Toward an Original Forestry

*by rolf struthers**

A Moment (A Release).

On a day in early spring, I was sitting on a small hummock eating lunch, enjoying the warmth of the spring sun and relieving my legs after a good, long walk in the Woods when it happened. It takes a while, it never happens right away but sometimes, after hours of walking, thinking, and feeling my way along the paths of the Woods, it can happen. The wall drops and conversation begins. I breathe in fresh spring air and I feel my blood go rushing through me in a flood of exhilaration. "LIVE, BREATHE, AWAKEN" the Woods say, "Let us begin again." The ground, the smell of fresh rotting leaves, the sound of the trickling water, the hum of the first bumblebee in the nearby leaves, the unhurried wariness of the wolf spider hunting in the leaf mold, the up-shooting lush green of the trilliums and other wood spring flowers--all these things create a rhythm. I feel the rhythm coursing through me; I feel like I too am being renewed. I leap up and caper around briefly, then stop.

And the moment is gone.

But it is not completely gone. Many times now I have re-called that moment, and I am there. I and the Woods are speaking, the Woods saying LIFE and I exclaiming yes! here, life dig, root, push, lift, spread! The rhythm of spring echoes in my ears and fills my nose with its vibrant odour.

This literary passage takes us along a way toward an *origin*al forestry. When we say "original," we mean a forestry that re*turns* to its *origins* and then *turns* out into its own pathway. In this essay I try to speak with language that reminds us of the textuality of the text, breaking up words or bringing words together to remind us of their contextual origins and their origins-in-the-world, that is, the origins of language in nature and our shared experience.

This venture begins on woodpaths in the Backus Woods, an old-growth Carolinian forest in Southern Ontario. It has recently been the centre of an environmental controversy, which resulted in the Woods becoming an "Area of Natural and Scientific Interest."[1]

The Backus Woods' existence is intertwined with the forces of Western history, that is, with the questions of modern forestry management and the questions of modern Western conservation and thus Western environmental thought.

The Woods is now dependent upon the sway of modern Western technology and representational thinking. The sway of modern Western technology is an expression, translated from the thought of Martin Heidegger, which describes an underlying force within modern Western forestry and indeed all facets of modern Western life.[2] This paper intends to openly think[3] on the way in which representational thinking and the drive of modern technology entraps modern Western forestry and forest conservation into devastating and disruptive relationships with forests. To think openly on the matter of an original forestry asks us to step back from our assumptions concerning modern forestry and modern forest conservation and think openly on the matter at hand--forestry. In venturing into this confrontation I have relied on the helpful work of Martin Heidegger, particularily the texts: **What is Called Thinking?**[4] and **The Question Concerning Technology**.[5]

Let us get underway by meditating on this passage from Martin Heidegger.

> The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines.[6]

Habitually we think the forester is bidden by the forest industry to "improve" natural deciduous woodlands with forest management techniques. The lumber industry is bidden by the profit-motive to make an ever greater profit from the sale of forest timber; thus it puts ever-increasing pressure on forest lands to produce timber more quickly. It is commanded by the drive for ever-increasing profits.

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Lumber companies and pulp and paper companies, small or large, are no longer secure as long as they are profitable in comparison to the average profits made in the forest industry. Profit-making is measured internationally by the ability of investors to make profits in any particular industry. Thus, if gold mining is more profitable than lumber, then investors will invest in gold mining. Those that invest in the forest industry expect the same rate of return as if they had invested in gold mining and so drive the forest industry to increase its profitability in order to secure and increase the investments of its investors. This profit-making itself should not be understood, however, to be controlled by investors. Investors are themselves driven by profit-making to invest in the most profitable industry. If they do not invest in the most profitable industries, then they will be overtaken by those who do invest in the most profitable industries. Investors can only store their profits in the most profit-making industries to remain themselves profit-makers. Thus, investors are made subordinate by the drive of profit-making in the forest industry as in every industrial investment possibility which is itself subordinate to global industrial investment possibilities.

In the same way, profit-making in the lumber industry makes the forester "subordinate to the orderability of cellulose." That is, the forester finds that the most productive and efficient means of producing wood fibre, whether for lumber or pulp and paper, are silvicultural techniques that are themselves the embodiment of our modern ecological and representational understanding of the forest. Let us turn to the forester's ecological and representational way of thinking of the forest.[7]

As we walk south along the centre path in the Woods we encounter stands of red pine and mixed stands of red and white pine. These plantation stands embody the challenging drive of profit-making in the forest. Red pine and white pine are valuable tree species useful to humans. They are planted in rows, thinned and pruned. In this way the forester orders the forest and commands the forest, *challenging forth* the lumber or pulp chips he needs to supply the forest industry's sawmills and pulp and paper mills. Often the forester cannot wait for the trees to grow naturally, so fertilizers[8] are applied to challenge the trees to even greater growth and to compensate for soils that have been exhausted by previous silvicultural or agricultural stress. As well the forester cannot allow undesirable tree and shrub species to slow the growth of those trees he has under his command, so he applies herbicides[9] to destroy these "competitors." The forester also cannot allow the death of his profit-making trees through disease so he applies fungicides[10] to destroy viruses and fungal tree diseases. He cannot afford the loss of crop trees through insect infestations and depredations so he applies insecticides.[11] In this way, the forester commands the forest to supply trees for the forest industry. The red and white pines before us are the embodiment of "the orderability of cellulose" to which the forester is made subordinate, whether he knows it or not. In this way forests are being set by the forester into what Heidegger calls a "standing reserve."

Thus, even as a forest preserve, Backus Woods is part of the carved up mosaic for modern forestry of lands that are in one way or another standing reserve. Though most of these lands are not on reserve for the forest industry, every piece of land is categorized in terms of its possible usefulness or use-less-ness to the forest industry: its current reserve status or its ability to be put on reserve (its capability in terms of soils, drainage and physical features to support valuable forest species).

This challenging forth is not limited to the forester. In the same way, the scientist, environmental educator and naturalist fall into the trap of approaching the forest as "objects of research," (i.e. representations: names, diagrams, collections, vegetational inventories, etc.) or as "a living tree museum."[12] These are the records of the standing reserve. In order to ascertain the presence of an object, the researcher does not need to actually find the object in the forest but only make an observation of it in the inventory (the list of the standing reserve). We no longer need to actually visit the Woods to ascertain what is in it, we can consult an inventory. Thus we believe, in some sense that the inventory--the abstract collection of objects in the forest--is more desirable and useful than a visit to the Woods with all the variable and incidental inaccuracies that may arise from such a visit. The scientist is commanded by his science to yield up objective knowledge of the forest, while the forest is challenged by scientists seeking the forest's objective knowledge. The conservationist is commanded by the representational science of conservation to yield up scientific proof that the forest is a rare and representative Carolinian forest, while the forest is challenged to yield up rare and representative fauna and flora (plants and animals). The proof of the importance of scientific conservation is revealed in the Backus controversy where scientific conservationists arguing on the basis of the need for scientific research in old-growth forests and the rare collections of species and species communities played an important role in conservationists' arguments for the preservation of the Woods.

This is the danger, the Danger, that accompanies us on our walk, in our venture, but

which we are only now able to articulate in a way that we can begin to attend to. The Danger is the grasping, driving, challenging forth of the forest to yield up its gifts: lumber, pulp, firewood, shade, nuts, fruits, syrup, resins and sap, medicaments, scientific knowledge, rare species, conservation challenges and sacred groves. The Danger to the essence of the Woods is that we will only think of the Woods as a list, an inventory, or a tree museum.

The Danger stems from what we have called representational thinking. This thinking is driven by what we might call the drive of the modern technology of the West; we must not however, mistake this technology for something technological, for it itself is not a tool or machine or technique. The interwoven links between the Danger, representational thinking and Western technology are revealed not just by the Woods itself but also by the old Backhouse waterwheels and the new Backus Heritage Conservation Area "Nature Trail" pathway.

The Backhouse waterwheel sits at the end of the flume that brings water from the dammed pond into which the Dedrich Creek flows. It is presently a wooden, overshot wheel similar to the one John Backhouse originally used. The mill, before it was bought by the Long Point Region Conservation Authority (LPRCA), had a turbine at the bottom of a ten foot well.[13] The mill also had, at that time, a natural gas engine which could be hooked up to the main drive shaft of the mill, and the water wheel disengaged, if the water level was too low. The dam places the water of the Creek "on call" and ready for use. The natural gas engine is similarly on call as is the mill itself: its belts and buckets, grinders, baggers, rollers, sifters and the grains stored in bins, ready to be ground and sold as animal feed, flour for baking, oats for cooking, etc.

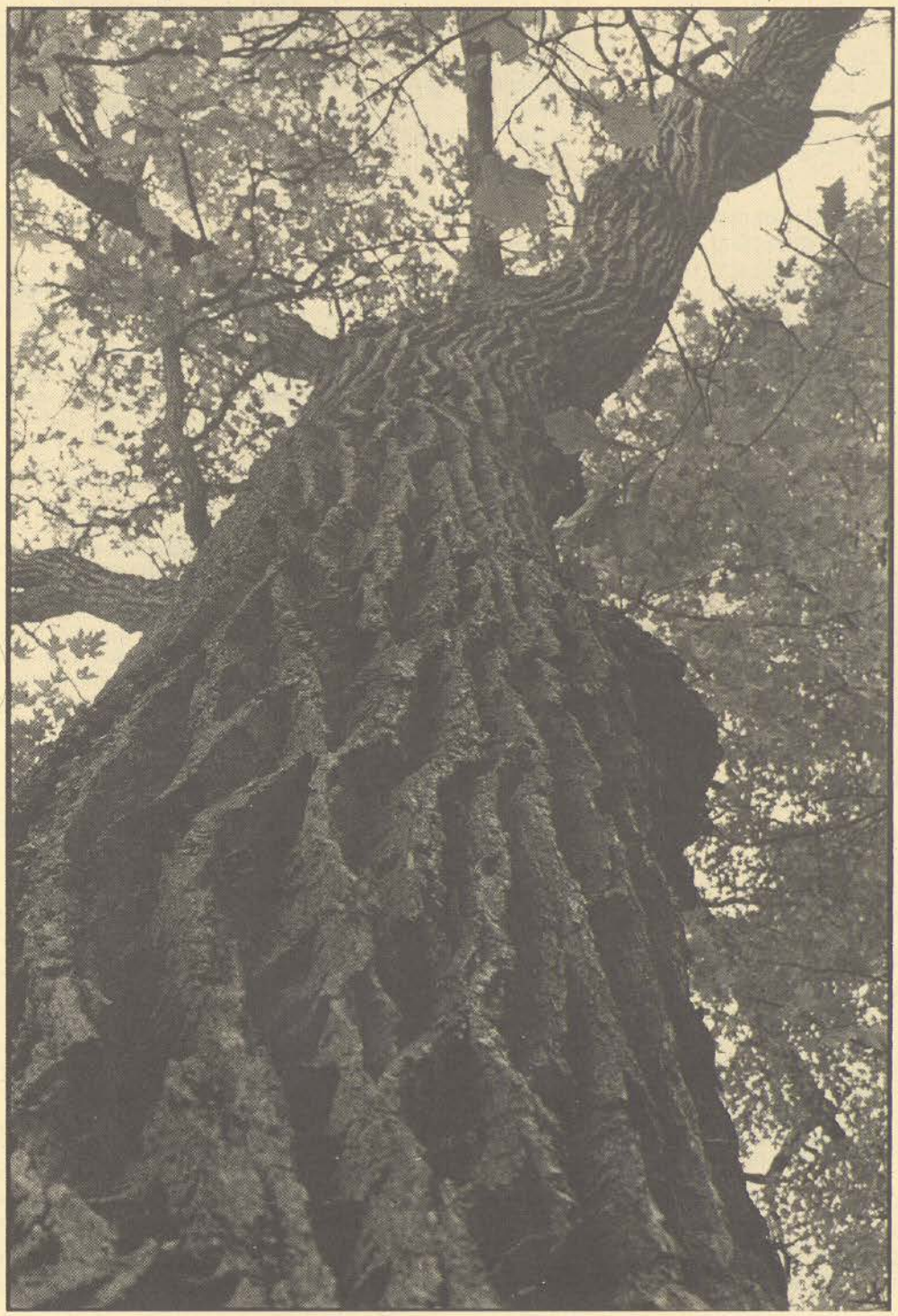
Thus the dammed water of the Creek and all the materials and machinery of the mill are placed on reserve, in other words, on call for the making of grain products. However in order for the Creek to be dammed up there first must be *the thinking that thinks* of the water as an object that can be stored up in readiness for the use of a grist mill. This thinking would also see the forest as "ready-to-hand;"[14] objects ready to be sawn into timber for export to Great Britain and the eastern United States and to build the sawmill, gristmill, local housing, harbour facilities, canal systems and fortifications. This thinking would also see the forest as a supply of nuts, sap, etc. The technology involved in thinking of the water mill is a way of thinking that does not as yet show itself fully. According to our modern way of thinking the mill is now inefficient. The mill dam is insufficient; it cannot always guarantee "peak" production--in fact, it cannot guarantee any production at all. When the water is low in the Creek, sufficient power to drive the mill is unavailable. We could say the dam does not gather the water together in a way that successfully challenges the Creek to be orderly and supply the Backhouse mill continuously.

It is because the Backus grist mill, waterwheel and dam cannot produce at all times, that the mill has passed out of use and become a curiosity piece. It is a thing that still stands for tourists to poke through, though its thingliness[15] is ended. The mill is now a piece of Ontario's heritage: "a resource of antiquity." Thus it has been successfully put into the standing reserve of this age as a part of the Backus Heritage Conservation Area. The mill has therefore become part of the standing reserve but not as the thing that it was but as a thing which has had a new determination of its thingliness attached to it as Ontario's heritage.

The Backus mill, homestead and former woodlands (now the Backus Conservation Area and The Backus Woods, respectively), are joined into the larger history of Upper Canada. As well, the mill and homestead were constructed because of the historical movement that has placed the Woods into the context of Western history.[16]

Backus Woods lies in the path of Western history as is shown by recent improvements to the "Nature Trail" in the Backus Heritage Conservation Area. This nature trail was widened and flattened last summer. It appears the LPRCA used a bulldozer. A bulldozer is a good symbol of the progress of the technology of the West. This particular bulldozer gouged out a broad, flat pathway from the mill pond up to the third concession. What was a small footpath that made its way along the banks of the Dedrich Creek up to the third concession and over along the Dedrich floodplain path, is now a large muddy walkway wide enough for trucks. The bulldozer tore up and smashed the roots of trees along the high side of the path leaving a scar of broken roots and exposing the sub-soil which is now eroding into the pathway. It pushed the soil it had torn up from the high side, down onto the lower creekside covering up the trunks of trees. Two magnificent white ashes, their trunks now a foot deep in subsoil, stretch their arms out over the Creek. A sign beside them identifies them as white ash--*Fraxinus americana*. Will the ashes survive? Trees react very poorly to such changes. It is likely that the bulldozer broke or damaged many of the twin ashes' roots. Thus weakened, the ashes may experience root rot and other root diseases. However, it is because their trunks have been buried that the twin ashes

probably will not survive. Many trees are very resilient to change and some trees are unaffected by fluctuating soil levels (for example floodplain tree species). However most tree species will die if their trunks are covered with soil forty centimetres or more from the base of the trunk. Other trees have died and may die from the work of the bulldozer. This summer, while walking along this path by the Creek, I noticed that three trees (which had previously fallen into the Creek because their principal roots were cut by the bulldozer blade) have now been sawn up and their trunks removed. The pathway is now broad and even, making it easily accessible. But the cost of this easy access is the life of trees, ironically, in a conservation area.



Should we be surprised to see that, in a conservation area, the improvements to a nature trail actually harm those beings they are trying to conserve? It is the over-arching and over-whelming drive of the modern age to use a bulldozer to "improve" the nature trail. The path the bulldozer makes is the kind of path we most often find ourselves walking on in this age--a path that is gouged out, paved over and marked off with signs everywhere: turn right, turn left, bathrooms this way, three kilometres to go, no motorbikes allowed, etc. The most obvious of these, such as the now bulldozed, widened and flattened path, display our representational distance from trees and therefore break their roots and cover up their trunks without care and without understanding. The bulldozed path shows up the way we think in this age in the way it flattens out and controls everything in its path before it may happen. We seek to prevent the kind of interference a natural path might cause. And we seek to prevent it from reminding us that it is a natural path through the Wood that bends our way and that bends to our walking way. We can see good examples of these two ways at work in animal paths that make their way through the Woods. The bulldozer path seeks to control the way the path moves through the forest: it maintains the path by moving dirt into areas where the Creek threatens to pull the path down and it controls obstructions by cutting trees and branches out of the way and removing uncertain inclines and downward