



*“Whatever you can do, or dream  
you can, begin it. Boldness has genius,  
power, and magic in it.”*

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE (1749-1832),  
POET, DRAMATIST, AND PHILOSOPHER

## PREFACE

# Turning Point

Marian White

AND NOW THEY WERE FALLING – five roped climbers yanked from their footholds on a steep mountain-face in the Canadian Rockies. The collapse of a cornice had triggered an avalanche that sent the men hurtling, airborne in a haze of snow and ice shards. Propelled clean over a gaping crevasse, they tumbled, then slithered until, at last, they came to rest on the steep snowfield below.

Slowly, they staggered to their feet. All, that is, except one: Jay lay still, his back broken. As the team scrambled to carry him to safety on a makeshift stretcher, adrenalin masked the pain in Robin’s severely damaged knee. That fateful day

FACING PAGE: *While descending this ridge on Mount Robson, an avalanche swept Robin’s climbing party down to the snowfield below. The injuries he sustained marked a turning point in our lives.*

on Mount Robson in July 1977 changed his life and mine forever.

I was elsewhere at the time, hiking back-country passes with the Cheerful Charlies hiking group, for, like Robin, mountains were my passion. My own love affair with wild landscapes had taken off during a weeklong high-school field trip to the mountains of the English Lake District soon after I turned 17. Back then Robin, a stranger still, was already climbing mountains in Wales and Switzerland, and four years later I began climbing there with friends, too. That’s how Robin and I first met – waiting out a storm at a mountain hut high in the Swiss Alps. Our need for adventure and communion with large, wild places had finally brought us together.

Strangely, we share this passion with none of our relatives. And growing up in the suburbs of London, England, we

experienced only the tiniest glowing embers of wild nature. Yet those were enough to spark a yearning for something other than the overpopulated, overbuilt, over-roaded land that gave us birth.

So, in our late twenties, we embarked in 1968 on the first of many journeys through the deserts, mountains, forests, and grasslands, and the towns and villages of the world. Those early travels, within some of the poorest countries, marked the first and most profound turning point in our lives. They opened our eyes to the natural beauty and diversity of the planet, forced us to re-examine our beliefs and values, and taught us what in life is important and what is not. One result was our not returning to England. In July 1970, with only \$300 left in our pockets, we put our vagabond ways behind us and launched upon a new life in a new land: Canada.

Our travels had generated more questions than answers and this soon led to university studies in Toronto. We emerged more knowledgeable not just about Nature and the natural systems upon which all life depends, but about the need to address the growing human footprint. Then, yearning again for mountains and the solitude of wilderness, we headed in 1975 to Alberta – our home ever since.

JAY'S BROKEN BACK HEALED SURPRISINGLY FAST. But the extensive damage to the cartilage and ligaments of Robin's left knee left him questioning whether he would ever walk properly again, let alone run, climb, or ski. Until the accident, our lust for hard physical exercise had shaped our weekend agendas of hiking and climbing, but we were forced, now, to

adopt a slower pace. Far from restricting us, however, this opened our eyes to another world: the lives of wild plants and animals. Rope and ice axes yielded to binoculars and camera; climbing guidebooks to flower and bird guides.

Photography had always been Robin's passion and now there was more time for it. We would spend hours lying on our bellies in alpine meadows waiting for the wind to drop so we could photograph wildflowers or sitting quietly in a blind as a ruffed grouse proudly drummed on a log three paces away. And something else happened. As our knowledge of wilderness and the natural world became more intimate, there arose a new feeling: a spiritual awakening, a transcendent sense of being a part of the Whole – of truly coming home at last.

TWENTY WORK-YEARS PASSED. It was time for reflection. After years as a technical editor in the oil patch, I had quit and started a small business providing stock photography, writing, and editing to industry and the educational field. Robin worked at the City of Calgary, leading a team of planners designing new suburban communities that supported public transit, walking, cycling, and reduced car dependency.

We'd continued travelling abroad on our annual holidays. But our focus was shifting from geographical and cultural landscapes toward biodiversity and conservation. On returning, through slide shows we'd share with audiences our

FACING PAGE: *Grizzly bear. While large predators went extinct in most of overpopulated Europe long ago, Alberta's continue to roam – for now.*



experience of the wildlife and peoples of far-off lands, and how environmental damage and the worsening human condition typically go hand in hand. And we tried to walk our talk, raising awareness and funds to help protect forests, alleviate poverty, and educate children in Africa, Madagascar, and Nepal. But what about our own home? What about Alberta?

We came from a land that has 20 times Alberta's population but only one-third its land base, where wildness hangs by a thread and brown bear and lynx, boar, wolf, and beaver are long gone. Today, Britain's wild bird populations have shrunk to half their 1970 numbers – even the ubiquitous house sparrows are vanishing and its pollinating butterflies and bumblebees are in steep decline or already going extinct. It's a recipe for disaster. Not surprisingly, Robin and I are in awe of Alberta's remaining wildness: the diversity of her natural landscapes and wildlife, from grizzly bear and curlews to orchids and bull trout.<sup>1</sup>

True, the massive wave of early settlement on the prairie and parkland degraded and fragmented those natural regions (see map, page 16), and energy-industry activities expanded the human footprint from 1949 onward. But some wild expanses and most wild species that were around 150 years ago – even large carnivores at the top of the food chain – somehow still survive here. It is these – our soils, forests, grasslands, wetlands, plants, and animals, superbly co-evolved with the climate – that are Alberta's real wealth, her natural capital. Collectively, they underpin Alberta's economy and the quality of life of her citizens.

BACK, NOW, TO OUR STORY. In 1998, Robin decided it was time to quit the City and do something different. While we had come to know Alberta's mountain parks and a few prairie locales well, we knew the land north of Edmonton not at all. Nor had we paddled her great rivers or driven an ice-road. It was time to go exploring again – this time, our homeland.

A routine evolved. We would rent out our house each May through October. Then, using *Song Dog*, our camper, as a mobile base, we spent seven years exploring wild places we'd never been before and old haunts we had come to love. Along the way we learned from ranchers, First Nations people, conservationists, biologists, and many others. Much of what we saw and heard was magical, but much of it was alarming. It was time to write a book.

Most coffee-table books about Nature celebrate it and so do we. The more you learn about it, the more fascinating Nature becomes, and we enjoy sharing our experiences and images with others. But today celebration is not enough. Our generation inherited the Earth from previous generations and we owe it to our children and grandchildren to be good stewards. We aren't – and most Albertans know it. From one end of this province to the other, this paradise is under siege from human overuse and, indeed, abuse.

Certainly we are all to blame to some degree. Most of us can, and should, live more lightly on the Earth. And we should have done a far better job of holding our governments to account. We trusted them to develop an ecologically sustainable economy, manage our resources in the broad

public interest, effectively regulate industrial pollution, and act responsibly in the global effort to prevent dangerous climate change. Overwhelmingly, they failed and most of us were too preoccupied with our daily lives to respond.

NOW, ALBERTA STANDS AT THE CROSSROADS. Are we going to continue with our collective head in the sand, ignoring the environmental damage we are causing, or are we going to rethink our relationship with Nature and demand that our leaders manage this province more responsibly?

Ours is intended as a transformative book. People won't fight for something they don't understand and have little attachment to. So we hope that the images, stories, and natural history in Part One, "Exploring Wild Alberta," will encourage you to pause in your busy life, buy some Nature guides and a pair of binoculars, and set about rediscovering wild Alberta for yourself.

At the same time, we want to raise people's awareness of some of the key conservation issues affecting each natural

region, and we do this chapter by chapter. Part Two, "At the Crossroads," has three chapters: in "Losing Our Way," we try to put our finger on what must be done to address the systemic problems and get Alberta on track to a more sustainable future. In "Finding the Path" we address the question: "But what can someone like me do to make a difference?" Here you'll find examples of exciting initiatives by Albertans who aren't just wringing their hands and complaining, but are taking action, typically in concert with others, to forge a sustainable future. There's a whole raft of things that anyone can do to make a difference, and in "Getting Started, Striding Out" you'll find some handy resources and tips on how to begin re-establishing a connection with the natural world; how to get up to speed on the issues; and how to help protect wild Alberta – our life support system – for our children.

So this is our story. Nearly thirty years ago a close call on a mountainside triggered a turning point in our lives. We hope this book will spark a turning point in your own.