



CANADIAN HERITAGE RIVERS SYSTEM LE RÉSEAU DES RIVIÈRES DU PATRIMOINE CANADIEN

A Background Study for Nomination of the Ottawa River Under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System

Une étude de base pour la mise en candidature de la rivière des Outaouais au Réseau des rivières du patrimoine canadien

2005



Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee Comité de désignation patrimoniale de la rivière des Outaouais

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The Ottawa River By Night

Poem donated by Margaret Atwood in support of Ottawa River heritage designation

In the full moon you dream more. I know where I am: the Ottawa River far up, where the dam goes across. Once, midstorm, in the wide cold water upstream, two long canoes full of children tipped, and they all held hands and sang till the chill reached their hearts. I suppose in our waking lives that's the best we can hope for, if you think of that moment stretched out for years.

Once, my father and I paddled seven miles along a lake near here at night, with the trees like a pelt of dark hackles, and the waves hardly moving. In the moonlight the way ahead was clear and obscure both. I was twenty and impatient to get there, thinking such a thing existed.

None of this is in the dream, of course. Just the thick squareedged shape of the dam, and eastward the hills of sawdust from the mill, gleaming as white as dunes. To the left, stillness; to the right, the swirling foam of rapids over sharp rocks and snags; and below that, my father, moving away downstream in his boat, so skilfully although dead, I remember now; but no longer as old. He wears his grey hat, and evidently he can see again. There now, he's around the corner. He's heading eventually to the sea. Not the real one, with its sick whales and oil slicks, but the other sea, where there can still be safe arrivals. Only a dream, I think, waking to the sound of nothing. Not nothing. I heard: it was a beach, or shore, and someone far off, walking. Nowhere familiar. Somewhere I've been before. It always takes a long time to decipher where you are.

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