

THE WOLF'S HEAD

Writing Lake Superior



PETER UNWIN

author of *THE ROCK FARMERS*

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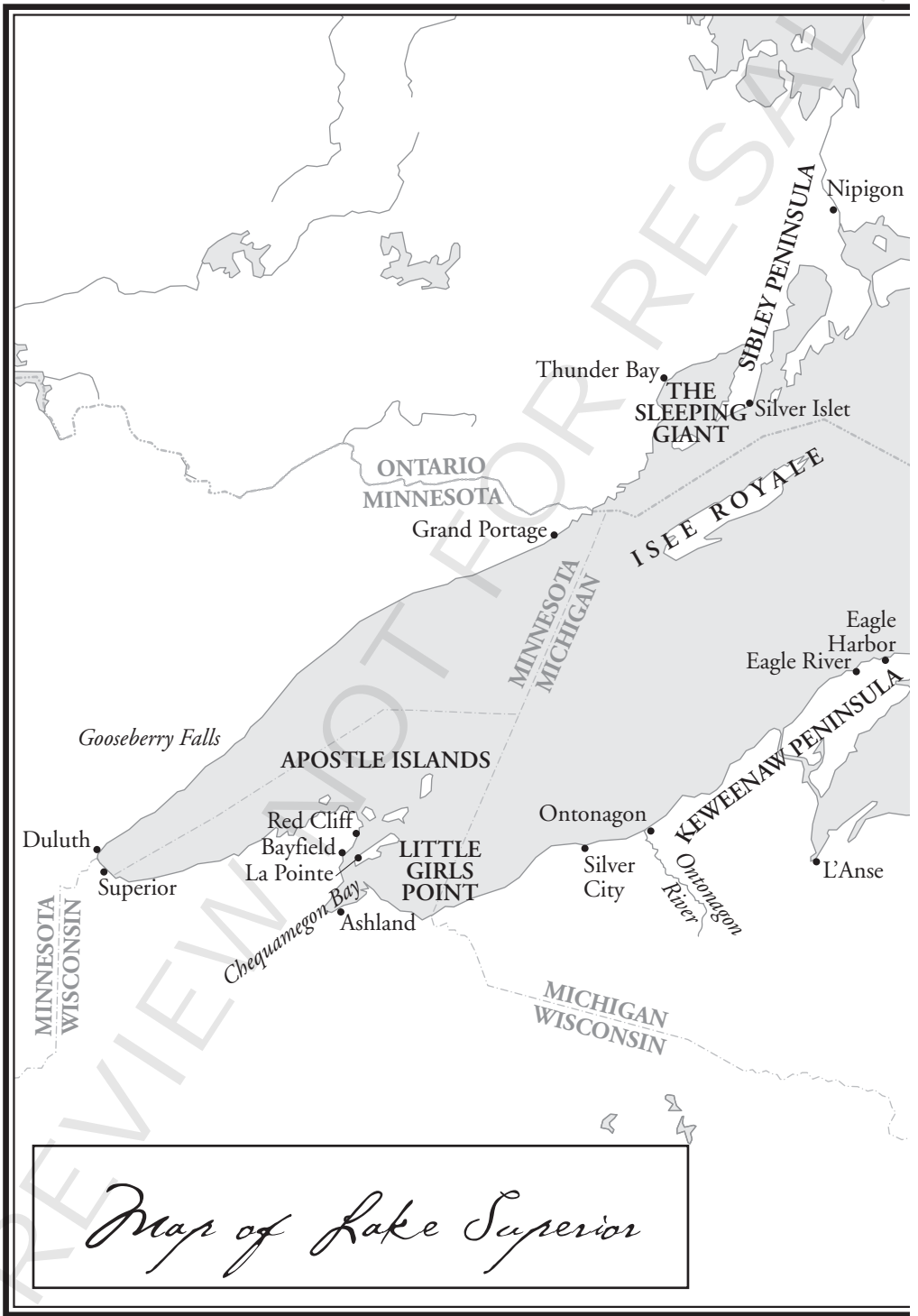
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This book is dedicated to the diarists, letter writers, history buffs, historical society and museum volunteers, authors of self-published chapbooks, storytellers, old-timers, and all the crucial enthusiasts who keep the past from giving up on us.

Then I commenced: "Kagagengs, I hear that thy head is full of old stories, as an egg is of meat, and as I am so eagerly collecting the stories of the old time, as thou dost the herbs, I have come to thee to beg thee and to ask thee if thou art disposed to tell me some tradition of thy tribe?"

Naturally enough, such a request, which startled the old man like a gun-shot at his ear, rendered him quite silent and confused. He wrapped himself more closely in his blanket ... At length he said that he was not conscious of knowing any stories, and if he did, they were not worth hearing; and, besides, there were so many stories in the world, that he did not know where to begin.

— JOHANN GEORG KOHL
*KITCHI-GAMI: LIFE AMONG
THE LAKE SUPERIOR OJIBWAY, 1860*



Map of Lake Superior



Prologue



Approaching the Wolf

*Superior, Lake, the most N.W. of the five Great Lakes,
and the largest body of fresh water in the world.*

— GROLIER'S ENCYCLOPEDIA CANADIANA, 1958

From the first map it resembled a wolf's head, with an island standing in for an eye and a peninsula for a grinning mouth. As small students we found this helpful. What could be easier to memorize than a wolf's head? For hundreds of years that's how Lake Superior came to be recognized. Soon we would know the rest of the lakes too: Erie, Ontario, Michigan, Huron, the watery guts of where we lived, held together by a swift melody of Algonkian, English, and French. Indian words were as genuine on our immigrant tongues as *baseball* — words such as *totem*, *Winona*, *moose*, *moccasins*, and even *whisky-jack* — words that exist beneath the skin now and will never be foreign again.

We memorized the names of the provinces first. The provinces, the prime ministers, the capital cities, and best of all the five compelling bodies of blue ink that clung together on the pull-down maps that a teacher made appear before us with a swoop of her mighty arm — the Great Lakes. Five of them, not counting Georgian Bay, which no one counted, probably because of its ridiculous and un-Indian-sounding name.

These were the greatest lakes in the world, and I was enormously proud of them for being so big and for belonging to *us*. Exactly how big was drilled into us every day. Entire countries could fit into them. Scotland, Belgium, England ... I imagined these paltry nations heaved out the side of an airplane and sinking quickly beneath the hugeness of the Great Lakes — our Great Lakes.

To children all lakes must abound with fish, and so it was that the Great Lakes were filled with great fish. Back then, in our innocence, there could be no gillnets or lamprey, no Port Coldwell or Jackfish, no heavy metal contaminants. Back then, Rosspport was a thriving town, home of the world's most famous fishing derby. Sturgeon grew to the size of train cars. Mysterious garfish sawed through nets with their evil noses, and quivering trout were eager to be caught by men who wore overalls and whistled, who opened and shut enormous jackknives, and packed fresh fish into cracked ice — one pound of ice for every pound of fish. For some reason these men looked like our dads.

We sat obediently beneath the gods of Transportation, Commerce, Mining, and Forestry, reciting the names of the Great Lakes on command. From encyclopedias we memorized patriotic, mind-numbing facts that led nowhere: “The Great Lakes are the largest body of fresh water in the world. They have a total of 95,000 square miles. They are of great importance to trade. They are bordered by two countries ...”

In this way we came to know something alarming about the Great Lakes, that other people lived on them besides us. These people were different from “Indians.” Indians were an acceptable and necessary part of the story. We barely knew it, but the story was couched in their language. It blew through everything, in words such as *Keewatin*, the north wind, such as *Canada* and *Chicago*. The story could not be spoken, it could not even begin without Indians. They were the audience — to us. Their purpose was to witness our arrival and brilliant growth. We sat at wooden desks and spent hours, weeks, a half decade of grade school “studying” Indians: how they possessed strange legends, paddled birchbark canoes, scalped people, and suffered forever from the slightest diseases. We were told over and over again in salacious, hypnotic detail how they cut out

Father Brébeuf's righteous heart and ate it. We also learned that that sort of thing didn't happen anymore; that Indians had generously disappeared into the woods to make room for *us*.

But these people in that other bordering country were not "Indians," and they were not us either. They were called "Americans" and they were not making room for anyone. They invented spaceships and hot dogs, television and iron-ore freighters that unloaded themselves and stretched a fifth of a mile in length. For unknown reasons they had been given half of the Great Lakes. *Our* Great Lakes. The arrangement wasn't fair, and it made it considerably more difficult to memorize this enormous continent with Americans living all about. What was Lake Michigan to us, with its unknown and countless shipwrecks? There was something un-Canadian about Lake Michigan. On July 24, 1915, the *Eastland* had rolled over in this lake, killing more than eight hundred people in several minutes. We lived in towns of that size.

Lake Erie, at least, we could grasp. My mother had a friend who owned a cottage on Lake Erie, and each summer we went there to swim and eat fresh perch and fried potatoes. Our skin turned crimson, we lived an outdoor life. We shrieked in the white foam of crashing waves while our fathers stood around the barbecue with shirts off, holding brown bottles of beer in one hand and spatulas in the other.

These were the Great Lakes, the *lower* great lakes, a flat, blue-and-amber landscape composed of sand and soda pop. Clapboard cottages leaned against the sky. A dog, struck by a car, bravely hauled itself home on three legs. One memorable twilight a shining rainbow trout was hauled out in a net. Attached to it, like a bad conscience, was a lamprey releasing its life-sucking grip on the trout and slithering, like the coward it was, back into the water. These were the things that made Lake Erie possible.

"Lake Ontario" had a comforting sound to it, but was strangely removed though we lived less than two miles away. Toronto sprawled on its shore. To the small, sunny towns of southern Ontario, Toronto was farther away than imperial Rome. Lake Ontario was the Skyway Bridge, a dredging scandal, the packed steelyards of Stelco and Dofasco. Steel and mountains of purple slag rose from this lake. Black freighters were

moored against concrete docks like enormous adventures about to happen. At the sound of a whistle, men emerged from gates holding lunch buckets. Only later when I was an adult did Lake Ontario begin to make some sort of sense. A line of smelt washed like rinsewater against the shore; the gulls wading through the fish devoured their eyes with a quick poke of the beak, leaving the rest to flop in the sand.

One lake in particular stood out — Lake Superior, mounted highest on the pull-down map. The biggest of them all, it also looked undeniably like a wolf's head. In case we had any doubt about this, it was there in the crowded margins of *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, by Holling Clancy Holling. Lake Erie, that remarkable book informed us, was a lump of coal; Lake Ontario was shaped like a carrot. As children we knew better than to eat either one. But Superior: "Lake Superior's outline makes a wolf's head." So it was written. Four increasingly wolf-like drawings followed the lake's outline and drove the point home. After that came a blueprint of a sawmill, and then a few sentences explaining to very young children that a "bull chain" was no different from a "jack chain." The next page offered a detailed schematic on how to build a breeches buoy in case our ship sank. The assumption was that every child at some point would find it necessary to cable off the bow of a sinking Great Lakes freighter. I could hardly wait for my turn.

We didn't know it would never come; the last documented breeches-buoy rescue on Lake Superior had already taken place in 1953 when the freighter *Armstrong* ran aground off the American town of Marquette. We didn't understand the physics of these things and would not have believed them, that a man could be too cold and tired to reach out and seize the rope that could save his life.

How to build a sawmill, how to escape a sinking freighter, and how to see the wolf's head in Lake Superior. These were the essentials of a Canadian education, and like many things we learned them through an American book. First published in 1941, *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, with its stunning illustrations, was the Bible of Lake Superior, turning a faraway body of water into schoolyard discussion. Sixty-five years later nearly every children's library in North America owns a copy.

“The Canadian wilderness was white with snow.” With those strangely comforting words a carved miniature canoe is set loose upon Superior, where even the waves themselves “rushed ... like packs of wolves.” It did not yet seem significant that this canoe, so heavily freighted with pathos and symbolism, carried a wooden, miniaturized facsimile of an “Indian” instead of a real one.



Unknown to us, this great body of water had looked like a wolf's head since at least 1672, when the vigorous and dour Jesuit Father Claude-Jean Allouez completed a faithful map. That map, *La Carte de Jesuits*, published in France to accompany the *Jesuit Relations* for 1671, made Superior the first Great Lake to be accurately mapped.

Intensely disliked by the Natives and reputed to be a dreadful canoeist, Allouez eventually paddled the entire shoreline of Superior. He built a chapel out of bark, which was the only Christian institution on the continent beyond Montreal. Without assistance he carried two years' worth of mass wine, a small library, and a portable altar across thirty-six portages. He seems to have been so unpleasant that no one would help him.

Crammed into that head that Allouez drew was all the knowledge of a wolf. In there was the looming adventure of a child's life, the immense distances that must be crossed, the fears, the loneliness and yawning future that lie in wait for a person and a country. We didn't know that this lake was inhabited by a cruel, spindly backed monster named Mishipizheu, who eagerly sucked children down to their deaths, swamped canoes, and hurled enormous bulk carriers to the bottom.

We had not heard of a man named Selwyn Dewdney, who after a lifetime tramping the bush, suggested that “the impact of aboriginal beliefs and attitudes has shaped us more than we know.” With this simple suggestion, North America was no longer the faithful story of near extinction and marginalization of Natives, but a subtle and complex tale of how Native culture has penetrated our own, and changed us.

For children this is not a difficult concept. We accepted that a moose

was a moose, and a whisky-jack a whisky-jack. We did not doubt that gods lived in the woods who could lasso the moon with a willow switch. Little hairy-faced men who paddled stone canoes into the rock walls of Lake Superior posed no difficulty.

Seated in irrefutable rows on solid land beneath a portrait of Queen Elizabeth, we were ready for anything. We could accept that the Great Lakes were created more than a million years ago during the Pleistocene epoch, and that the land around Superior, freed of the heavy burden of the Wisconsin glacier, was rising straight up at the rate of eighteen inches every century. We would have accepted just as willingly that this lake was formed by a beaver slapping its tail, or that it contained three quadrillion gallons of water, 10 percent of the fresh water on the planet, enough to flood North and South America up to our knees.

We were ready for the truth that children know in their hearts, that magic lives in the dark and bottomless promise of water, and that the greatest water of all was mysterious, clad in a necklace of rock, surrounded by "Indians," and shaped in the head of a wolf. From our desks we saw it crouched low, preparing to lunge westward across the prairies and up snowy mountains.

We knew its name was Lake Superior.