

## Founding Fathers (in a Tailings Pond)

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Article abstract

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Image credit: Ruth Beer, 2022

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## FOUNDING FATHERS (IN A TAILINGS POND)

MELANIE DENNIS UNRAU

*This speculative essay uses an imaginary (and non-existent) comic to call a tar-sands industry founder who may have thought of himself as a goose back to Fort McMurray to see how waterfowl fare in tailings ponds. It treats S.C. Ells (1878-1971), an early-20th-century Canadian Department of Mines engineer who was also an amateur writer and illustrator, as a colonial founder not only of the tar-sands industry but also of literary and visual representations of the industry and the Athabasca region. Drawing inspiration from artist and former tar-sands worker Kate Beaton's "Founding Fathers" comics, it compares the linkages between humans and waterfowl in Ells's works and in Beaton's 2014 webcomic "Ducks." By doing so, it takes Ells on a time-travelling adventure and homecoming tour in the petromodern dystopia that has become his legacy.*

*Cet essai spéculatif utilise une bande dessinée imaginaire (et non existente) pour rappeler à Fort McMurray un fondateur de l'industrie des sables bitumineux, qui se considérait peut-être comme une oie, pour voir comment la sauvagine s'en sort dans les bassins de résidus. Elle traite S.C. Ells (1878-1971), un ingénieur du ministère canadien des Mines du début du XXe siècle, qui était aussi un écrivain amateur et un illustrateur, d'un fondateur colonial non seulement de l'industrie des sables bitumineux, mais aussi des représentations littéraires et visuelles de l'industrie et de la région de l'Athabasca. S'inspirant des bandes dessinées, «Founding Fathers», de l'artiste et ancienne travailleuse des sables bitumineux, Kate Beaton, elle compare les rapports entre les humains et la sauvagine créés dans les œuvres d'Ells et dans la bande dessinée en ligne « Ducks » de Beaton (2014). Ce faisant, elle accompagne Ells dans une aventure dans le temps et une tournée dans la dystopie pétro-moderne qui est devenue son héritage.*

## INTRODUCTION

“**F**ounding Fathers (in a Tailings Pond)” is a comic that I wish existed—a version of comic artist and former tar-sands worker Kate Beaton’s Founding Fathers webcomic series that would poke fun at one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the Canadian tar-sands industry. In the absence of such a comic, this speculative essay creates an anachronistic encounter inspired by Beaton’s representations of U.S. Founding Fathers in 21<sup>st</sup>-century shopping malls and amusement parks. It calls S.C. Ells (1878-1971)—a Canadian Department of Mines engineer and an amateur writer and illustrator who liked to be referred to as “the father of the tar sands” (McCook; “Father”)—back to visit Fort McMurray and the Athabasca region. Comparing representations of waterfowl in Ells’s works and in Beaton’s 2014 webcomic “Ducks” (and suggesting that Ells may have thought of himself as a goose), it imagines taking Ells on a time-travelling, homecoming tour to see how waterfowl fare in a tar-sands tailings pond. This essay treats Ells as a colonial founder not only of the tar-sands industry but also of literary and visual representations of the industry and the region—a proud and deeply flawed ‘father,’ visionary, and nature-lover who failed to conceive of the destruction and harm that would become his legacy.

## LOOPING BACK ON FOUNDING FATHERS

**K**ate Beaton’s comics series “Founding Fathers (in a Mall)” and “Founding Fathers (Stuck in an Amusement Park)” imagine famous American historical figures in ubiquitous 21<sup>st</sup>-century settings. In the first panel of one two-panel comic drawn in Beaton’s rough, cartoonish style and titled “Infinity,” a man in 18<sup>th</sup>-century garb points to a roller coaster and expresses to another his hope that the “chain of carriages” will bring them “home”—presumably back to their own time and place (see Figure 1). In the second panel, the second founding father, who has seen the trajectory of the roller coaster, dashes the other’s hopes, saying, in one speech balloon, “It is



Figure 1: "Infinity" from the series *Founding Fathers (Stuck in an Amusement Park)* by Kate Beaton.

merely a circle of violence," and, in a second balloon, "and then you retch."

"Infinity" can be read as meta-commentary on what Daniel Marrone calls Beaton's anachronistic practice of "a history that is constantly folding over on itself" (176): the *Founding Fathers* comics' seemingly infinite loops of jokes and juxtapositions represent the Fathers as variously appalled and enthralled by the dystopian, late-capitalist ends to which their principles and visions have been applied. At another level, the minutes-long roller coaster loop serves as an allegory for the violent project of homemaking on someone else's land—a "slow disturbance" that links its founders to ongoing dispossession, genocide, and harm through what architecture and media scholar Rafico Ruiz describes as infrastructural "chains of settler colonial materiality and accountability" (7). The point in the roller coaster loop where "you retch" is a temporal marker where past promises, as seen from the back loop, are emptied out and revealed as having been part of the "circle of violence" all along.

Beaton's roller-coaster scene anticipates urban geographer Stephanie Wakefield's application of resilience ecology theory to the geological era now known as the *Anthropocene* in *Anthropocene Back Loop*.

Like other natural-cultural systems, the Anthropocene is subject to patterns of growth, stability, fragmentation, dissolution, and adaptation that can be imagined as a figure eight, with opportunities for experimentation, resistance, and change arising especially in the back loop, where the logics and structures of the entire system are in question. Wakefield considers the 20<sup>th</sup>-century era of megaprojects such as dams and tar-sands mines as exemplifying the front-loop sense of “being a part of an order that was going somewhere better” (26)—like a roller coaster chugging upward on its tracks. The back loop, in contrast, is “our present, the moment of the naming of the Anthropocene (as a failure), in which the past (front loop) has not disappeared, like points trailing behind on a line, but is erupting in unpredictable ways in the present” (32). What is revealed in the eruptions of climate change, precarity, fragmentation, and confusion is that the modernist-colonialist-capitalist system has always been a “circle of violence.”

Now a celebrated professional artist known for her *Hark! A Vagrant* comics, Beaton finished her undergraduate degree in history at Mount Allison University and then, to pay off her student loans, joined the droves of workers from the Maritimes in Fort McMurray during the oil boom between 2006 and 2008. It was while she was working in Fort McMurray and drawing at night that Beaton first began publishing her absurd historical, feminist comics online (Shimo). Beaton has published two scrolling webcomics about living and working at a tar-sands mine—“Night Shift” and “Ducks”—but there are no Founding Fathers comics about the tar sands. Following Patricia Yaeger’s invitation to treat energy sources as modes of material and cultural production, however, we might describe Beaton’s works as petro-media and cultural forms that can be traced to the tar sands in their place, time, and mode of production (even those not explicitly ‘about’ the tar sands). For this experimental essay-as-imagined-comic, I adopt Beaton’s roller coaster as theoretical framework and as anachronistic method for reading (representations of) waterfowl in the tar sands.<sup>1</sup> Like Beaton, I approach “founding fathers” with skepticism and irony, rooted in Indigenous and decolonial critique of what Métis scholar and poet Emma LaRocque calls the “colonial sub-

terfuge behind the fantastic hero-ification of the White man” (36), and also in feminist and womanist critique of the dubious notion that the violent, dominant, and oppressive patriarchal father figure is necessary for the development of human individuals, families, or institutions.<sup>2</sup>

### FATHER GOOSE

**S**idney Clarke Ells was a white mining expert and civil servant, a stubborn, hands-on innovator who was sent in 1913 by the Canadian Department of Mines to investigate the tar-sands deposits in Treaty Eight territory, on the homelands of Cree, Chipewyan Dene, and Métis peoples near the Hudson’s Bay Company fur-trading post of Fort McMurray. Ells would continue to work primarily on the Athabasca tar sands until his retirement in 1945, surveying and mining the underground deposits, paving experimental roads with asphalt made from bituminous sand, and developing early methods for bitumen separation. The 1931 photograph of Ells in Figure 2 shows Ells seemingly in the middle of work, holding a pail, with the Abasand Oil Plant behind him and the steep shore of the Horse River beside him. After former Abasand owner Max Ball first called Ells “the father of the Alberta bituminous sand research and development” in 1950 (quoted in Ells, *Recollections* 101), Ells encouraged his own reputation as “the father of the tar sands” (see, for example, McCook; “Father”). The Sidney Clarke Ells fonds at Library and Archives Canada reveal that Ells spent much of his career and his retirement defending and reasserting this reputation—in media interviews, letters, and multiple versions of and addendums to his memoir—against those of better-known and better-liked founders like Karl A. Clark and Robert Fitzsimmons. I picture Ells waiting beyond the grave, eager to be summoned up by future generations as a hero and innovator, but our summons to 2022—to “code red for humanity” (“Secretary-General”), to an Athabasca region treated as a sacrifice zone for extraction, and to the back loop of the tar-sands roller coaster—is a summons to a moment of reckoning and of asking where the founding fathers led us astray.

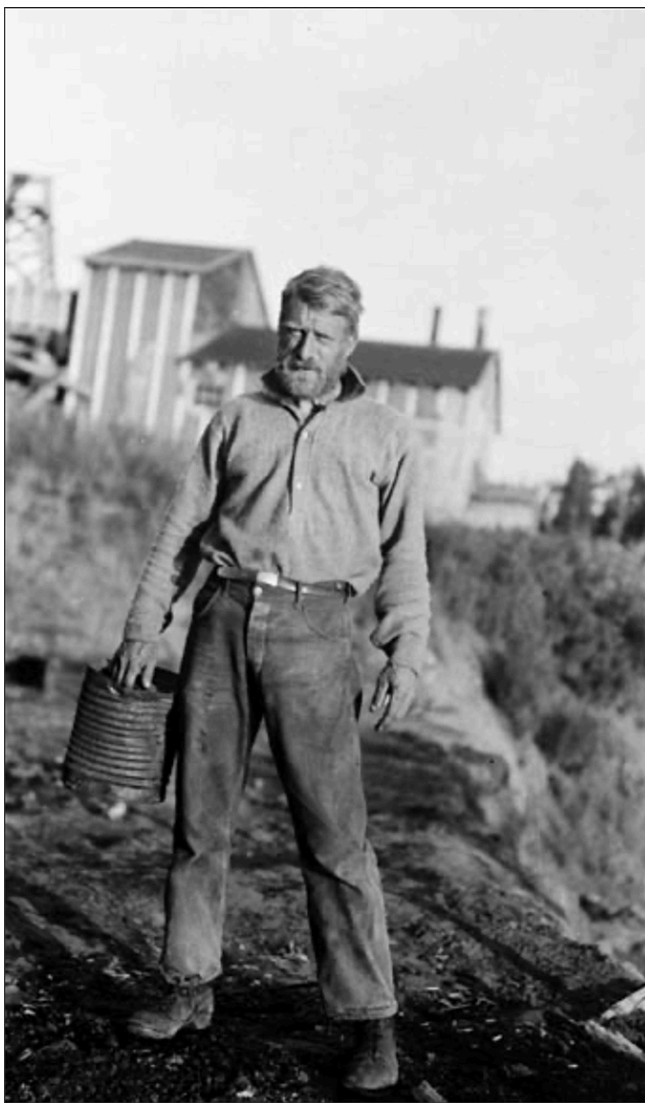


Figure 2: Sydney Ells at tar sand plant, Waterways, Alberta, 1931. Photo by H.S. Spence.

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While Ells seldom receives the credit he deserves for founding the tar-sands industry, it is even more rare for Ells to be acknowledged as a precursor and perhaps founder of colonial literary and visual representations of the tar sands.<sup>3</sup> Ells was an author of old-fashioned amateur poetry, short stories, histories, and pencil-drawn illustrations about life in the Athabasca region, first created as Christmas cards for friends and family or as contributions to the *Canadian Geographical Journal* or the *Canadian Mining Journal*, and later collected in the book *Northland Trails*, published in 1938 and in an expanded edition in 1956. Ells's amateur writing was part of the popular-poetry tradition that flourished in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chasar). Judging from the 26 reviews of *Northland Trails* published primarily in newspapers and geological and mining periodicals included in the Sidney Clarke Ells fonds, Ells's book was well received by a wide range of readers. Ells is seldom remembered today as an artist or writer in Fort McMurray,<sup>4</sup> not to mention in Canada, but he made significant contributions to the cultural and aesthetic project of laying claim to land that was already occupied as the sentient homeland of Indigenous peoples—making it seem available for extraction as a beautiful but empty hinterland.<sup>5</sup>

Reading Ells's memoir *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands* and his technical reports with a view to how they contributed to a colonial visualization of the tar sands that emphasizes "industriousness" (39),<sup>6</sup> sociologists Debra Davidson and Mike Gismondi conclude that Ells "literally took the measure of the place, concentrating his geologist's eye on verticality and not on surfaces" (47). Literary scholar Jon Gordon likewise reads only Ells's *Recollections*, focusing on two poems by Ells used as the epigraph and epilogue. Gordon agrees with Davidson and Gismondi but adds that a repressed tension between "modernity and wilderness" propelled Ells's work and poetics (56), because Ells also loved the land he sought to conquer (57). Gordon's observations bear out in the rest of Ells's creative oeuvre, where the tension between modernity and wilderness is a prevalent and unresolved "energy unconscious" (Yaeger 306). *Northland Trails* vacillates between exultation in the

seemingly untouched nature of “the northland” (as seen through the colonial myth of *terra nullius*) and celebration of the rugged individualism of white engineers, prospectors, and explorers determined to industrialize and modernize the North. The collection avoids the clash between Ells’s contradictory roles as lover and colonizer of the Athabasca region. It does this, in part, through the use of migratory geese—who travel between north and south like Ells did between Fort McMurray and Ottawa—as a subtle metaphor for Ells. The goose metaphor indigenizes Ells while also offering a distanced visualization of the tar sands that separates him from responsibility for the harms done by the industry he was so proud to have founded.

Perhaps the most obvious example of Ells’s affinity with geese is “My Symphony,” an illustrated ballad in rhyming pentameter and trimeter first published in the *Canadian Geographical Journal* in 1939 and included in the 1956 edition of *Northland Trails* (see Figure 3). In it, the Athabasca region awakens with the arrival of the geese in spring,

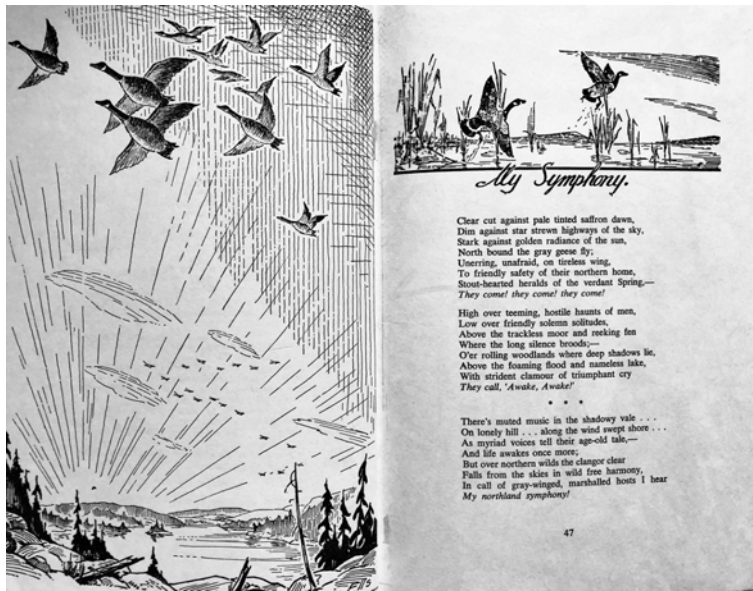


Figure 3: “My Symphony” and illustration by S.C. Ells. *Northland Trails*, 1956 edition.

an annual event that often coincided with Ells's own arrival from Ottawa. The poem is preceded by a full-page drawing of a northern sunrise scene with Canada geese in flight in both foreground and background, a landscape with a station at its base for the viewer to stand and watch the geese fly over. Or, the viewer might raise their arms, imagining conducting the symphony or taking flight themselves. A second image above the poem shows two geese lifting off from a body of water. The lines of the poem also seem to take flight, especially in the repetitive, emphatic, italicized lines that close each stanza and align the poet's ode or song with the honking of the geese. This visual-literary text positions the speaker, and Ells himself, as both a natural resident of the North who prefers the calls of geese over the symphonies of the city and a modernizing hero who brings change to the region.

Despite the attention to detail and realism in Ells's drawings of geese, the words of the poem reveal an inattention to the geese that suggest that "My Symphony" is more about Ells than the waterfowl. The descriptive language of the poem is focused on telling rather than showing, highlighting the contrast and visibility of the geese but, aside from the unimaginative description of Canada geese as "gray," not actually describing their appearances. Geese arriving from the south are described using adjectives that highlight characteristics Ells admired and emulated: *clear cut*, *stark*, *unerring*, *unafraid*, *tireless*, and *stout-hearted*. In contrast, the territory that the geese awaken in the second stanza is represented as *terra nullius*, as "trackless," silent, and "nameless," into which the speaker seems to hear the geese call "*Awake, Awake!*" The geese, who arrive as "gray-winged, marshalled hosts," calling out with "strident clamour of triumphant cry," recall not only the World War I veteran's own military-style discipline and work ethic but also colonial occupation, so that the sounds the speaker hears in the third stanza as "wild free harmony" also serve as the war cry of an occupying force (47). The third stanza contrasts the "muted music" of other northern animals and beings against the stridency and noise of the geese, seemingly justifying Ells's own aggressive behaviour and colonial motivations (as expressed elsewhere in

his celebrations of men who “push the frontier back” and “who won’t take ‘No!’” [*Northland* 43; 32]).

Geese are treated as literary devices in the poem, emptied of goose-being and imbued with human imagery and motivations. As a migrant whose indigeneity and belonging in the Athabasca region are never questioned, and as a loud and brash being whose arrival and departure signify seasonal change, the goose serves as a convenient metaphor for Ells to assert his belonging at the same time as his role as an agent of change. In this sense, Ells represents himself as one of the geese, flying and honking along with the natural rhythms of the wilderness while also asserting the right to modernize and change the region. The arrival of the geese also serves as pathetic fallacy, suggesting that all the beauty and the noise are a celebration of Ells and his arrival, so that the honk-like calls at the end of the first stanza—“*They come! they come! they come!*”—amount to the land itself exclaiming *you’re here!* to celebrate the arrival of the mining engineer. Calling the sounds of geese a symphony is anthropomorphism and an act of composition akin to the human-centred framing of the visual images. Like Ells’s memoir titled *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands*, “My Symphony” situates individual geese within a bigger picture and a grander narrative, while also highlighting one exceptional human-goose as the composer or conductor of it all. It suggests that everything that happens as part of the symphony (or the long trajectory of the industry) was known and planned from the beginning by the conductor (or the “father of the tar sands”).

“My Symphony” constitutes a founding visualization and “literary land claim” for the tar-sands industry (Fee). The framing of the visual imagery and the poem claim the symphony as being *by, for, and about* Ells more than the geese. Ells uses this sense of belonging and entitlement to make the symphony, the geese, and the land *mine*, ignoring the prior claims of Indigenous peoples and instead claiming the land for himself and the Canadian state as an extractive zone—that is, *as a mine*. Using a strategy of verticality that differs from but is related to the one that Davidson and Gismondi observe in his geological reports, Ells adopts the perspective of a goose’s-eye view, or what Donna Haraway has famously called a “god-trick of

seeing everything from nowhere,” a pretended objectivity that denies “the particularity and embodiment of all vision” (189). This strategy is a form of subterfuge that allows Ells to portray himself as a hero and founding father while avoiding engaging in good land relations with the Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous settlers, trappers, and traders, and other sentient beings (including waterfowl) who already called the Athabasca region home when he arrived in 1913.<sup>7</sup> It also allows Ells to avoid taking responsibility for the harms that would be done by the tar-sands industry and the further colonization of the region.

Another example of Ells’s irresponsible use of a goose’s-eye view is his illustration for a World War II-era article he authored for the *Canadian Geographical Journal*, titled “Research Touches the North: Commercial Potentialities of Alberta’s Bituminous Sands—to Meet Allied Oil Needs for Times of Peace and War” (see Figure 4). The viewer of this image might be a goose flying low over a futuristic imagination of a large-scale tar-sands plant located on the same site along the Horse River that is seen in the background of Figure 2. Nowhere in Ells’s article is this image signalled as an imaginary future for the tar sands; the lack of a caption for only this illustration makes it seem either that such a plant already existed in 1942 or that its future existence was inevitable—yet this is a dream image, an idealized future and an empty infrastructural promise. It adopts what literary scholar Jennifer Wenzel calls a resource aesthetic of improvement, one that would ultimately be replaced with a resource aesthetic that treats everything that had been improved and preserved as “overburden after all” (n.p.) Although Ells’s vision and visualizations for a tar-sands industry to come did influence and shape its eventual development, this image—with its clean lines, efficient delivery systems, and integration into the surrounding ecosystem, as well as its now-preposterous assumption that crude oil could be extracted from bituminous sand in a process so clean that its only by-product would be “waste sand” (and maybe a few wisps of smoke)—reveals Ells’s incomprehension of the scale, waste, and disregard for nature of a profit-driven tar-sands industry to come.

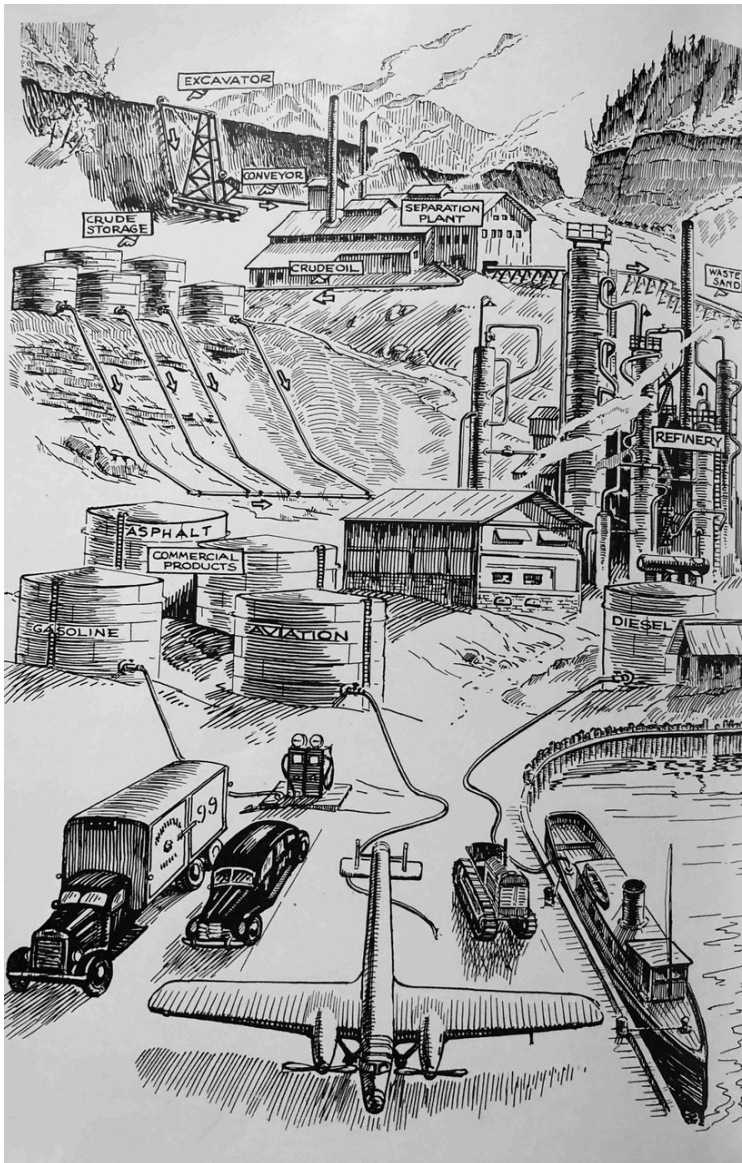


Fig. 4: S.C. Ells's drawing of a future Abasand plant in "Research Touches the North."



When called up alongside the all-too-familiar imagery of tailings ponds and open-pit tar-sands mines in the Athabasca region today, this image demonstrates Ruiz's argument that settler-colonial resource frontiers are made through processes of infrastructural mediation as "slow disturbance." Although each link in the chain of such a disturbance may make only incremental changes, the result, under late racial-industrial capitalism, is the condition of what cultural scholar Michael Truscello calls "infrastructural brutalism," through which "the 'critical' infrastructure that sustains life in industrialized societies also generates necropolitical assemblages, death-dealing dispossession, and structural oppressions" (6-7). Despite Ells's claims to have started or foreseen the trajectory of the "development of the Athabasca oil sands," it is the voracious and indiscriminate appetite of capital, and not the visions of a handful of innovative "fathers" that drives the trajectory of the oil sands industry. The disparity between Ells's vision of a future tar-sands industry and the actual conditions in the region today reveals some of the problems inherent in the hero-ification of founding fathers. A back-loop perspective on the tar sands suggests not only that the visionaries and founders of the industry should be held responsible for their actions instead of being celebrated but also that vilifying them as if they foresaw the destruction that would be wrought in their names does little to resist and break ongoing practices of colonization, extraction, and harm.

### "DUCKS"

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Anthropocene front loop, Ells created images of waterfowl in the tar sands that emphasized flight and his own presumed-to-be-glorious legacy. Since 1600 ducks became mired and drowned in a tailings pond at Syncrude's Aurora mine near Fort McMurray on April 28, 2008, waterfowl have played a significant role in 21<sup>st</sup>-century public opinion and debate over the tar sands. In his book *The Patch*, journalist Chris Turner argues that the Syncrude ducks represent a collision between High-Modern industrial utopianism and Anthropocene dystopia. He critiques the metonymy of a media response that might be described as

a back-loop inversion of the hyperbolic imagery and symbolism of Eells's symphony: "[t]he birds and the tailings pond became a proxy for a wider polluted world in conflict, and in short order the whole industry became the embodiment of climate change itself, the poster child for the whole sinful age of fossil fuels, the face of an invisible global catastrophe" (xxiii). Today, no one wants to be the father of the tar sands. With the symphony of the front loop crash-landing in the muck and mire of the back loop, the oil lobby wants responsibility to run like water off a duck's back (as it does all too often in relation to contamination and accidents affecting nearby Indigenous communities), but, in the case of the ducks, it sticks like tailings-pond sludge.<sup>8</sup> Observing a related phenomenon in the United States following the BP oil spill, literary scholar Ruth Salvaggio considers an iconic oiled Pelican as a "Pelican Angel," a version of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, watching the wreckage of petromodern progress piling up before its eyes (384). Through the "traditional linkage of birds and human imagination" (Salvaggio 393), reading waterfowl in the tar sands exposes an unfolding catastrophe that is also a crisis of imagination; through the impulse to save an oiled bird, the image sticks. It compels us to respond.

Kate Beaton's "Ducks" responds to the Syncrude ducks incident in the form of an autobiographical, scrolling, sketch-style webcomic about living and working on a tar-sands mining site. Made in 2014, the comic is based on the two years Beaton spent in Fort McMurray and is set in spring 2008.<sup>9</sup> Beaton's long-awaited book-length graphic memoir on the same theme, *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, is forthcoming with Drawn & Quarterly in 2022. The unnamed protagonist of "Ducks" is a young, white woman from Cape Breton who works in an office in the work camp where she also lives. She is veggie deprived, homesick, lonely, worried about the air quality, rashy from the water, and showing signs of having been harassed by the men in the camp.<sup>10</sup> Yet, she also feels solidarity and a sense of community with the other workers, who are all living and working in the fraught place referred to as "the oil sands" (Part Five)—a place where bitumen, workers, residents, and stolen land are rolled into one resource to be exploited. Indigenous people are either absent from or



unmarked in the comic, although their proximity and vulnerability are signalled through references to workers catching and releasing deformed and inedible fish, through the ducks, and perhaps through a scene where the protagonist tries to help a sex worker someone snuck into the work camp who is having a mental health crisis in the bathroom.<sup>11</sup> The protagonist visualizes and inhabits the Athabasca region as an extractive zone; she seems only vaguely to understand it as an Indigenous homeland. In contrast to Ells's polished images and his affinity for aerial perspectives, Beaton's comic is messy and grounded. The images are scaled to the perspective of a worker in a camp, based on Beaton's experience and on what a worker can see from inside a mine site. Work camp life lends itself neither to grand narratives nor to aestheticized or politicized landscapes; instead, the framed and unframed panels that scroll one at a time form a litany of images of workers that push back at their representation as perpetrators of violence and ecocide by showing how they are also exploited and harmed.

Beaton's comic begins with the protagonist hearing the news about the Syncrude ducks from a coworker, then looking up a news story on her computer. On the way to a safety meeting, she sees ducks flying overhead, then puts on her hardhat to block them from view, choosing not to face these bodies freshly weighted with significance as symbols of human violence, ecocide, and broken relationships with the land (see Figure 5).

As the death count climbs from 300 to 500 and eventually over 1000 ducks in the course of the five-part comic, Beaton accumulates comparisons between ducks and oil workers (including sex workers) as expendable and exploited in the tar sands. At the safety meeting, other workers joke and giggle through the announcements both about the new air cannons and scarecrows the company is installing to protect waterfowl and about the tragic death of Gerald Snopes, a crane operator who had a heart attack and threw himself out of the crane to avoid falling on the controls and injuring others. One worker, Chris, scolds the others, saying, "As far as I'm concerned the man's a hero," contrasting Gerald's selfless behaviour with the stubborn in-



Figure 5: Three panels from Part One of "Ducks" by Kate Beaton.

dividualism of famous tar-sands heroes such as Clark and Ells (Part One). The workers, meanwhile, survive and inflict the indignities, toxicities, and dangers of work-camp life while installing cannons and building scarecrows, sacrificial figures who are dressed in the same clothing as the workers themselves. For example, in Figure 6, George dresses up a scarecrow and suggests, inappropriately, that the protagonist might be attracted to it; the scarecrow in the second panel stoops forward like the protagonist and stands in for her.

When Chris criticizes the half-hearted efforts of the company to protect ducks, saying “somebody high up thinks ducks are pretty fucking stupid” (Part One), he implicitly critiques similar half-measures to protect workers, while also commenting on the dangers and pitfalls of being “high up”—referring both to the corporate hierarchy and the too-distant perspectives of those outside the work camp who have so much to say about it. When Greenpeace activists block a Syncrude tailings pipe, a worker calls out a god trick when he asks, “Who puts their life on the line to unclog that pipe?” and continues, “I tell you it sure as fuck isn’t the President of Shell” (Part Three).

“Ducks” ends with an epilogue in which the protagonist is having drinks with a friend, somewhere far from Fort McMurray. When asked by her martini-drinking companion if she feels “bad about working in a place like that,” the protagonist stammers and pauses for one wordless frame before responding, “I feel a lot of things.” Her pause creates a reflexive moment to consider all there is to feel bad about in the tar sands, and how far from simple it is to assign guilt or blame to the people who work there. The final, borderless panel depicts a sludge-covered duck drawn from the news coverage of the 2008 incident (see Figure 7), linking all of the incidents of human endangerment, violence, abuse, and kindness in the preceding frames with the duck, and suggesting an environmental politics that is in solidarity with workers and that refuses god- and goose-tricks.



Figure 6: Two panels from Part Four of "Ducks" by Kate Beaton.



Figure 7: Final, frameless panel from “Ducks” by Kate Beaton.

## CONCLUSION

In the front loop of the tar sands, Ells spun out visions of industrialization as improvement on land that he perceived, wrongly, as pristine and practically empty. Operating under the illusion that modernity and wilderness could blend harmoniously in the Athabasca region, he laid the groundwork for an extractive industry that would treat the land, its inhabitants, and workers alike as overburden. Despite Ells’s use of geese and a goose’s-eye view to legitimize his presence and claims on the land, waterfowl in the tar sands have always exceeded and resisted the limits of representation, and they have taken on new meaning in the back loop. As a disillusioned material and cultural worker in the Canadian petro-state, Beaton uses images of ducks to call out the founding fathers and higher-ups of the tar-sands industry for setting us and keeping us on a roller coaster of violence and abjection. This journal-article-as-imaginary-comic picks up where Beaton left off, giving Ells the Founding Fathers treatment. To catch up with Ells at the site of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century tailings pond is to reframe “My Symphony” as the receding view of the Syn-

crude duck as tar-sands Angel of History, rewriting Ells's legacy as a brutal accumulation of wreckage, damage, and harm. With industry and political rhetoric still amounting to puffery and mansplaining in the face of the urgent projects of decarbonization and decolonization, "Founding Fathers in a Tailings Pond" suggests it is time, to borrow another phrase from Beaton, to *Step Aside, Pops*. In the face of oiled birds, unemployed workers, threatened Indigenous peoples and territories, brutal infrastructure, and a climate emergency, please take this article as a call for a just energy transition such as the Green New Deal, one that leaves no one behind and that follows the lead of Indigenous land and water protectors, workers calling for green jobs, and young climate activists.

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## IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: "Infinity" from the series *Founding Fathers* (Stuck in an Amusement Park) by Kate Beaton. *Hark! A Vagrant*, 2006-2018, [www.harkavagrant.com/index.php?id=375](http://www.harkavagrant.com/index.php?id=375).

Figure 2: *Sydney Ells at tar sand plant*, Waterways, Alberta, 1931. Photo by H.S. SpenceCanada. Dept. of Mines and Technical Surveys, Library and Archives Canada, PA-014454. Public Domain.

Figure 3: "My Symphony" by S.C. Ells. *Northland Trails*. 1938. New and Enlarged Edition. Burns & MacEachern, 1956. Public Domain.

Figure 4: Illustration for "Research Touches the North" by S.C. Ells. *Canadian Geographical Journal*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1942, p. 256.

Figure 5: Three panels from Part One of "Ducks" by Kate Beaton. *Hark! A Vagrant*, 7 Apr. 2014, <http://www.harkavagrant.com/images/ducks1.png>.

Figure 6: Two panels from Part Four of "Ducks" by Kate Beaton. *Hark! A Vagrant*, 7 Apr. 2014, <http://www.harkavagrant.com/images/ducks4.png>.

Figure 7: Final, frameless panel from "Ducks" by Kate Beaton. *Hark! A Vagrant*, 7 Apr. 2014, <http://www.harkavagrant.com/images/ducks5.png>.

## NOTES

1. I use this phrasing to signal the affinity of this looping method with poet Stephen Collis's similar method in the poem "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands," written (referencing poet William Wordsworth) after Collis participated in a Tar Sand Healing Walk around a tailings pond near Fort McMurray. Collis writes,

Wordsworth—I feel you too!  
Though there is no mechanism

To nuance this conversation  
 Across the years—so I brought  
 Your ruined cottages your  
 Evening walks and Grasmere  
 Homing here to the Tar Sands[.] (62)

For other examples of something like the Founding Fathers treatment in poetry about the tar sands, see David Martin’s *Tar Swan* and Lindsay Bird’s “The Peter Pond Mall.” ↵

2. See, for instance, hooks; Lorde; Ruddick.↵
3. For example, poetry such as Lindsay Bird’s *Boom Time*, David Martin’s *Tar Swan*, Garth Martens’s *Prologue for the Age of Consequence*, Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons*, and Kelly Shepherd’s *Shift and Insomnia Bird*, fiction such as Rudy Wiebe’s “The Angel of the Tar Sands,” Richard van Camp’s *Godless but Loyal to Heaven*, and Warren Cariou’s “An Athabasca Story”; comics and graphic novels including Beaton’s “Night Shift,” Nicole Burton, Hugh Goldring, and Patrick McCurdy’s *The Beast*, Joe Sacco’s “Bitumen or Bust,” and Cariou and Nicholas Burns’s “An Athabasca Story”; other visual texts like Cariou’s petrography, Lucas Seaward’s bitumen paintings, Edward Burtynsky’s *Oil*, Louis Helbig’s *Beautiful Destruction*, and Elizabeth LaPensée’s *Thunderbird Strike*; and polemical nonfiction including Ezra Levant’s *Ethical Oil*, Andrew Nikiforuk’s *The Energy of Slaves*, Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything*, and Chris Turner’s *The Patch*.↵
4. The Wood Buffalo Regional Library (the public library in Fort McMurray) has a copy of Ells’s *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands* but no copy of *Northland Trails*. The library at Keyano College, the community college in Fort McMurray, does not hold either book. I visited the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray in 2017 and saw no reference to *Northland Trails*; I have since shared a copy of the book with employees at the museum. I did, however, find several copies of *Northland Trails* in the University of Manitoba libraries, including a copy once owned by Margaret Laurence.↵
5. On the framing of northern Alberta as homeland vs. hinterland, see Westman, Joly, and Gross.↵
6. An unauthorized version of Ells’s memoir, *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands*, was published by the Department

of Mines in 1962; it was reissued by Syncrude sometime in the 1970s. Ells's many notes and revisions to the published version of the memoir are available in the Sidney Clarke Ells fonds at Library and Archives Canada.↵

7. On the complex land and treaty relations of the Athabasca region prior to 1913, see McCormack. My thinking on extraction and pollution as land relations is indebted to Max Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism*.↵
8. Tailings ponds are used to contain toxic waste from the extraction and separation of bitumen from the Athabasca tar sands. Although the industry is required to remediate land affected by extraction, the problem of how to fully remediate tailings ponds has gone unresolved for the lifespan of the industry (that is, since the Great Canadian Oil Sands plant opened in 1967); despite this (and with existing tailings ponds big enough to be visible from space), oil-sands projects predicated on unproven remediation strategies continue to be approved. For a literature review of scientific articles about the remediation of fine tailings, see Saborimanes.↵
9. I read this comic with my students in Introduction to English: Reading Culture at the University of Winnipeg in 2020 and 2021; I am indebted to my students, who shared their insightful readings and influenced my own reading.↵
10. Another comic by Beaton, "Night Shift," about working the night shift in the tool crib in 2006, features the same protagonist and depicts overt sexual harassment. (In "Night Shift," the protagonist is compared to a fox who has been hanging around the mine site.)↵
11. The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls includes findings about resource extraction projects, including the following: "Industries that create 'boom town' and 'man camp' environments are implicated in increased rates of drug- and alcohol-related offences, sexual offences, domestic violence, and gang violence, as well as sex industry activities in the host communities. These occurrences disproportionately impact Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people" (593).↵