Seth's Ironic Identities: Forging Canadian History

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166 With distinctive brushwork that evokes a bygone era of pop culture, and stories that are by turns funny and elegiac, Seth has established himself as one of Canada's foremost cartoonists, though the identifiably Canadian aspects of his work rarely disclose themselves in a straightforward manner. Seth's first book, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996), chronicles his search for an obscure Canadian gag cartoonist, John "Kalo" Kalloway, whose work appeared sporadically in magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The book also contains extended first-person ruminations from Seth, and depictions of his day-to-day life in Toronto, including his friendship with fellow cartoonist Chester Brown. However, this ostensibly autobiographical story is not quite what it appears to be: Kalo is not an actual historical figure and the entirely plausible "reproductions" of magazine pages featuring his work are forgeries created by Seth. *It's a Good Life* constitutes an intervention into both the history of cartooning and the autobiographical mode that has become so familiar in contemporary comics.

The most apt description of Seth's work may be "historiographic metafiction," a term coined by Linda Hutcheon. She explains that historiographic metafiction "questions the nature and validity of the entire human process of writing—of both history and fiction. Its aim in so doing is to study how we know the past, how we *make* sense of it" (*Canadian Postmodern* 22). Her emphasis on the making of the past resonates strongly with Seth's approach to storytelling and helps to illuminate those aspects of his work that are often characterized simply as nostalgia. Stuart Hall suggests that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (225). Seth's comics draw attention to the narrativization of the past and reveal the extent to which the making of history—and, by extension, identity—is an act of great artifice.

Seth's historical inventions/interventions are substantiated not only by his evocative drawing style, but also by his compelling portrayal of imagined communities, to appropriate the phrase developed by Benedict Anderson in his book on nationalism. (Anderson's communities are imagin*ed*, but not imagin*ary*.) In *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (2011), the community imagined by Seth serves as a stage for a particularly ironic nationalism. The Canadian identity of Seth's characters can also be quite modest, at times even covert, included for the benefit of an imagined community of knowing readers. *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (2009) is an idiosyncratic account of the life of a small-town hero known for his long-running lecture series and local TV show, in which he repeatedly rehearses the arctic expeditions of his early career.

In its settings and cultural points of reference, Seth's work has always been quietly Canadian, but in *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* the nationalist connotations of Anderson's phrase "imagined communities" become explicit. Seth reinforces his invented national history with references to actual Canadian cartoonists like Doug Wright and James Simpkins. Along with extended assessments of metafictional comics and detailed descriptions of the Brotherhood's sprawling clubhouse, Seth spends nine pages on Wright's popular strip *Nipper*, for which he clearly has genuine affection (fig. 1). The annual G.N.B.C.C. award for best cartoonist, "The Jasper" (*GNBCC* 6), is a tribute to Simpkins's once nationally beloved, now nearly forgotten character Jasper the Bear. The reader who does not possess an encyclopedic knowledge of Canadian cartooning will probably not recognize names like Peter Whalley and George Feyer, and may assume that they too have been invented by Seth. Seth takes advantage of the relative obscurity of these real-life cartoonists, deftly incorporating them into a dense imbrication of historical fact and credible invention.

In this way, the central tension that emerges in reading *The Great Northern Brotherhood* is between the known and unknown. This uncertainty—which might be designated as epistemological ambivalence on the part of the reader—is a product of the inherent ambiguity of metafiction, amplified by Seth's appropriation of historicizing discourses. In the opening pages of the book, Seth playfully anticipates the tension between known and unknown in his description of a bas-belief arch over the clubhouse entrance: "It's a Who's Who of Canadian cartoon characters. Some famous…some forgotten" (15, ellipsis in original). The reader with complete information (to borrow a term from game theory) knows that although some of the characters depicted in the arch may be relatively famous (Wright's Nipper) or forgotten (Simpkins's Chopper), many are Seth's invention, which are strictly speaking neither famous nor forgotten.

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Figure 1. Seth, *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (56).
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Within the world of Canadian cartooning that Seth has imagined, however, even his invented cartoons exist in a hierarchy, some better known than others. Seth yokes together fictive and historical realities by placing them on the *same* spectrum between famous and forgotten. About the bas-relief arch, Seth deadpans: "It's worth looking at carefully just to see who you can recognize" (16). The implication is that an absence of recognition signals not utter fabrication on Seth's part but simply the natural fading of certain artifacts from the collective pop cultural memory. This gambit has a sharp ironic edge because much of the real, *non*-fabricated history is so obscure. Throughout *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, even the most careful reader experiences occasional moments of literary-historical vertigo in which it is difficult to discern—or remember—which parts of Seth's history are invented. The integration of real, esoteric Canadian history into an invented community is so seamless that for many readers *The Great Northern Brotherhood* may have the effect of flattening all hierarchies, real or invented, into an ahistorical arcade. (In a final deadpan manoeuvre, the book closes with an alphabetical index, an entirely neutral list that does not distinguish between history and fabrication.)

Writing about Chris Ware's role in comics history, Jeet Heer reports that "Canadian cartoonist Seth, whose passion for old comics matches that of his friend Chris Ware,

once noted that most cartoonists have to educate themselves in the history of comics" (Heer 4). In turn, these cartoonists sometimes educate the reader. Heer positions Ware as a comics historian "engaged in an act of ancestor creation, of giving pedigree and lineage to his own work" (4). In many ways, Seth's literal invention of cartoonist predecessors is comparable to Ware's more conventional historical endeavour. In *It's a Good Life* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, Seth foregrounds his role as a comics history autodidact, but the knowledge he passes on to the reader blurs the boundary between fiction and nonfiction. These books constitute ironic versions of what Heer aptly calls "canon formation" in Ware's work (Heer 4). Both Ware and Seth are forging histories, but in different ways: Seth's work fully accommodates the double meaning of the word "forge" and in doing so points to the deliberate manipulation of material that even the most apparently neutral history entails. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White describes this process as the "selection and arrangement of data from the *unprocessed historical record* in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an *audience* of a particular kind" (5, emphases in original).

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It is the audience that finally realizes this arrangement of data as history. Seth's work frustrates this realization because the reader cannot participate in its history-making without simultaneously setting in motion other discursive modes—satire, metafiction—not traditionally associated with historical truth. White's very lucid remarks about "The Conventional Conceptions of Historiography" help to account for this tension. "In the eighteenth century," he writes, "thinkers conventionally distinguished among three kinds of historiography: fabulous, true, and satirical" (49). These distinctions persist, indeed have become so entrenched that the twenty-first-century reader may regard the term "true history" as redundant, and think of fabulous or satirical history simply as genres of fiction. Seth blends the three kinds of historiography together, which compels the reader to constantly take up new positions in relation to the text. In this way, Seth seems to cultivate something akin to what White calls a metahistorical consciousness, which "stands above, and adjudicates among, the claims which the three kinds of historiography (fabulous, satirical, and truthful) might make upon the reader" (White 51).

In Seth's work, this metahistorical consciousness usually has an ironic quality. As a result, satire, being a narrative manifestation of irony (White 8), often seems to emerge as the foremost historiographical mode, even in those narratives that are not overtly satirical. For instance: the earnest, elegiac tone of *It's a Good Life* rarely takes on a satirical edge, but the mode of the work—fabulation presented as autobiographical truth—is highly ironic. *Wimbledon Green* (2005), on the other hand, is outright satirical fabulation, an affectionate send-up of comic book collecting, which employs historicizing discourses (chiefly anecdote) but which no one would mistake for a truthful history. Its companion volume, *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, is similarly fabulous, but incorporates truth in a manner that destabilizes conventional historiographical distinctions; this very ambiguity, however, seems to invite a satirical resolution.

Each book offers a unique juxtaposition of the fabulous, truthful and satirical, but Seth does not (cannot) actually impart either a metahistorical or ironic consciousness; readers will respond in different ways to the various claims made upon them by his work. In her rich, astute essay "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," Hutcheon describes such responses:

> Irony is not something *in* an object that you either "get" or fail to "get": irony "happens" for you (or, better, you *make* it "happen") when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, usually with a certain critical edge. Likewise, nostalgia is not something you "perceive" *in* an object; it is what you "feel" when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you. (Emphases in original)

This simple but by no means simplistic passage does much to refine and draw together certain strands of this discussion. First, it highlights the structural similarity between irony and nostalgia; second, it advances an appropriately process-oriented understanding of complex phenomena that resist rigid definition; third, in doing so, it helps to clarify the notion of "epistemological ambivalence" identified above. It is not simply that the reader knows or does not know that, for instance, Kalo is a fictional character or that Doug Wright is an actual historical figure; it is that Seth's work engages readers in the process of *making* their own historical knowledge. Moreover, Seth's work prompts readers to make historical knowledge that is ironic, nostalgic, or otherwise ambivalent.

Nostalgia is a form of historical knowledge not unlike memory; as Hutcheon suggests in her essay, it consists of "the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire." However, nostalgia is also a form of geographical knowledge: it operates both temporally *and* spatially, unable to separate geographical and historical origins. Originally a diagnosis of patriotic homesickness (Boym 3), nostalgia has always had geographical, which is to say national, stakes. Were Seth's more overtly Canadian stories not so saturated with irony and ambiguity, their geographically specific longing for the past might be in danger of becoming overdetermined as nationalist discourse.

Particularly in works such as *George Sprott* and *GNBCC*, nostalgia is often bound up with emblematic instances of Canadiana. The most obvious example is a literal emblem, the 1967 Canadian Centennial logo, which Seth uses as an insignia on the brass buttons of the G.N.B.C.C. club jacket (fig. 2). Several pages later, there is a reference to the National Film Board of Canada, or NFB, an actual long-standing Canadian institution that Seth weaves into his invented history. Addressing the reader directly, the narrator insists "You must remember, in grade school, watching those NFB cartoonist documentaries" (26). Here Seth imagines a community of readers with a shared cultural memory—and, needless to say, the memory too has been imagined by Seth.

Figure 2. Seth, *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (21).
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In addition to these markers of official, institutional Canada, Seth's work also contains identifiably Canadian elements that are more organic. In *Palookaville 19*, the collected items in a character's bedroom include several Inuit stone carvings (92), which encapsulate precisely the commodification and compartmentalization of aboriginal Canadian culture that becomes a sustained undercurrent of *George Sprott*. Another recurring feature of *George Sprott* is the arctic landscape, which appears not only in narrative episodes but also in the arresting two-page spreads that punctuate the book.

Northern geography appears in *The Great Northern Brotherhood* as well, but it is given a far less reverent treatment as the backdrop of the comically remote G.N.B.C.C. Archive. In another flourish of hyperbolic Canadiana, the unlikely architecture of the Northern Archive is styled after igloos (*GNBCC* 81). It is not surprising that a cartoonist would both utilize and satirize such potent imagery, bordering as it does on caricature, but this nevertheless suggests a series of questions: Is there some kernel of national identity that irony does not deflate? Aside from the sheer associative power that Inuit culture and arctic landscapes possess, is there anything that makes them Canadian? From such historical and geographical specificities, is it possible to derive abstract elements of "Canadian-ness"?

In *The Canadian Identity*, originally published in 1961, historian W.L. Morton proposed that the "alternate penetration of the wilderness and return to civilization is the basic rhythm of Canadian life, and forms the basic elements of Canadian character" (5). Half a century later, this claim sounds more like mythmaking than measured historical analysis, but it nevertheless has a certain undeniable resonance. Like other cultural stereotypes, this notion of the basic "Canadian character" may dissolve on close examination but nevertheless seems somehow coherent, powered by an irresistibly unambiguous essentialism. And yet, Morton's book is not unsubtle. The premise

that national identity can be reduced to an essence or "basic rhythm" is undercut by his suggestion that Canada is "a country resting on paradoxes and anomalies" (51). He also observes that the "evolution of the national identity" was "slow, obscure, and indefinite" (71). For Morton, Canadian identity is, essentially, a site of tensions and ambiguities.

In *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies*, Hutcheon suggests that these ambiguities have done much to inform Canadian art and literature. "Obsessed, still, with articulating its identity," she writes, "Canada often speaks with a doubled voice, with the forked tongue of irony" (1). To some extent, Hutcheon is responding directly to Morton, whom she briefly cites, attempting to update and develop his claims. In the preface to *Splitting Images*, she offers Canadians an alternative to the endless search for a cohesive national identity: "what if we made a virtue out of our fence-sitting, bet-hedging sense of the difficult doubleness of being Canadian, yet North American, of being Canadian yet part of a multinational, global political economy? That virtue's name may well be irony" (vii). In many ways, Seth seems to embrace Hutcheon's proposal: the virtue of irony pervades his books, which do not strain toward national self-definition even when their stories have an explicitly Canadian dimension. This unassuming but hardly toothless approach is nowhere more on display than in *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, his most ironically Canadian work.

The book opens with an epigraph attributed to the experimental cartoonist Henry Pefferlaw, one of Seth's most appealingly iconoclastic creations. According to Pefferlaw, "Canadians have a born advantage when it comes to cartooning because of their national tendency toward dullness" (*GNBCC* 1). Oddly, this sardonic statement strongly recalls W.L. Morton's entirely earnest claim that Canada is "governed only by compromise and kept strong only by moderation" (*Canadian Identity* 51). Morton seems comically temperate by comparison, a personification of the stereotypical Canadian dullness that Pefferlaw ironically invokes. Pefferlaw's droll aphorism is not just flatly ironic, however; it entails a range of ironies, the enumeration of which may help to demonstrate the rhetorical density of *The Great Canadian Brotherhood*.

First and most obviously, the epigraph ironically praises Canadians for a rarely-praised quality: dullness. Second, and less obviously, this irony is compounded by Pefferlaw's status as an experimental cartoonist (not revealed until much later in the book) whose non-narrative comics could be described as willfully dull in their lack of conventional narrative action. With this in mind, the statement becomes doubly ironic: Pefferlaw's apparently sarcastic swipe may actually indicate esteem in an ironic inversion of "dull" and "interesting." As a writer, Pefferlaw has much in common with real-life artist Martin Vaughn-James, who only lived in Canada for a decade but produced a significant corpus of innovative short comics and book-length works during that period. Seth includes Vaughn-James's "darn near impenetrable" non-narrative book *The Projector*[1] in his compact annotated bibliography *Forty Cartoon Books of Interest* (44). Seth's own affinity for dullness in the form of "sublime boredom" (qtd. in Dunley) adds a further dimension to the layered ironies.

Despite its shifting significance, Pefferlaw's remark remains a statement about national identity. His convoluted, ambivalent brand of nationalism does seem characteristically Canadian, at least according to the terms set out by Morton and Hutcheon. Hutcheon is quick to note that irony is in no way uniquely Canadian, but she observes that there "seems little in Canada that is not (or has not been) inherently doubled and therefore at least structurally ripe for ironizing" (*Splitting Images* 15). Throughout *The Great Northern Brotherhood*, Seth demonstrates Canada's susceptibility to irony and satire, often with pointed (though not entirely ungenerous) historical inventions.

One of the most indelible of Seth's invented comic book characters in *GNBCC* is "Kao-Kuk of the Royal Canadian Astro-Men," an Inuit astronaut (fig. 3). This marriage of occupation and cultural background has a cartoon logic that is strangely compelling: "the Eskimo, with his unique understanding of isolation…and his experience with vast emptiness made him the perfect choice for space exploration" (*GNBCC* 46, ellipsis in original). Like Morton's conception of the basic Canadian disposition, this simplified understanding of "Eskimo" identity holds an essentialist fascination. Drawn into the momentum of the peculiar premise, the reader is suddenly complicit, fulfilling the caricature with personal assumptions and associations.
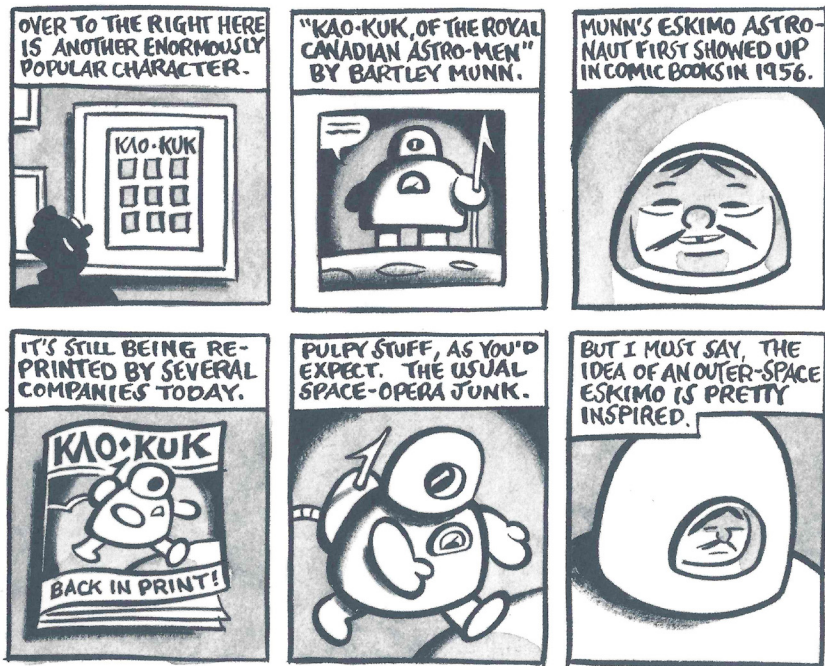
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Figure 3. Seth, *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (45). ©Seth/Gregory Gallant 2016.

Even the character's name functions in this associative manner. Creator Bartley Munn (also invented by Seth) admits that "Kao-Kuk" is not authentically Inuit, but rather a linguistic forgery that he felt "sounded Eskimo" (*GNBCC* 46). This telling detail casts in sharper relief *The Great Northern Brotherhood*'s ambivalent longing for the past, and goes a long way toward evoking an era in which such cultural insensitivity in cartoons would go largely unnoticed. It also deftly conveys that particular strain of racism that lacks malice but is all the more insidious as a result. A white author sends an Inuit character into outer space: this scenario hyperbolically exemplifies the displacement and appropriation that characterizes pop culture's re-imagining of communities that have become marginal. Seth explores this white-Inuit dynamic in *George Sprott* as well, though not through the ironic lens of metafiction.

In a complementary instance of metafictional hyperbole, Seth inverts Canada's putatively dominant culture with one of *The Great Northern Brotherhood*'s most outlandish characters, Canada Jack, who is loosely styled after nationalist heroes like Johnny Canuck.[2] Seth reports that Canada Jack was created in the 1960s by a mysterious cartoonist named Sol Gertzman. Some highlights from the series include a short-lived flying robot horse, a guest appearance by a poorly-drawn Snoopy, an entire issue devoted to highway construction, and a caveman valet. As Seth says of his invented series: "They are certainly the oddest comic books ever made in Canada —a kind of folk art, almost" (95). Indeed, it is the sheer eccentricity of the stories that seems to mark them as particularly Canadian. With his utterly unpredictable expressions of civic enthusiasm, Seth's Canada Jack is what Hutcheon might refer to as an "ex-centric" (*Canadian Postmodern* 4), who is at once inside and outside the dominant culture. In this sense, Canada Jack is a nationalist hero—but it is a knowing, Pefferlavian nationalism that delights in ambivalent impulses. As Seth says elsewhere, in a description of one of the Brotherhood's social clubs, it is "both grand *and* self-mocking" (*GNBCC* 70, emphasis in original).

With the "folk art" of Canada Jack, Seth tempers nationalism with camp; *George Sprott*, alternatively, exhibits nothing as strident as nationalism, so its exploration of the contradictions of the nation can afford to be implicit and nonverbal. Some of the most Canadian features of *George Sprott* are the two-page arctic landscapes, which resist interpretation even as they allude to the history of Canadian art: Seth's wintry tableaux bring to mind the later canvases of Lawren Harris. Harris is one of the more easily identifiable members of the Group of Seven, which, as Canadian readers will recall, was a pioneering collective of interwar Canadian landscape painters.

Morton makes specific reference to Harris's work in *The Canadian Identity* as an example of what he calls the "art of the hinterland" (109), a tradition that Seth clearly gestures toward in *George Sprott*. Harris's arctic paintings are often bright and translucent, distinguished by icy peaks and shafts of light that strongly suggest some form of spiritual ascension. Seth's allusive illustrations are more cryptic and opaque (fig. 4), moonlit panoramas that offer the reader a reprieve from the densely-paneled, text-heavy pages that are typical of *George Sprott*. As an elaboration of his claims about

the essential Canadian character, Morton points to "the existence in Canadian art and literature of distinctive qualities engendered by the experience of northern life" (109). The large, mute, arctic hiatuses that Seth incorporates into *George Sprott* evoke this northern experience by means of their inscrutability. At the same time, these reticent images are culturally anchored by their reference to Harris's depictions of the north.

An understated but capacious work, *George Sprott* also features large photographs of cardboard models constructed by Seth, and a novel fold-out section in which the repetition of images and phrases creates a hypnotic approximation of the rhythms of memory. In many ways the book is a technical *tour de force*, and Seth's experimental approach to the comics medium fortifies the narrative's modernist sensibility. Bart Beaty has argued that "comics are only now moving through a modernizing period but that they are doing so against a larger cultural backdrop of postmodernism" (11). *George Sprott* may be Seth's most modern book, in which nonlinear storytelling gradually accrues into a multifaceted portrait. (In this way, it serves as a noteworthy alternative to Chester Brown's more traditional Canadian comic-book biography, *Louis Riel*.) By comparison, *The Great Northern Brotherhood* seems quite gleefully postmodern, not only in its deployment of jostling metafictions but in the overall attitude to nationalism and national history/identity that these metafictions delineate.

Metafiction is certainly the most recognizably postmodern technique in Seth's work, a fundamental component as early as *It's a Good Life*, but postmodern playfulness alone does not account for the sheer charm of Seth's invented comics. Seth's historiographic metafiction is at its most lively when it playfully highlights the fictional dimension of communities. One of Anderson's most subtle, vivid insights in *Imagined Communities* is that "fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (36). Something of this percolation is at work in Seth's narratives, but the inverse is of equal significance: Seth forges history by allowing reality to seep into his fiction.

If identities, as Hall suggests, are positions within narratives of the past, then it should come as no surprise when these positions change, multiply, or otherwise fail to remain fixed in response to those ever-shifting narratives. In manipulating a range of identifiably Canadian elements, Seth's historiographic metafiction unsettles familiar notions about the stability and coherence of identity. Hall's account of identity is echoed by one of Eric Hobsbawm's remarks on community: "To be a member of any human community is to situate oneself with regard to one's (its) past, if only by rejecting it" (10). Seth does not reject the past, but neither does he fully embrace it. Rather, he ambivalently situates himself in relation to the past by remaking it in fictional form, and in doing so compels the reader to take up a similarly ambivalent position.

Figure 4. Seth, *George Sprott: 1894-1975* (n.pag.).

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Notes

1. *The Projector* was first published in 1971 by the Canadian avant-garde press Coach House Books. Coach House's re-issue of Vaughn-James's 1975 book *The Cage* features an introduction by Seth.

2. Here the boundary between historical truth and fabulation becomes exceedingly porous: in the mid-1940s, freelance artist George Menendez Rae created a very straitlaced, "realistic" Nazi-fighting hero named Canada Jack, who appeared in over twenty issues of the comic *Canadian Heroes* ("Guardians of the North").

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