

# In Praise of Arctic Warming

## An Unsettling View by an Anti-Ecological Novel: *Erres boréales* (1944)\*

Daniel Chartier,  
(Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada)

---

### Abstract

In 1944, Florent Laurin published *Erres boréales*, a utopian novel in which the French-Canadian people settled lands much farther north thanks to the planned warming of the St. Lawrence River and the Arctic. This anti-ecological picture is disconcerting for today's reader because it is incongruous with modern environmental discourse. The Arctic has always been represented as inaccessible, virgin territory and, as a result, the North has provided a blank canvas on which authors have been inclined to create imaginary Edenic worlds serving ideological ends. That is certainly what Laurin did in *Erres boréales*, but the ideology underlying his representation of the Arctic is so jarring for today's reader that it prompts us to look at the ideology shaping our present-day views of the imaginary North.

**Key words:** Imaginary, North, literature, Québec, global warming, ecology, the Arctic, the Inuit, conquest, science fiction, *Erres boréales*

General discourse today is marked by environmental concerns. Issues associated with global warming are discussed in every field—from the arts and sciences to society and politics—

---

\* Translated from French by Elaine Kennedy.

and influence our interpretation of facts and events. Such environmental discussion focuses on the poles, and especially on the Arctic: the potential “warming” of the coldest point on earth underscores not only the fragility of the Nordic desert, but also the interdependence of the rest of the planet on its vast blocks of ice which—although formerly considered useless—ensure global balance. According to Inuit environmentalist Sheila Watt-Cloutier, while the signs of these disturbing changes are physical, such warming is first and foremost “a human issue”:

These monumental changes threaten the memory of where we were, who we are and all that we wish to become. The Arctic is the early warning, the health barometer for the planet. Whatever happens in the world occurs here first. (Watt-Cloutier, 2007)

The prevalence of environmental discourse in most fields has gradually changed some of the parameters we relied on to conceive of the world and our future. By simply taking a look at some works created in the relatively recent past, in both the arts and literature, we can see that the issues of progress and man’s control of nature were considered a given. Today, when we review certain cultural premises put forward in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we realize that this interpretive change has made certain works outdated or, at least, incongruous with cultural discourse at this point in time.

The increased focus on the North, the Arctic and the Antarctic has also opened the door to a re-evaluation of the importance of these territories in terms of physical, human and cultural geography. While such an assessment is taking place, people in most Inuit territories (Nunavik, Nunavut and Greenland) are speaking out and asserting themselves in a way that is dissipating some clichés about the Arctic, in particular about the Arctic being barren and uninhabited.

In the West, the Arctic has always been represented as inaccessible, virgin territory, remote from civilization and characterized by extremes (distance, cold, day and night, luminosity and desolation). As a result of its perceived emptiness,

the “North” has served as a blank page, canvas or screen on which authors, artists and filmmakers have set imaginary, utopian worlds. In cultural studies, the “North” must be analyzed methodologically (1) according to the different elements comprising its representations—the Arctic, North Pole (and, similarly, the South Pole), the Inuit world, wintriness, and so on—and (2) from a multidisciplinary point of view, as indicated by geographer and linguist Louis-Edmond Hamelin, who coined the term *nordicité* or “nordicity” in the 1960s. From this perspective, the “North” can be understood as discourse, as an amalgamation of texts, images, colours, clichés, stereotypes, experiences, narratives and sounds, all of which have created a gap between it and the real north and that have, at the same time, determined it. The discursive amalgamation we call “North” generally has a relatively coherent construction which we can consider and study as the “idea of North.” If we compare the “North” with other large geographic cultural spaces, we see that it is distinguished by the amount of discourse that represents it—discourse not based on an experience of the region, but on previous discourse. The “North” is thus a complex of representations that is determined discursively, but based on specific elements that exist in reality (the cold, geography, etc.). The “North,” as conveyed by cultural discourse, is conceived of from discourse, but not randomly: it is defined precisely and coherently through signs, colours, stereotypes, figures and discursive schemata that enable the reader and viewer to recognize it.

This network of representations forms a “discursive node” that can serve ideological ends, depending on the times and trends. Today, in discussions about the North and the Arctic, two main types of political concerns emerge, which influence our interpretation of the representations of these regions:

1. fears about global warming, which are quintessentially fuelled by the fragility of the polar ecosystem. Countless popular magazines now publish green issues with *steel blue* cover photography of Arctic ice, along with a few polar bears

symbolizing animal power threatened by short-sighted human action. This colour reversal—*arctic* blue replacing *plant* green as a symbol of nature—is such that, from a semiotic point of view, *arctic blue* has become a sign of environmental green;

2. the fate dealt the people who live there (Natives peoples as well as small communities remote from urban centres) by North American and European societies—a fate that has led to a new “post colonial” view and a fascinating reinterpretation of the past.

The environment and post-colonial political relations thus mark discourse on the imaginary world of the North, from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first, to the point where it is difficult to dissociate them from any interpretation of the Arctic and northern territories. In the past, scenes of the Greenland icecap might have conveyed the idea of territorial conquest, lucrative whaling, the potential of a cryolite mine, or nuclear and military testing; today, such scenes have been replaced by images of blue icebergs floating in warming seas—a sad reminder of the melting ice—and remote stations evoking the social, cultural and political precariousness of northern inhabitants.

## A history of the imaginary

According to the methodological perspective put forward by Lucian Boia in *Pour une histoire de l'imaginaire* (1998), we must take all material provided by culture into account to gain an understanding of the history and structure of the imaginary. Thus, a novel like *Erres boréales* cannot be excluded from an analysis simply because it is a minor work.<sup>1</sup> It bears conflicting signs that enable us to see

---

<sup>1</sup> As discussed elsewhere (Chartier, 2000), the selection of “major works” or “classics” is a never-ending process in which random factors, politics, polemics and morality play an important role; consequently, limiting a study to such works may not be the most appropriate means of gaining an understanding of the imaginary of a time, place or society. In terms of the imaginary North, take for example *L'Impératrice de l'Ungava*, written by Alexandre Huot in 1927: it was not recognized by literary critics or history, is

where we stand in relation to representations of the Arctic in the early twentieth century and to comprehend the ideology of our own views on this imaginary world. It should be noted that the selection of *Erres boréales*, although difficult to justify from an aesthetic standpoint, does not mean that other works (ranging from average to masterly) are not also of interest; on the contrary, all works have a contribution to make. On the basis of Boia's premise, we suggest that, in conceiving of the North as a system of representations, a discursive tradition can be discerned; while such a tradition represents the real north, in whole or in part, it has become increasingly dissociated from it, developing modes of operation, organization and combination that are specific to it. The consideration of "marginal" cultural works contributes to a fuller picture of popular history that can provide for an understanding of the way in which a given time or place may conceive of the world or part of it. This history must be included in the study of the imaginary North and Arctic, which must be as cross-cultural and comprehensive as possible.

### **The North Shore, Labrador and Ungava Bay "tropicalized"<sup>2</sup>**

*And from afar to farther off  
From this snowy desert  
Where you persist  
In putting up villages  
(Vigneault, 1967, p. 10)*

The utopian social, scientific novel *Erres boréales*, published by its author Armand Grenier under the pseudonym Florent Laurin in

---

considered poorly written, and has now been forgotten despite the fact that it was widely read in its day. It talks about its time in a way that eminent works do not: it talks about the desire for adventure, conquest, and conciliation with the aboriginals—issues not addressed by Huot's contemporaries, from Claude-Henri Grignon to Lionel Groulx.

<sup>2</sup> One critic of the day spoke of the "captivating view of the almost 'tropicalized' Ungava empire" provided by *Erres boréales* (Lespérance, 1944, p. 32).

1944, has never had any real historic impact and boasts very few literary merits; yet, despite its tediousness, it offers a marker of the imaginary through its incongruity with our times. The novel is part of French-Canadian expansion ideology, a perspective depicted in different forms in the West during the first half of the twentieth century. At that time, a peaceful French Canada imagined it was expanding by branching out demographically and geographically to form the great “French-Canadian crescent”—a demographic that was, in fact, due to a thinning of the population as a result of emigration in the late nineteenth century. Thinkers preferred to see the exodus of hundreds of thousands of people as a symbol of the growth of the nation, which would ultimately extend from Boston to Winnipeg in a northern arcing pattern.

Jack Warwick (1988), the first scholar to study the “literary North” in Canada, emphasized the link between expansion ideology and the literary exploration of Québec’s North in his 1968 essay *The Long Journey*: he indicated that the idea of the *pays d’en haut* or “upper country” was referred to in an impressive amount of literature devoted to expansion, and was associated with the nineteenth century and perpetuated well before the twentieth. This “upper country” refers historically to the lands immediately north of the St. Lawrence River, but the author of *Erres boréales* chose to chart his expansion straight toward the Arctic as far north as Baffin Island, with no other barrier than Greenland, which became French Canada’s neighbour.

This utopian charting appears more complex when its many facets are considered: links with the past, interference of English-speaking America, cooperative economic system and francization. In this novel, the French-Canadian nation opens up and develops freely toward the North, emphasizing social values and creating ties with the Inuit in disconcerting harmony. The *other threatening people* are completely absent from the imaginary geography of French Canada. English Canada and the United States are off the map, while compatriotic Greenland is on, as the new, Danish

*neighbour*. The author has created an easy national triumph here, although it is marked by a departure from ethnic theories popular at the time as it provides a positive representation of the Inuit world.

It is not so much the expansion that is unsettling for the modern reader as the *anti-ecological* position, albeit fascinating, taken by the author. Laurin proudly and enthusiastically depicts action that seems utterly inconceivable for the contemporary reader: the deliberate, desirable and systematic warming of the Arctic, enabling Québec to make strong colonial inroads into the North, beyond its present political borders up to Baffin Island—which becomes francized—and to Labrador, acquired from Newfoundland at a high price.<sup>3</sup>

Although fantasy, the novel is based on a keen knowledge of the Arctic world. Laurin refers to a characteristic demonstrated by geographers today (Pouliot, 1998)—that the Arctic Circle is not consistently equidistant from the pole, so the North Shore of Québec is one the regions where the north extends the furthest south in the world: “they exposed the major culprit in this abnormal thermal deflection where our shores meet: the cold Labrador current”.<sup>4</sup> What constitutes a distinctive feature for the geographer is an anomaly for the author that must be corrected: in *Erres boréales*, Laurin uses technology to push back the cold zone toward the Arctic Circle and make the lands between the St. Lawrence and Ungava Bay—or even further north—fertile.

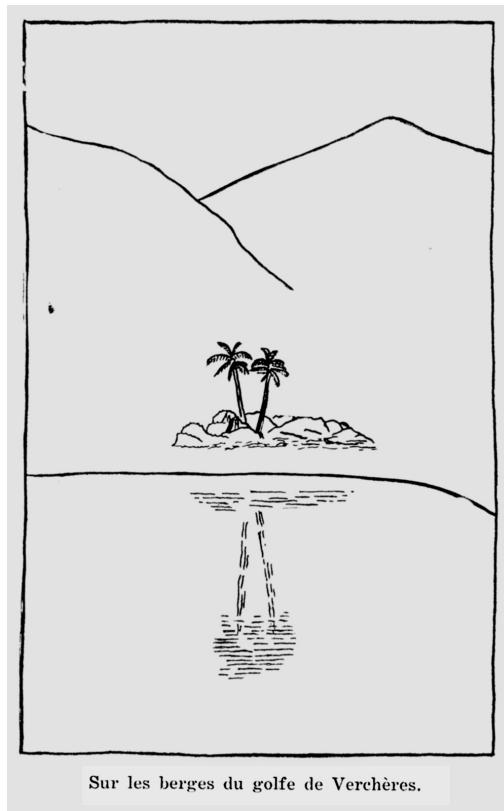
---

<sup>3</sup> The border between Québec and Labrador is still in dispute. The line was established in 1927 through a unilateral decision by the Privy Council in London favouring Newfoundland, which was not yet part of Canada. Québec has always challenged that decision. The division created two regions: the *North Shore*, i.e., the portion of Labrador along the St. Lawrence River remaining in Québec; and the rest of the northeast peninsula of Québec forming present-day *Labrador*, which is now under the jurisdiction of the Canadian province Newfoundland and Labrador.

<sup>4</sup> The original French quote read: “de cet anormal fléchissement thermique à la rencontre de nos côtes, ils dénoncèrent le grand coupable: le courant froid du Labrador” (Laurin, 1944, p. 13; the novel is hereinafter cited as *EB*, followed by the page number).

The narrative thus (1) serves French-Canadian expansion ideology by developing the nation beyond the English-speaking realm and in harmony with the aboriginals; and (2) emphasizes the ability of science to reverse climate by “tropicalizing” the North Shore, Labrador and the Arctic and making these regions more conducive to agriculture, development and habitation (see Figure 1).

**Fig. 1:** Drawing from *Erres boréales* (p. 97) illustrating a “tropicalized” island in the Arctic





## A “crusade against a natural enemy”<sup>5</sup>

The High Arctic was open, our people were saved.  
(*EB*, 16-17)

*Erres boréales* was the first novel by Armand Grenier (born in Lac-Saint-Jean, Québec in 1910), published in 1944 under the pseudonym Florent Laurin. In 1953, Grenier published a second novel, *Défricheur de hammada: Le roman d'un misanthrope évadé de l'Amérique*, under the name Guy-René de Plour; in that work, journalist Louis Galliène invents a type of greenhouse enabling him to operate a tropical farm in the Laurentians. Galliène is considered too individualistic by the woman he loves, and it is not until after a period of self-exile in Africa, where he builds domes designed to make the desert fertile (reflecting the author's ongoing interest in climate reversal), that he can hope to earn back the respect of his people. Moral values, utopias, technology, and the environment were thus the themes explored by this author, whose “stilted, pompous style”<sup>6</sup> was judged harshly by the critics.

One of the characters in *Erres boréales*, which is set in the future (in 1968), is a man by the name of Louis Gamache. In his youth, Gamache journeyed to the Arctic and got to know the Inuit. Now old, he returns to his country, but the Québec he finds has been transformed by major, hydro-powered heating units installed in the straits of the St. Lawrence River and the Arctic to warm the oceans and Arctic regions so that new French Canadian provinces could be established to the North of what has become Old Québec. The technological, patriotic narrative is accompanied by simple drawings and an interesting map of the imaginary provinces of French Canada, which extend as far north as the northern tip of neighbouring Greenland. Laurin—referred to by

---

<sup>5</sup> G.T., 1946, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> The original French quote read: “style ampoulé et artificiel” (Laurion, 1982, p. 328).

Jean-Louis Trudel as “our first artist of global warming”<sup>7</sup> in the history of science fiction—imagines what can be called the “southification” of the North, from the North Shore where thin black pines and the taiga have been replaced with lush forests, “up to the Arctic Circle”<sup>8</sup> where Fraser fir and Californian sequoia<sup>9</sup> now grow wonderfully.<sup>10</sup> Man’s natural enemy—the cold—has been conquered thanks to technology: global warming is a sign of the victory.

This “seemingly scientific, futuristic novel” in which “the characters [establish] a civilisation on the steppes of the tundra”<sup>11</sup> was favourably received by nationalistic critics when it was first published. Laurin’s lack of realism, heavy style, convoluted narrative and anti-ecological position did not have the same hold on their minds as the appealing territorial expansion of French Canada and the fantastic use of the climate- and nature-changing technology that paved the way for it: “you can see greenery and lush vegetation grow where there were only snowy solitudes,” wrote *La Revue populaire*; “a whole new world is springing forth in New Québec.”<sup>12</sup> The novel was an “epic adventure,” a “crusade,” an “amazing dream,” wrote a reviewer for *L’Action catholique*, in

---

<sup>7</sup> The original French: “notre premier artiste du réchauffement global” (Trudel, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> The original French: “à la hauteur du cercle polaire” (EB, 91).

<sup>9</sup> Trudel points out that “the entire novel reflects a very marked interest in the specific names of plants and minerals, no doubt due to the influence of naturalist Marie-Victorin, whose *Flore laurentienne* was acclaimed when it was published in 1935. The influence was such that the name Florent Laurin is no doubt a partial anagram of that title. The original French: “l’ensemble du roman témoigne d’un intérêt très marqué pour les noms précis de la végétation et des minerais. Il faut sans doute y voir l’influence du naturaliste Marie-Victorin, dont la *Flore laurentienne* avait fait date lors de sa parution en 1935. À tel point que le nom même de Florent Laurin est sans doute une anagramme partielle du titre de ce livre.” (Trudel, 2006)

<sup>10</sup> The original French: “à merveille le pin de Fraséride et le séquoyer californien” (EB, 92).

<sup>11</sup> The original French: “roman futuriste à l’allure scientifique” in which “les personnages [établissent] une civilisation aux steppes de la toundra” (Plante, 1944, p. 4).

<sup>12</sup> The original French: “on voit la verdure et une abondante végétation s’élever là où il n’y avait que solitudes enneigées; tout un monde nouveau naquit dans le Nouveau Québec” ([Anonyme], 1945, p. 5).

which young people “carry out a gigantic project to melt the ice and snow covering New Québec”.<sup>13</sup>

## The economic union of French Canadians in the conquest of the Far North

Although the novel is set in 1968, the work by the group supporting the climatic conquest of the Arctic—the “Jeune-Laurentie”—began in the 1940s and was intended to change Québec at that time through patriotic, territorial expansion. The influence of the Jeune-Laurentie, as Jean-Louis Trudel points out, was based on the social action of a real group, the Association des Jeunes Laurentiens, which was founded in 1936 and inspired by the ideas and action of an eminent thinker of the day—Lionel Groulx. In Laurin’s narrative, the project advocated by these young people targeted nothing less than “the formation of a colossal *North American* empire, the annexation (to a *free New France*) of several large islands in the Arctic Archipelago, including Baffin Island, which they gave the *fine name* Euryale”.<sup>14</sup> It would ensure, in particular, that “both continental and oceanic Labrador were politically united . . . with the large Québec bloc”.<sup>15</sup>

As soon as it was founded, the “Jeune-Laurentie” disclosed many of the premises and objectives underlying its project. As Québec expanded toward the North Shore, Labrador, Nunavik and the Arctic, the nation would find a way to

(a) be *North American*, and to disregard its English-speaking neighbours (as indicated by the map on the novel’s cover which

---

<sup>13</sup> The original French: “aventure épique,” “croisade,” “rêve magnifique” in which young people “exécutent une gigantesque dissolution des neiges et des glaciers qui couvrent le Nouveau-Québec” (G.T., 1946, p. 4).

<sup>14</sup> The original French: “la formation d’un colossal empire *nord-américain*, l’annexion à une *libre Nouvelle-France* de plusieurs grandes îles de l’archipel arctique, dont la Terre de Baffin, qu’ils baptisèrent par avance du *beau nom* d’Euriale” (EB, 13-14; my italics).

<sup>15</sup> The original French: “les deux Labradors, continental et océanique, se rattachent politiquement [...] au grand tout québécois” (EB, 51-52).

does not include Canada or the United States—see Figure 2). The nation would thus manage to “focus [its] entire, incoercible migration instinct on the Far North!”;<sup>16</sup>

(b) be *free*: with its independence, it would find the power to colonize the others—the Amerindians excluded from this utopia and the westernized Inuit;

(c) be faithful to its roots and thus to *New France*: “having gotten back to itself, its vital function of expansion and its deep-rooted calling as builder, the grass roots [of Québec] would surely repeat the wonders of the olden days” by pursuing the “call of the North” which was that of the descendants, settlers and *coureurs de bois*;<sup>17</sup>

(d) pursue its identity project in North America by replacing place names with *fine* French *names*: “what magical, soft, clear and resonant names, in the spirit of France, can be read on signs from place to place: Estèbe, Pommereau, Margry, Gorgendière, Abacourt, Grandmesnil, which follow Abélard, Pertuis and Crébillon” (see Figure 3).<sup>18</sup> For the reader, this francization of English names in the Arctic evokes the “re-inuktitutization” of the geography of Nunavut and Nunavik in the late twentieth century, when English place names were replaced with Inuktitut designations.

---

<sup>16</sup> The original French: “orienter tout entier vers le grand Nord [son] incoercible instinct de migration!” (*EB*, 11-12).

<sup>17</sup> The original French: “revenu à lui-même, à sa vitale fonction de rayonnement, à sa vocation invétérée de bâtisseur, [le] petit peuple [du Québec] renouvellerait sûrement les prodiges des anciens jours” (*EB*, 11-12).

<sup>18</sup> The original French: “quelles magiques appellations, douces, limpides et claironnantes comme le génie de la France, lit-on, d’espaces en espaces, sur les plaques indicatrices : Estèbe, Pommereau, Margry, Gorgendière, Abacourt, Grandmesnil, qui font suite aux Abélard, aux Pertuis et aux Crébillon” (*EB*, 51-52).

**Fig. 2:** Cover of *Erres boréales*, with a map showing Québec extending North, excluding Canada and the United States

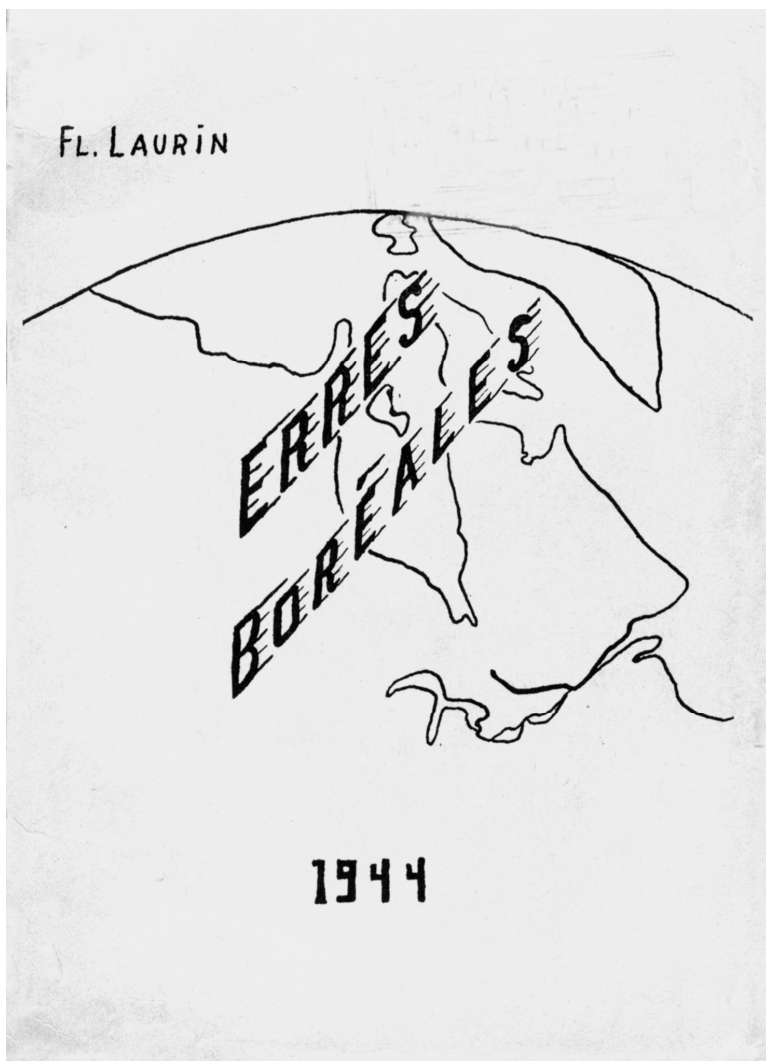


Fig. 3: Map accompanying *Erres boréales*, illustrating the towns in the North, with French names



Nationalistic, independent, respectful of traditions and the French language, the imaginary empire in *Erres boréales* is directly in line with the nationalistic movement in French Canada in the early twentieth century. It is also consistent with that movement through the innovative schemes it includes—the use of modern technology to *control* nature and *harness* the resources it contains—and the importance it places on cooperation in managing the development of the territory. The “Promised Land” of the Far North—acquired at the cost of formidable intervention in nature through the electrical heating of waters, ice and land—is settled by cities with cutting-edge technology and amenities: “the tactile extremities of a colossal nervous system,”<sup>19</sup> energetic and all-powerful, can be seen on the outskirts of cities linked by rapid air connections (“Tonight, at 10:00, he is taking a Québec-Arcticity special, which must reach Lescar tomorrow around 5:30”).<sup>20</sup> This territorial expansion was marked by a very French Canadian peculiarity: no one had to yield to the temptation of capitalism to achieve it, as the following dialogue indicates:

— Hey! Are you travellers?... are you from the old country?

— Yes, from Québec City!

— Oh, yeah! From the capital, and you’re not capitalists?

— Oh, no! We’ve all signed the Co-o.\*

— In that case, I’ll pour you a little glass of blue; it’s as light as azure and the colour of the flag.

\*Short form for the neologism “coœuvre” or joint undertaking (French Canadian economic union for the conquest of the Far North) (*EB*, 44-45)<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> The original French: “les extrémités tactiles d’un colossal système nerveux” (*EB*, 76).

<sup>20</sup> The original French: “Il prend ce soir, à dix heures, un spécial Québec-Arcticité, qui doit rallier Lescar demain vers cinq heures et demie” [*EB*, 197]).

<sup>21</sup> The original French: — Tenez! vous êtes des voyageurs?... du vieux pays?

— Oui, de Québec!

— Ah! bon! de la capitale, sans être tout de même des capitalistes?

— Pour ça, non! Nous signons tous de la Co-o.

— Dans ce cas, je vous verse un petit bleu; c’est léger comme l’azur et de la couleur du drapeau.

(*EB*, 44-45)

## New (converted) allies: the Inuit

Like the Montagnais in Alexandre Huot's 1927 novel, *L'Impératrice de l'Ungava*,<sup>22</sup> it is through music that the Inuit in *Erres boréales* best convey their heritage and the environment in which they live: musicians in Innu, their territory, give a concert in honour of the visitors from the South that features Inuit cosmogony. Thanks to the orchestra, "you could easily recognize the Big Dipper (literally the Big Bear in French), the Pleiades and Gemini the Twins in the figures in this indigenous ballet representing the caribou, the pack of dogs chasing the polar bear, and the two stones placed at the entrance of ancient igloos".<sup>23</sup> The picture Laurin paints of the Inuit world is one that is colonized, but also cultivated and coherent, and thus not as dark and gloomy as that portrayed by his contemporaries. The author, contrary to all expectation, shows a genuine liking for these people, and the representation he gives of them seems progressive in comparison to other authors in that day. The Inuit have the status of *subject*, a rare situation at that time in fiction:<sup>24</sup> they take part in the narration and dialogue, are referred to by name, make friends with the other

---

<sup>22</sup> In this novel, which describes Innu renaissance, Mentagna, the wife of the Grand Chief, plays a piece of music at the piano; the melody evokes a storm, the suspension of time, space and place: "A soft melody began. It was the rustling of the wind in the forest. The explorers lost all notion of time, space and place. They let themselves be transported in the thick woods of the north. Now a terrible storm came up. The gusting wind was whistling. Then the storm died down. The first notes of a primitive dance were heard. It was a frantic saraband, in which you could have sworn that you heard the cries of savages." The original French: "Une douce mélodie commença. C'était le bruissement du vent dans la forêt. Les explorateurs perdirent la notion du temps, de l'espace, du lieu. Ils se laissèrent transporter dans les grands bois du nord. C'était maintenant une tempête terrible. La rafale sifflait. Puis la tempête s'apaisa. Les premières notes d'une danse sauvage se firent entendre. Ce fut une sarabande effrénée, où on aurait juré entendre les cris des sauvages." (Huot, 2006, p. 103-104)

<sup>23</sup> The original French: "on put facilement reconnaître la grande ourse, les pléiades et les gémeaux dans les figures destinées à représenter, dans ce ballet indigène, le caribou, la meute des chiens à la poursuite de l'ours blanc, et les deux pierres placées à l'entrée des anciens igloos" (*EB*, 142-143).

<sup>24</sup> See Chartier, 2005, on this topic.



characters on an equal footing. The environment in which they live inspires admiration rather than fear and loathing: these people, “long considered the most disinherited in the world”<sup>25</sup> now live in palaces. The “standard Eskimo house” includes “magnificent serpentine marble floors specked with yellowish spherulite and covered here and there with polar bear or muskox skins”.<sup>26</sup> Further on, you could see “sofas padded with shiny seal pelts, rustic drawings embroidered on purple linen fluttering on soft green walls”.<sup>27</sup> However, Laurin resolves two major differences between the French Canadians and the Inuit through the assimilation of the latter: language and religion.

The Inuit adopt French, convert to Catholicism and become integrated into French Canada, while retaining territory and rights related to their way of life. In this social and political utopia, they favourably replace the people traditionally considered “the others” in Québec—the English Canadians and Americans, who are totally absent from the narrative. When bilingualism is mentioned, it is in reference to the Danish spoken in Greenland: “a nice French Canadian must be able to speak the langue of each of his allies”.<sup>28</sup> In this novel, nationalistic French Canada thus found new allies who, through an alliance with the aboriginals,<sup>29</sup> enable them to forget their minority situation in North America (see Figure 4).

---

<sup>25</sup> The original French: “longtemps réputé le plus déshérité de la terre” (*EB*, 113).

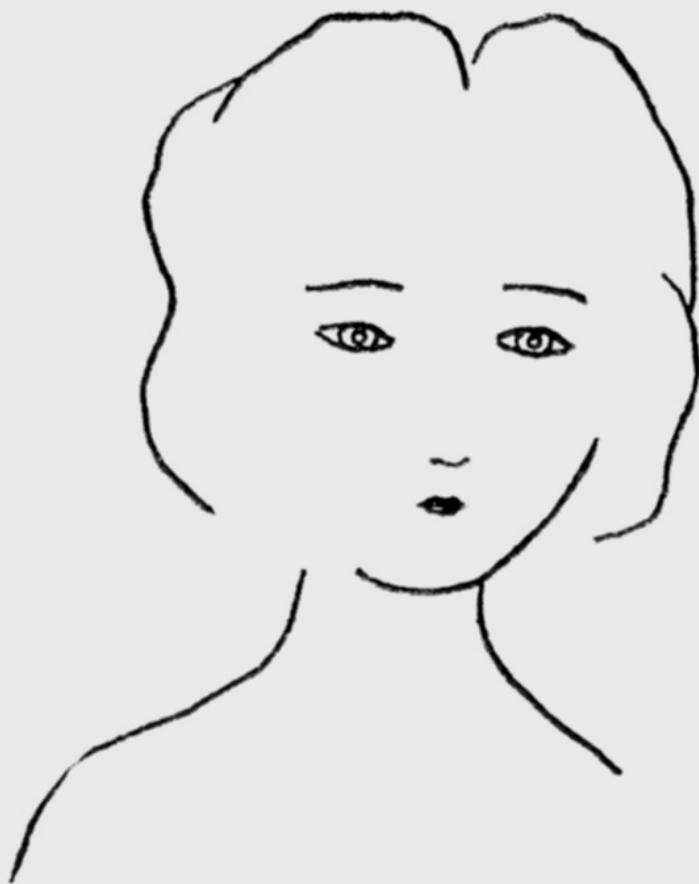
<sup>26</sup> The original French: “sompueux plancher de porphyre vert taché de sphérolithe jaunâtre, couvert ça et là de tapis naturels de peaux d’ours blanc ou de bœufs musqués” (*EB*, 137).

<sup>27</sup> The original French: “des sofas capitonnés de luisantes pelisses de phoque, des dessins rustiques brodés sur des lins mauves flottaient sur les murs vert tender” (*EB*, 137-139).

<sup>28</sup> The original French: “un Canadien gentil doit pouvoir s’exprimer dans la langue de chacun de ses allies”<sup>28</sup> (*EB*, 151).

<sup>29</sup> Like in *L’Impératrice de l’Ungava*, where the French Canadians anticipate an alliance with the Amerindians.

Fig. 4: Drawing of a young Inuit, Toutillia Kamagniak,  
taken from *Erres boréales* (p. 145)



Toutillia Kamagniak

## Nature serving “expansion”

In this narrative, the cold Labrador current is the enemy that prevents man from taking advantage of the resources of the North: technology is therefore used to warm and colonize the region, and thus pave the way for the inescapable expansion of the French-Canadian nation. By harnessing the rivers the nation produces the hydroelectric power it needs for this project, which is carried out in cooperation and agreement with the Inuit: “Put up a fitting obstacle to this powerful, gigantic drift [the cold current from Labrador], stem its course if you can, and you will see a lush vegetation zone vastly farther north.”<sup>30</sup> This obstacle would be a “heat barrier” made up of “submarine electrical nodes”<sup>31</sup> that heat the water and the climate. While a few concerns about climatic warming can be discerned here and there (for example, the idea of a dyke is rejected because “it would disturb the physical economics of the hemisphere”<sup>32</sup>), Laurin is very enthusiastic about this control of nature. By superimposing time (one character returns to the country after an extended absence), the author provides for a comparison of the desolate Arctic *before* and the developed Arctic *after*, to convince the reader of the relevance of his schemes. He acts as a visionary, imagining what will become of the Churchill dam in Labrador and anticipating that the melting of the ice will open up new sea routes between Europe and Asia. For today’s reader, this enthusiasm seems naïve and worrisome: it challenges the values on which our interpretation of facts and events are based, and consequently our interpretation.

Despite its stylistic weakness and drawn-out plot, *Erres boréales*

---

<sup>30</sup> The original French: “Opposez un digne obstacle à l’emportement de cette dérive gigantesque [le courant froid du Labrador], enrayez, si vous pouvez, son cours, vous verrez remonter d’un bon démesuré vers le nord la zone de grande végétation” (EB, 13).

<sup>31</sup> The original French: “barrière thermique” made up of “ganglions électriques sous la mer” (EB, 152-153).

<sup>32</sup> The original French: “elle bouleverserait toute l’économie physique de l’hémisphère” (EB, 13).

can be considered one of the first environmental novels: although the premise that nature must be subjugated by man raises scepticism today, it had long been an accepted idea when the novel was published. Through his themes and utopias, Laurin is one of the only authors of his time to envision climate change and its effects on human geography. Definitely anti-ecological, this novel positions the North as an instrument that knowledge and power can transform for the benefit of man, showing as a victory what our time considers its greatest danger. Through its triumphalism, the novel ultimately highlights what can be called the “negativism” of our environmental thinking: essentially *reacting* to climate change by rightly proposing plans to *fight* and *reduce* it, and being reluctant to consider the possibilities of man and nature’s adaptation to these changes, some of which as this novel indicates are not necessarily inconveniences.

## References

- [Anonyme] (1945) : “Nouveautés littéraires. *Erres boréales* de Florent Laurin”. In *La Revue populaire*. Vol. 37, no. 5, July, p. 5.
- Boia, Lucian (1998): *Pour une histoire de l’imaginaire*. Paris: Les Belles lettres.
- Chartier, Daniel (2005): “Au-delà il n’y a plus rien, plus rien que l’immensité désolée” : problématiques de l’histoire de la représentation des Inuits, des récits des premiers explorateurs aux œuvres cinématographiques”. In *Revue internationale d’études canadiennes*. No. 31, pp. 177-196.
- Chartier, Daniel (2000): *L’émergence des classiques*. Montréal: Fides, “Nouvelles études québécoises” series.
- G.T. (1946): “Chronique des livres. *Erres boréales* de Florent Laurin”. In *L’Action catholique*, May 1, p. 4.
- Huot, Alexandre (2006 [1927]): *L’Impératrice de l’Ungava*. Montréal: Imaginaire | Nord, “Jardin de givre” series.

- Laurin, Florent [pseudonyme d'Armand Grenier] (1944): *Erres boréales*. [s.l.]: [s.é.].
- Laurion, Gaston (1982): “*Erres boréales et Défricheur de Hammada*, romans de Florent Laurin et Guy René de Plour”. In Maurice Lemire (ed.): *Dictionnaire des œuvres littéraires du Québec. Volume 3: 1940-1959*. Montréal: Fides, p. 328.
- Lespérance [pseudonyme] (1944): “Littérature et Beaux-Arts. *Erres boréales*”. In *La Presse*, October 7, p. 32.
- Plante, Rodolphe (1944): “Un roman original. *Erres boréales* de Florent Laurin”. In *L'Action catholique*, November 8, p. 4.
- Plour, Guy-René de (1952): *Défricheur de hammada. Le roman d'un misanthrope évadé de l'Amérique*. Québec: Les Éditions Laurin, 229 p.
- Pouliot, Yvan (1998): “Le Québec dans le monde nordique”. In *Le Naturaliste canadien*. Vol. 122, no. 2, Summer, pp. 45-53.
- Trudel, Jean-Louis (2006): “Iconographie de la SFCF (7)”. In *Culture des futurs*: [http://culturedesfuturs.blogspot.com/2006/04/iconographie-de-la-sfcf-7\\_15.html](http://culturedesfuturs.blogspot.com/2006/04/iconographie-de-la-sfcf-7_15.html) (web site consulted on August 18, 2007).
- Vigneault, Gilles (1967): *Les gens de mon pays*. Montréal: Nouvelles éditions de l'Arc, “de l'Escarfel” series.
- Warwick, Jack (1968): *The Long Journey: Literary Themes of French Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Watt-Cloutier Sheila (2007): “A Human Issue”. In *Our Planet*. The magazine of the United National Environment Programme, May, pp. 14-15.

**Received:** July 7, 2009

**Accepted:** October 10, 2009