world is a better place now than it was then. And yet, we seem to have become pessimists. We worry about climate change and environmental degradation, economic instability and the price of housing, war in the Middle East and elsewhere, violence everywhere, racial and religious intolerance and the American political process. Those are my top-of-mind worries and I'm sure that you can add to the list. Perhaps our contemporary pessimism is no more justified than the complacent optimism that preceded it. The truth of the matter may be that the world is neither progressing nor regressing. It is only changing and change is always both longed for and difficult to bear.

The art of British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy comes to mind. It's not entirely easy to describe. Goldsworthy works with natural objects, such as rocks, leaves, mud and ice. He makes beautiful, fragile, ephemeral things with them, and then he photographs them.

The photographs play with the viewer's perceptions. Sometimes they seem impossible, and then a few lines of text explain how it was done: 'wrapping poppy petals around a granite boulder',² or, describing a yellow line extending to the end of a long horizontal branch of a beech tree in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, 'waited for the dandelions to open/collected quickly/made a line along the branch/before they wilted/sunny/May 1994'.³ For the cover of the order of service, we have an ice arch made in Cumbria over 2 days in December of 1982. Goldworthy's documentation states:⁴

Ice arch
left to freeze overnight
before supporting pile of stones removed
(made in a field of cows – tense wait)
pissed on stone too frozen to come out
fourth attempt successful
other three arches collapsed or melted

His diary notes 'Visible from long distance – attracted someone from long way – good to show it. Went back later to draw it – arrived just in time to see a very old man knock it down with a gun – sad.'

Transient is not a synonym for 'unimportant'. Goldworthy helps us see things properly, how beauty can exist for an afternoon, or a moment, or the blink of an eye, how it may matter not despite but because of its impermanence. The same is true of our lives. They are precious, they are meaningful, because this too shall pass, though the passage will be difficult to endure.

How bends the curve of time? Towards justice, if we strive for justice. Amartya Sen reassures us that we can aspire towards greater justice without believing in perfect justice.⁵ Not forever, but until our time here is done. What we achieve, fallibly, in this imperfect world, is all the more precious for its impermanence.

It is a curve, neither a straight-forward arrow nor a circle. What is past will not come again, and there are no guarantees that we will get to where we would like to go. Which is why it is important to read Cap Blanchett and reimagine her world once more. She shows us things that should not yet be forgotten, just as Andy Goldworthy shows us things that should not go unnoticed. We cannot remember and notice everything, but we can try to remember and notice some things. We can choose where to focus our attention. And our little life is rounded with a sleep.

Geoffrey Gomery
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² *Hand to Earth?: Andy Goldworthy Sculpture 1976-1990* (1990, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), p 76.

³ Andy Goldworthy, *Wood* (1996: Harry N Abrams, Inc.), pp 104-105.

⁴ Downloaded from http://www.goldworthy.cc.gla.ac.uk/image/?id=ag_02391 (15 August 2016)

⁵ *The Idea of Justice* (2009: Harvard University Press).

