

Kevin Van Tighem, *Our Place: Changing The Nature Of Alberta*, (Victoria: Rocky Mountain Books, 2017)

Reviewed by Heinz Unger

A Collection of Feelings and Passion and Some Hope

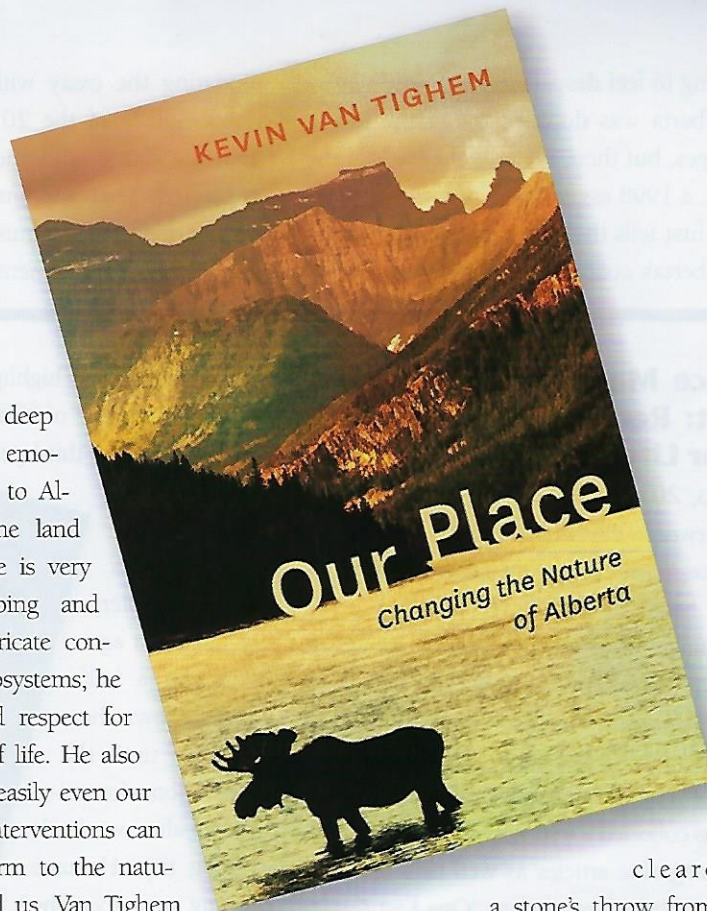
Readers of Van Tighem's regular column in *Alberta Views* will appreciate finding a large collection of his essays on nature, written over a period of about 30 years in one book. And AWA members and friends will feel pride reading several stories about AWA's determined – but not always successful – efforts to protect caribou or westslope cutthroat trout habitat, and oppose the construction of new dams. Not surprisingly, our own Vivian Pharis, Cliff Wallis, and Cheryl Bradley come through as heroes in these struggles. One feels frustrated that, despite all these efforts and the knowledge available even years ago, we're still facing the same, or worse, threats to some of Alberta's species, habitats and ecosystems. In the 1991 story *Grey Ghosts* Van Tighem quotes a prediction made in the *Wild Lands Advocate* that "Woodland Caribou may be extinct in Alberta within the lifetime of our children" and then goes on to describe how government and industry ignored the importance of protecting old growth forest as main caribou habitat. We all know that woodland caribou in Alberta are closer to that fate now than they were a generation ago.

Reading Van Tighem's beautiful, deeply felt descriptions of nature, whether in a forest, the prairie, along a stream or a wetland, or in the high mountains, one is left wondering how to develop and foster such deep knowledge, feeling and passion for all things natural in a child. How can we re-create his enthusiasm for nature developed, as it is, from a deep knowledge of natural systems and processes. Does it take a father, grandfather, uncle or friend to take a child out into the wild and show her the beauty of the living world around us the way Van Tighem experienced it as he grew up? Or, should we try to teach this love and reverence in the kindergarten and schools?

Van Tighem's deep feelings about and emotional connections to Alberta transform the land into his home. He is very skilled at describing and explaining the intricate connections in the ecosystems; he generates awe and respect for the complexities of life. He also warns about how easily even our well-intentioned interventions can do irreversible harm to the natural systems around us. Van Tighem gives some striking examples of this: the usefulness of dead leaves in rivers; the importance of flood flows for growing new poplars in the riparian fringes of the prairie rivers; how beavers are a natural alternative to dams for regulating flows and mitigating floods and droughts; and how forests clearly benefit much more from the mountain pine beetle than from industrial logging. Sadly, we often fail to see the connection between our behaviour and its effects.

Like many of his generation, Van Tighem praises the good management (for water resources) of the federal Eastern Rockies Forest Conservation Board between 1947 and 1971, and he recalls the old pioneer and stewardship values of the Stelfox and Cartwright families. In his earlier optimism, he could imagine how an intertwined natural and cultural history could have evolved towards a truly sustaining native culture. As an avid hunter and angler, the author tells how he pursues these activities with a strong sense of ethics, and how predator and prey are integral parts of the ecosystem.

A 2015 Facebook post about logging in the Ghost watershed touched me deeply. This impact wasn't just a result of talking about



new clearcuts a stone's throw from my own backyard. It came more from Van Tighem's skill in appealing to the emotional memories we have as we find ourselves "growing up orphaned from Nature." In his more recent writings such as *Santa's Pickup* (2014) Van Tighem's passion is supplemented by sarcasm, tinged with humour. What can we do we're asking, when facing *Terra Incognita* (2016), the author's most recent essay showing how we're changing the ecosystems around us without knowing where we're heading.

I would have liked to see illustrations of some kind or photographs – such as his son Brian's lovely photography that was included in the book *Heart Waters*. It might have made the messages conveyed in his excellent writing even more powerful. But, perhaps the author wants us to use our own imagination to see the places he describes, or better still, go out and experience them for ourselves.

If a man of Van Tighem's vision, knowledge, and passion cannot help to change policies and attitudes in Alberta, one wonders who or what could save this province from its mad drive to develop, exploit, cut down, tear up and destroy nature. I was

starting to feel despair that the wild nature of Alberta was doomed by all the recent changes, but then, towards the back of the book, a 1998 essay on *The Once and Future Wild* first tells the inspiring stories of some of Alberta's conservation heroes and then,

updating the essay with a footnote, Van Tighem tells of the 2015 announcement that the Castle wilderness would be fully protected. That announcement filled him with a renewed optimism that a growing conservation movement, by working to-

gether with government and industry, "can restore the wild to our native land." While we wait to see if that optimism is justified it's definitely worthwhile to make this trip with Kevin Van Tighem through Alberta's nature over recent time.

Bruce Masterman, One Last Cast: Reflections of an Outdoor Life, (Victoria: Rocky Mountain Books, 2017)

Reviewed by Chris Saunders

Bruce Masterman is an experienced journalist based in High River who writes on what might be called outdoor pursuits. Many readers will be familiar with his 21 years of work as a reporter and columnist at the *Calgary Herald*. He has also written many articles for magazines, notably *Outdoor Canada*. He has collected a selection of his newspaper and magazine articles as well as a number of unpublished essays into "One Last Cast." The collection offers readers Masterman's personal reflections on his lifelong experiences in the outdoors with particular focus on hunting, fishing, and observing nature.

The personal nature of the writing is the greatest strength of the book. It is why Masterman is so ardent in his pursuit of the outdoors and what he does to feed that passion. Several of the pieces include his family which adds to their interest. One particularly touching essay describes the author at 17 years of age, confused and angry at the world over his mother's prolonged death from cancer two years earlier. He knew he had to get away from his home and family. His response was to get a summer job, followed by a winter job two years later, at a remote rustic fishing lodge in northern Manitoba. Here, in return for many camp chores, he could experience living in true wilderness and was able to fish as much as he liked during the hours when he was not working. The beautifully spare description of this experience is spliced into Masterman's account of taking his 16-year old younger daughter back to the same fishing lodge 31 years later. Masterman is clearly grateful for that early experience and cites its importance in giving focus to his life.

For me, another highlight is an essay given the lovely title of "One Last Cast." It describes, in the third person, how the author introduced his elder daughter to fishing at age two and a half and follows her progress until she leaves home for university after one final fishing trip. He uses fishing as a metaphor for expressing the feelings of a parent watching his child grow into adulthood.

"A few years ago the father noticed his daughter was changing. A little girl no more, she started fishing apart from him, politely but firmly declining advice about fly selection, where to cast and just about everything else.

This sense of independence grew stronger in everything she did. A confident self-motivated young woman had emerged, seemingly overnight.

When darkness finally chased her off the river the night of that final outing, she insisted on driving her father home, the first time ever after a fishing trip. Silently, he wrestled with feelings of sadness, joy and pride."

There are several pieces devoted to Masterman's experiences in hunting. Without any affinity with or experience of hunting I found these stories particularly interesting. His detailed descriptions of what goes on in a hunt and the feelings of the hunter ring evocatively true to the uninitiated. He makes clear that

his hunting trips are physically very hard work and his account of the moral issues associated with wounding but not killing an animal show there is nothing easy about hunting for hunters with a conscience.

One Last Cast is a delightful book for those who like reading about wilderness and outdoor pursuits. It is very well written and compares very well with many other more famous titles on this subject from the past. I think you'll find it to be a very enjoyable read for the upcoming winter. It is also a reminder of the days when newspapers had columnists writing about the outdoors on a regular basis. Sadly, those days seem now to be gone.

