

What is dreamed and what is lost, Alas Babylon

Our City leaders stand in the glare of critical decisions everyday. While some issues present themselves as immediate, serious, even grave, others seem routine and insignificant. Our leaders likely lose sleep over what appear to be the big issues, but what seem to be matters of routine are dealt with down the path of least resistance. So it has been with permitting the plan of subdivision that will see the last wilderness area in the City of Ottawa cut down and bulldozed. Subdivisions are a way of life for Ottawa. Politicians are able to rest, assured that one more won't hurt anything.

When Philemon Wright came to the Ottawa area 211 years ago the Algonquin people who met him told him to go home. They said that they knew how settlement and development would destroy their way of life, undermine their economy and destroy the eco-systems upon which they relied. After some consultation Wright agreed to become a fellow Algonquin Chief and abide by Algonquin Law as long as he would be permitted to establish a farm and lumber mill. Within a hundred years, Wright's mill and those that followed cleared the entire Ottawa River Watershed of the great forests that had been the home to the Algonquin for at least the past four to five thousand years. Algonquin people took refuge in their traditional Winter hunting territories in disparate communities that existed on the edge of extinction. For the last 150 years these communities have struggled for recognition, preservation of their cultural values and protection of what is left of their homeland.

Philemon Wright is often considered the founder of the Ottawa-Hull region. He was the first developer. The great city of Ottawa emerged from the wealth extracted from the forests of the Algonquin that were processed in the industry that he began. Today, Ottawa is a beautiful city. It is the Nation's Capital. Ottawa is a centre of knowledge, justice and democracy. Ottawa is where the two founding colonial cultures merge and interact in complement with one another. But it is also becoming a city of cheap urban sprawl where the real costs of human development continue to be externalized in the destruction of the natural environment. And truthfully, there isn't much left.

The solutions for Ottawa's relentless urban sprawl are not the destruction of what is left of the South March Highlands. Such a plan simply represents poor municipal planning. Trading wildlands and productive

agricultural land for multiple “3 bedrooms and a garage” along with another economically marginal strip mall is just not reasonable. But it is the path of least resistance. It means that city politicians do not have to change the status quo and upset the industry, which is their principle political campaign funder.

Right now the South March Highlands is the largest “public” park in Ottawa and it doesn’t cost the City a penny. “Public” because people use it. They go there to give their pets some exercise, they ski and walk and take their children there to get them out of the house, teach them about nature and they go there to renew themselves, to enjoy solitudes and to catch sight of the co-habitants of this earth who really don’t give a damn about people or money or profit. The Highlands is a healthy place. All of the wonderful landscapers in Ottawa could not re-create such a beautiful dynamic functioning eco-system.

There are spirits in the South March Highlands that do not want this beautiful land to die. These spirits have not only made themselves heard by those who live nearby or those who use the Highlands but they are speaking to people from near and far who have not even seen this place. Perhaps these spirits, like the Algonquin, have taken refuge in the highland and quietly, patiently waited, taking solace in the company of people who respect the land. But surely, they are crying out for help now and many people hear them. The Algonquin people from both sides of the river have heard them and we do not want their home, our home to die. If the City of Ottawa permits the chainsaws and bulldozers to startup on Monday morning then what was once an insignificant routine decision by city leaders will haunt this City until it is nothing but ashes. Once destroyed the pieces of the Highlands will not be able to be restored by the hands of men. Ottawa will be a City of shame. Not only will it have taken too much, but it will have taken all of what the Algonquins and the Creator had. Philemon Wright’s dream will become a living nightmare.

We cannot turn back the clock. We cannot reinvent the sustainable world in which our ancestors lived. But we can stop the destruction of what cannot be replaced and we can build a City that respects our human qualities. We need to touch the earth from time to time. We need to see and understand the diversity of natural eco-systems as neighbours. We need not to be fearful of the wild. We need to teach our children to respect our leaders, but only if our leaders respect the sacredness of the land, our children’s land and of the hundreds of generations that will follow them.

If Mayor Jim Watson were a real leader he would know enough to realize that the incremental destruction of the last wildlands in the city needs to stop. As a real Chief he would be on the side of the people and the land. Jim Watson would be calling a special meeting of City Council and presenting an emergency motion to halt the death of the South March Highlands. And if this didn't work, as a real Chief, he would go to the Beaver Pond Forest on Monday morning and chain himself to the first tree to be cut.

In Peace and Friendship,

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