



## The Ecological Virtues of Bill Mason

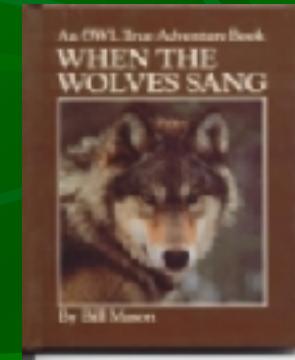
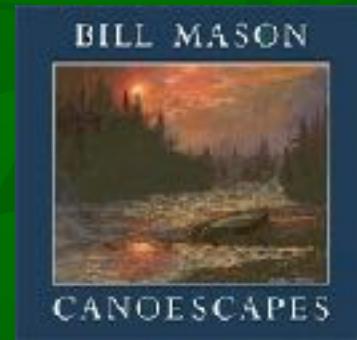
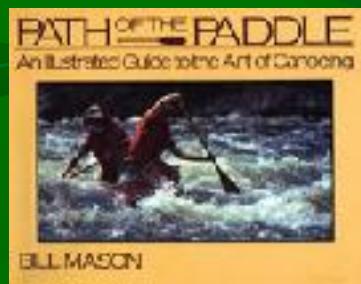
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# Introduction

- Although much has been written in the last few decades about ecological virtue ethics, very little has been written on this topic from a Christian perspective (Bouma-Prediger, 2016; Blanchard & O'Brien, 2014; Melin, 2013).
- Virtue Ethics: What type of person should I be?
- Cultivation of certain virtues are necessary to address ecological problems (Bouma-Prediger, 2016)
- Sometimes we see practices embodied in a person who displays what a life of virtue concretely looks like (Bouma-Prediger, 2016)
  - E.g., Mother Teresa
- “Such people are ethical exemplars or models of virtue who inspire us to live such a life ourselves.” (Bouma-Prediger, 2016, p. 24)
  - Doesn’t give an example
- This paper explores whether Bill Mason is an Christian exemplar of ecological virtues

# Bill Mason: Canoeist, Filmmaker, Artist 1929-1988



# Mason Films

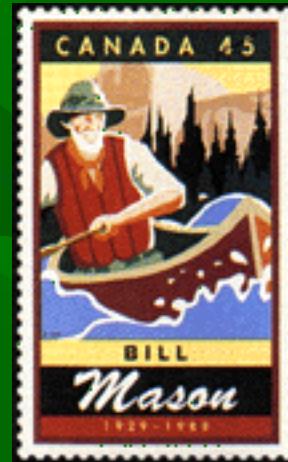
(most National Film Board of Canada films)

- Wilderness Treasure
- Paddle to the Sea
- Rise and Fall of the Great Lakes
- Blake
- Death of a Legend
- Wolf Pack
- In Search of the Bowhead Whale
- Cry of the Wild
- Face of the Earth
- Path of the Paddle Series (4 films)
- Song of the Paddle
- Coming Back Alive
- Pukaskwa National Park
- Where the Buoys Are
- The Land That Devours Ships
- Waterwalker



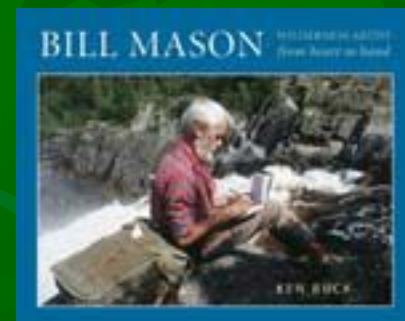
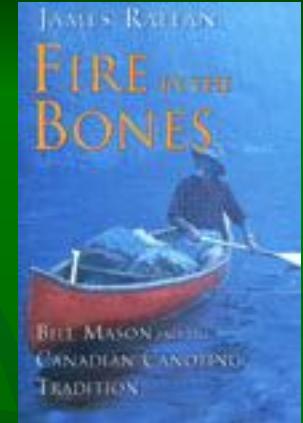
# Ongoing Influence

- Postage Stamp
- 2009: Inducted posthumously into the International Whitewater Hall of Fame

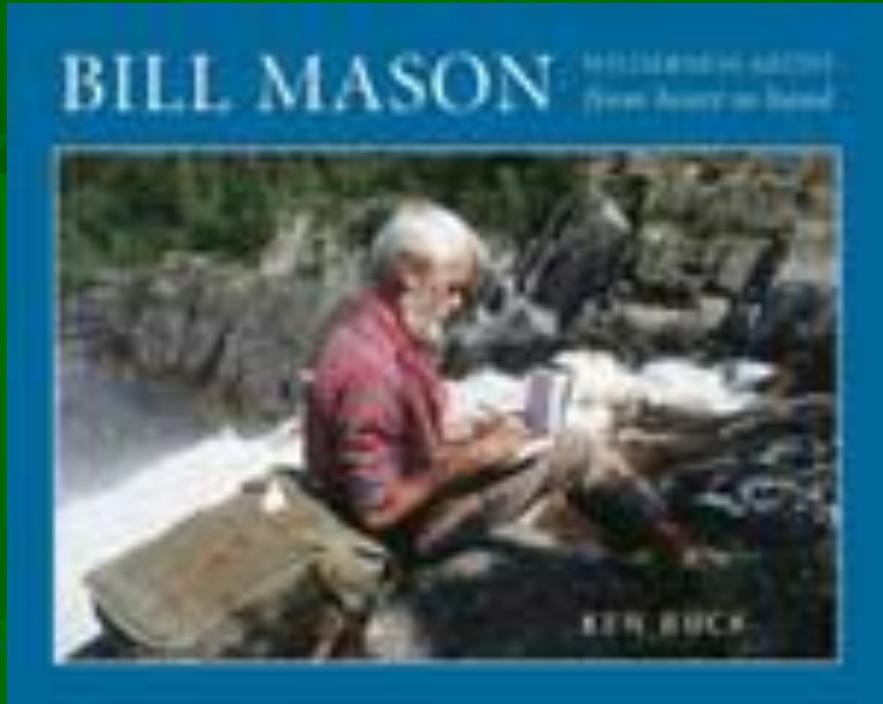


## Writings on Mason:

- Biography
  - Raffan (1995). *Fire in the bones*.
- Canoeing
  - Raffan (1999). *Being there: Bill Mason and the Canadian canoeing tradition*.
- Art
  - Buck (2005). *Bill Mason: Wilderness artist from heart to hand*.
- Environmental Ethic
  - Heintzman (2007). *The Environmental Ethic of Bill Mason*.
- Play Ethic
  - Heintzman (2011). *The Play Ethic of Bill Mason*.
- Dean (2013). *Return to Eden: Bill Mason, Canoeing, and Environmentalism*.



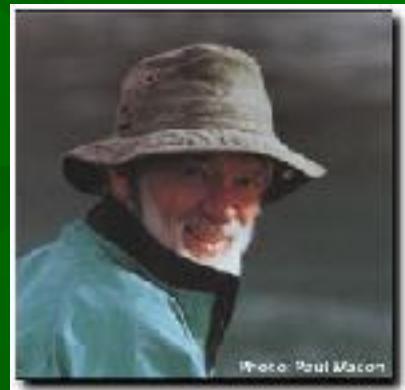
# Ken Buck (2005) *Bill Mason: Wilderness Artist from Heart to Hand*



- “few people of any nation have been so influential in creating a sense of responsibility for the environment” (p. 12)

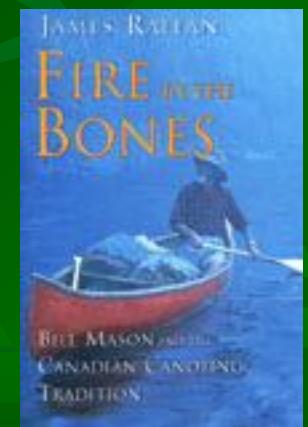
# Purpose of Presentation

- What were the ecological virtues of Bill Mason?



# Method

- An analysis of Mason's writings and films, primarily:
  - *Path of the Paddle* (1980)
  - *Song of the Paddle* (1988)
  - *Canoescapes* (1995)
  - *Waterwalker* (1984)
- Interviews with him:
  - *Crux* (1972)
  - *Genial Fanatic* (1988)
  - *Spirit of the Wilderness* (1989)
- Quotations in Raffan (1996) *Fire in My Bones*.



# Method (cont'd.)

- Content analysis (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1995)
  - documents read & reread
  - films viewed again & again
  - Identified phrases related to ecological virtues
- Uses Bouma-Prediger's (2001) framework of 14 ecological virtues

**Source: Bouma-Prediger**

<u>Biblical Story</u>	<u>Theological Motif</u>	<u>Ethical Principle</u>	<u>Virtue</u>	<u>Vice (deficiency)</u>	<u>Vice (excess)</u>
Genesis 1 Creation Psalm 104 Psalm 148	Integrity	Intrinsic Value	Respect Receptivity	Conceit Self-sufficiency	Reverence Addiction

Genesis 1 Creation Exodus 16 Matthew 6:11	Finitude	Sufficiency	Self-restraint Frugality	Profligacy Greed	Austerity Stinginess
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Genesis 2 Human Finitude Job 38-41 Psalm 8 Genesis 3	Faultedness	Responsibility	Humility Honesty	Hubris Deception	Self-deprecation Uncontrolled Candor
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Genesis 1 Fruitfulness Deut. 22:6-7 Deut. 20:19-20 Genesis 6-9		Sustainability	Wisdom Hope	Foolishness Despair	----- Presumptuousness
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Genesis 2:1-3 Exodus 20:8-11 Leviticus 25 Luke 4	Sabbath	Rejuvenation	Patience Serenity	Impetuousness Restlessness	Timidity Passivity
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Genesis 2:15 Psalm 24 Psalm 95 Genesis 6-9	Earthkeeping	Beneficence	Love	Benevolence	Malice Apathy	-----
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Exodus 20:12-17 Amos 5 Micah 6:8 Psalm 72	Righteousness	Equity	Justice Courage	Injustice Cowardice	----- Rashness
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# PATH OF THE PADDLE



BILL MASON

Happy Canoeing Paul,  
Bill Mason



# Results



**1. “Respect is an understanding of and proper regard for the integrity and well-being of other creatures....That which has intrinsic value calls forth a looking back—a re-specting—that acknowledges and regards that God-given value” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 143).**

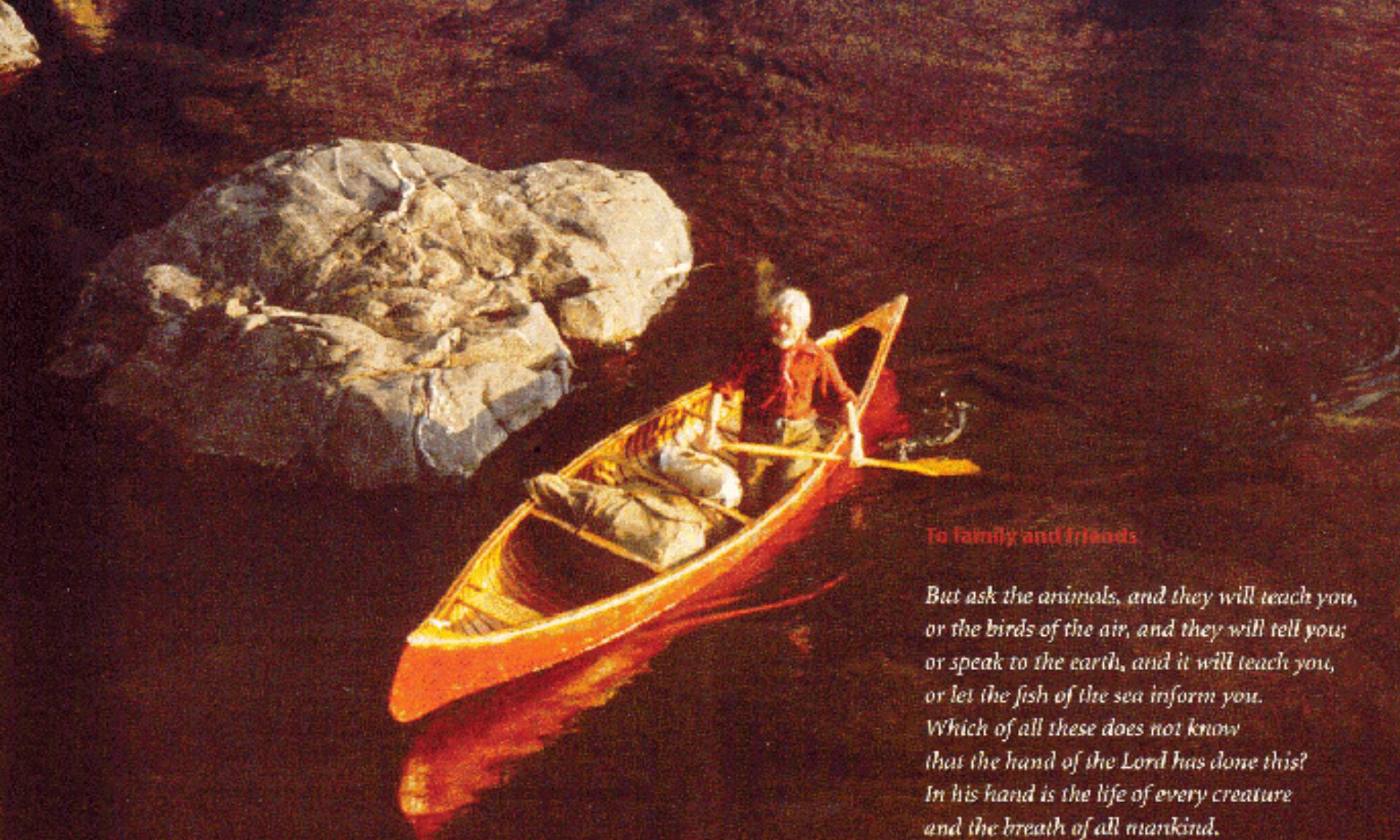
- “I cannot believe that God ever intended us to overrun the earth at the expense of all other living creatures. Somewhere on earth a species of life becomes extinct every day.” (*Canoescapes*, p. 150)
- “I believe that we have a moral obligation to preserve and care for the habitat of animals and plant life because, like us, they were created by God and have a right to exist too.” (*Path of the Paddle*, p. 192)
- “for the sake of all the myriad forms of life that live there. We have a responsibility to ensure that they continue to exist because they, like us, were created by God and have a right to exist” (*Song of the Paddle*, p. 179).
- “...all other things...were created as a part of the whole and have a right to exist” (*Canoescapes*, p. 156).

**2. “Receptivity...is the acknowledgement of our interdependence with other creatures. It denotes an acceptance of our kinship with our human and nonhuman neighbours—a willing embrace of our mutual dependence. Receptivity connotes responsiveness to the other....Receptivity...is a form of hospitality” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 143).**

- Creation as an art gallery: “I...look at the world around me and just marvel in the beauty in the world God created” (Quoted in *Spirit of the Wilderness*, 1989).
- “It has taken me almost a lifetime to learn to look and listen to what God has to say through his creation.”  
*Impressions: A Dialogue with the Arts*.







To family and friends

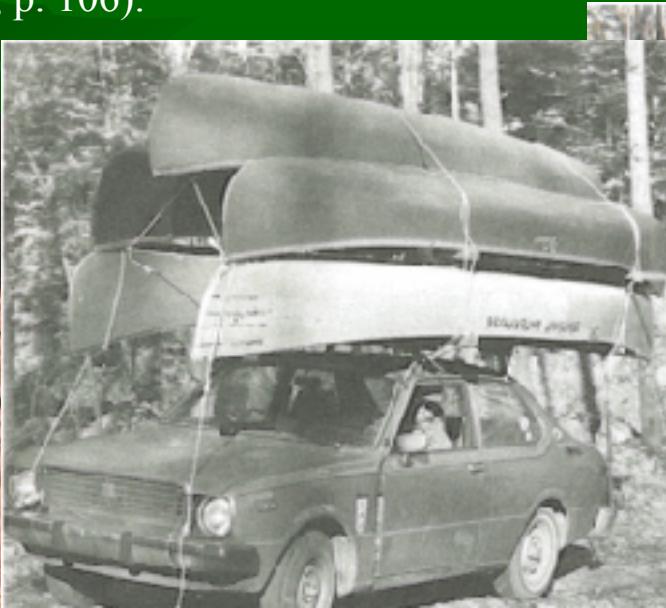
*But ask the animals, and they will teach you,  
or the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,  
or let the fish of the sea inform you.*

*Which of all these does not know  
that the hand of the Lord has done this?  
In his hand is the life of every creature  
and the breath of all mankind.*

The book of Job 12: 7-10  
Quoted by Bill Mason in *Waterwalker*

**3. “*Self-restraint* is moderation of inordinate desires...the virtue here is temperance--- habitual control of one’s appetites. The ecologically temperate (joyfully) say, ‘I have what I need’” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 145 ).**

- Casual attire at church
- “Bill...bought the cheapest and oldest cars he could find, ruthlessly, and with great pleasure driving them into the ground...when the car wasn’t roadworthy anymore, he rigged up a homemade snowplow to keep his driveway open” (Buck,)
- “My last three bush vehicles have been run-of-the mill passenger cars.... All I want is a vehicle to get me, my gear and canoe or canoes to the river or lake” (*Song of Paddle*, p. 106)
- “One final test for a bush vehicle is to stand back, look at and ask yourself, “If this car was parked at the take-out point, is this the last car anybody would chose to swipe?” If the answer is yes, you’ve got yourself a bush vehicle” (*Song of Paddle*, p. 106).

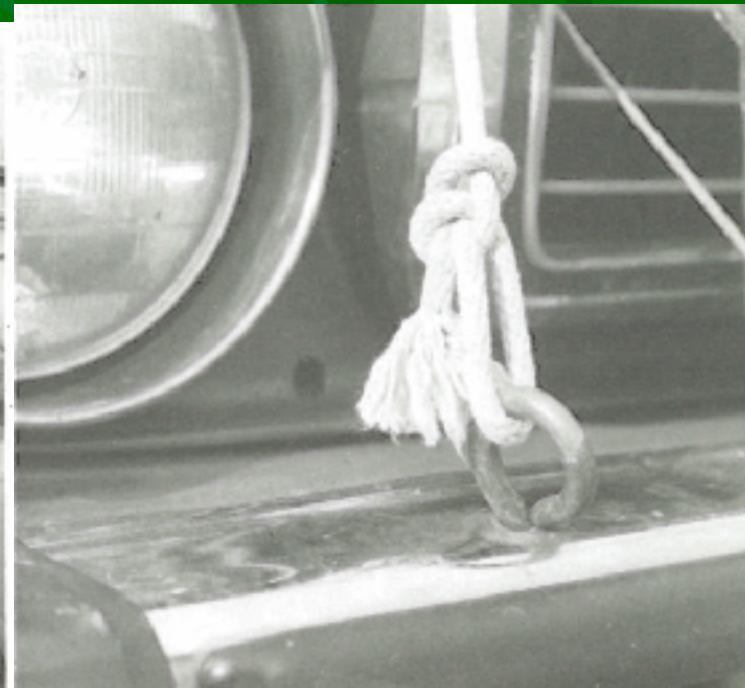


## *Self-Restraint (cont'd.)*

- “He screwed hand-crafted canoe carriers right into the roof of the car” (Buck).
- “The high-tech roof racks have a lot of attachments that are functional, but easily lost or misplaced. That’s one great advantage of the MXCC-003 over the high-tech models. There is nothing that can fall off.” (*Song of the Paddle*, p. 106).
- “Most of the better and more expensive makes have a locking system to protect the carriers or the stuff on them. The MXCC-003 is so cleverly disguised as an eyesore that nobody would think of swiping it. (*Song of the Paddle*, p. 106).



2 Rear view of MXCC-003



5 Eye bolts on bumpers

## Self-Restraint (cont'd.)

### Practiced and Encouraged Primitive Travel

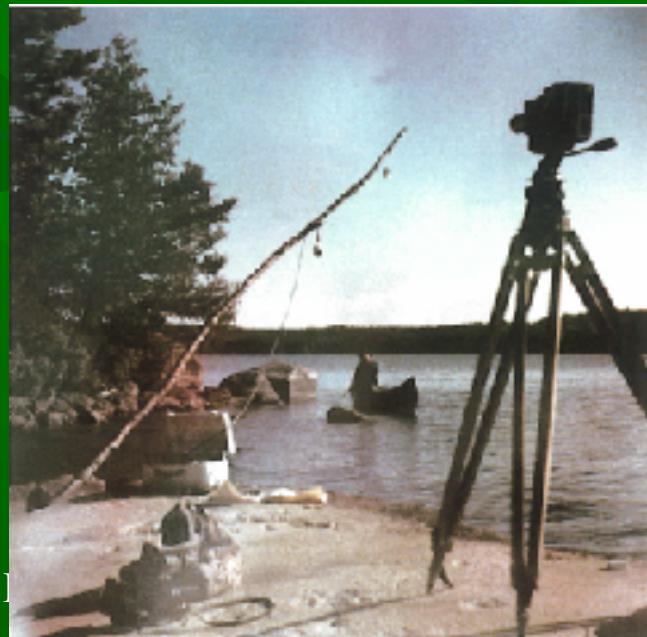
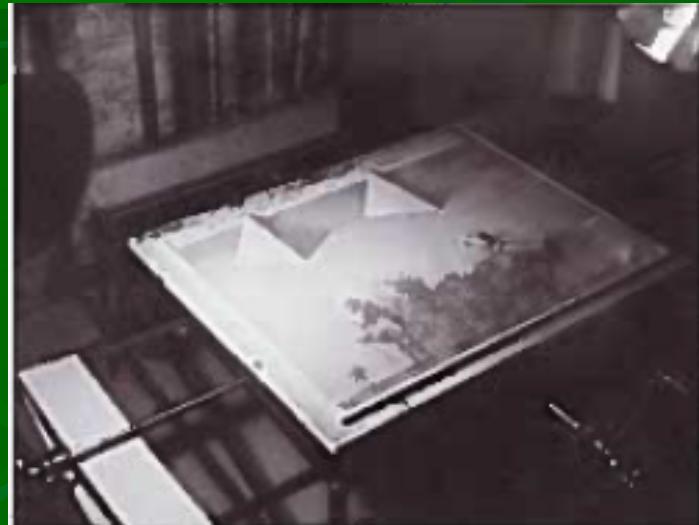
- Mount Rundle vs. Sulphur Mountain



- Parable in *Path of the Paddle* (hiking, canoeing, motorboating)
- “I would much prefer to paddle, portage, track, and wade up some unnavigable waterway to the base of a spectacular waterfall, pitch my camp, and sit there drinking in their beauty, than travel there by road. It isn’t the same. The falls you have to work to get to are always the biggest, the best, the most spectacular, even if they aren’t as high (Mason, 1980, p. 194).”

4. “*Frugality is economy of use or efficient use given the limits of the goods available....to be frugal is to enjoy...the proper use of the finite goods God has given us...frugality is characterized...by a desire to use sparingly that which God has provided in order that others may live and flourish*” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 145).

- “He wasn’t rich financially” (statement made at his memorial service by Wilbur Sutherland)



- Mason “had scrimped on restaurant meals and accommodation costs while in the field on that film [*Cry of the Wild*], bought extra film stock with the money he saved, shot every scene this way or that, and come up with footage that,...left an abundance of excellent material to craft a feature film” (Raffan, 1996, p. 234).

**5. “Humility...implies self-knowledge and especially knowledge of the limits of one’s knowledge. Aware of their ignorance, humble people do not pretend to know more than they really know...humility implies unpretentiousness.” (Bouma-Prediger, pp. 147-148).**

- “...the ‘bad guys’ are not all that bad. When I was making my films on wolves, I filmed biologists, trappers and hunters. In some cases the hunters and trappers were more interesting individuals and were more cooperative than scientists” (*Song of Paddle*, p. 178).
- “The words of the native people reflect a relationship with the land that does not come easily or naturally to our culture” (*Canoescapes*, p. 157).
- “Almost all of the recorded speeches of the native people reveal a profound belief in a Creator” (*Canoescapes*, p. 157).
- “I think that because they lived close to the land that they were the experts and what they have to say is worth listening to, especially today.” (*Waterwalker*)

*Humility (cont'd.)*  
E.g., Devil's Warehouse Island



The native peoples regard it as the chair from which the Creator or Great Spirit created the world. Their attitude to things natural suggests that they had a more harmonious relationship with the natural world than did some of those who were strongly influenced by the church. (*Canoescapes*, p. 38)

**6. “Honesty is the refusal to deceive—others, oneself or God. Honest people are without guile....The possess a singleness of intention, a straightforwardness of conduct. Ecological honesty brings with it sincerity and transparency. Honesty... likes telling the truth” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 148).**

- “I’m very disappointed that my fellow Christians do not have a natural love or concern or compassion for the natural world....” (stated in *Genial Fanatic*, 1988)
- But it’s [creativity] also at the root of our destruction of the natural world. In so many of our activities **we** have to destroy something in order to create something else. (p. 156, *Canoescapes*)
- “**We** have become so totally committed to changing our environment that **we** have become oblivious to the fact that the world around us is a creation itself—God’s creation.” (, p. 194, *Path of the Paddle*)
- “God has created us, placed us in a wonderful and beautiful world and set us free to create and utilize it and delight in it. We have the capacity to use it with compassion for all the creatures that share it with us but **we** have turned the air, water, and land into chemical soup.” (from form letter written when near death, p. 265, *Fire in the Bones*)
- “...it all boils down to stupidity and greed....the grinding war that **all of us** are waging against wild things.” (p. 156 *Canoescapes*)

## *Honesty (cont'd.)*

- “I spend considerable time lamenting about what a mess I’ll be leaving it (the earth) in” (Letter quoted in *Canoescapes*, p. 9)
- “I am convinced that our problems in relation to nature and also in human terms are because of **our alienation** from God the Creator. An alienation **caused by us**. Not God. It is not His fault that **we prefer to leave him out of our lives**” (quoted in Raffan, p. 188)



7. “*Wisdom* is sound practical judgement....For Christians, wisdom originates...in the fear of God. Thus, the ecologically wise know that God is at the centre of things and that the flourishing of the earth is God’s good future. By their lives, therefore, they bear witness to that future, fostering the fruitfulness of creation over the long haul” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 150)

- “the Creator who put it all together so long ago” (Mason, 1982, p. 9).
- “God really knew what he was doing when He was doing when He created the Earth” (Mason, 1995, p. 15).
- “...nature is the glorious fullness of God’s creation no less than man” (quoted in Raffan, 1996, p. 80)
- “...it's incredible to think that God who created all this died for me and has made it possible for me to belong to Him and to have fellowship with Him. And to have this fellowship as you go out into nature is incredible” (Crux, 1972, p. 13).
- “Our culture, so far removed from the natural world...continues the debate over whether or not the Creator even exists” (Mason, 1995, p. 157).

8. “**Hope** is confident expectation of future good....For Christians this expectation is solidly based on God’s promises and God’s character as keeper of promises. Christians hope because they worship a God who keeps covenant with creation and who raised Jesus from the dead as a sign of a coming future restoration of all things....Ecologically, hope is a yearning for shalom rooted in the confidence that a good future lies in God’s good hands.” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 150)

- “I spend considerable time lamenting about what a mess I’ll be leaving it (the earth) in. However, I have never believed in harping on the negative. ...**My optimism** is rooted in my faith that God has not forsaken us.” (Letter quoted in *Canoescapes*, p. 9)
  
- “My obsession has been to share the wonder and infinite beauty of the world God has created and to help people develop an appreciation and concern for it. **My optimism** is rooted in my faith that God has not forsaken us. My relationship with God is in his son Jesus Christ, and with a relationship like that there’s really not a lot that can go wrong.” (from form letter written when near death, *Fire in the Bones*, p. 265).

9. “*Patience* is calm forbearance. It is that trait of character that allows us to resist the press of the moment....*Patience presupposes a long view.* For Christians patience is grounded in God’s merciful forbearance (2 Peter 3:9)” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 153).

- Parable in *Path of the Paddle* (hiking, canoeing, motorboating)
  - Primitive travel
- Patience in making Waterwalker feature film
  - Changing storylines and dream scenes

**10. “Serenity is unruffled peacefulness, an inner calm amid the chaos....It is tranquility borne not of stoic indifference or apathy but rather nurtured by the assurance of God’s grace. Mindful that God is continually at work in the world---ordering the chaos and mending the broken reconciling the alienated---those whose character is marked by this trait go about their earthkeeping business with a calm assurance.”** (Bouma-Prediger, p. 153)

- Serenity in the midst of a storm on Lake Superior – *Song of the Paddle*
- “We live and cherish each day at a time, as always. I want to spend as much time as I can painting, writing, smelling the flowers and watching the clouds.” (Mason, 1995, p. 9)
- “To ‘have fun’ is a desire; often expressed by those who live in this age of anxiety and most of us have at times actually “had fun”. But recreation, pleasure, amusement, fun, and all the rest are poor substitutes for joy...” ( as quoted in Raffan, p. 80).

11. “*Benevolence* is the willingness to promote the well-being of another. Benevolent people are disposed to act kindly. They have a good (*bene*) will (*voluntas*) and thus usually produce (*facere*) good (*bene*) acts---acts that are beneficial....We can and should will the good, even to people present and future, animals domestic and wild, ecosystems near and far” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 155).

- Encouraged no-trace camping (*Path of the Paddle*, p. 192).
- “The organizations that I belong to are only against stupidity and greed for short-term gain.” (*Song of the Paddle*, p. 178). ...What really matters is that the creatures that share the earth with us continue to have a place to live. When their habitat goes they go. (*Song of Paddle*, p. 178)
- My motivation for sharing my love of the land through my work is to awaken a love and compassion in people for the land and to encourage them to become involved in the many environmental organizations that are concerned with the preservation of wild places (*Song of Paddle*, p. 178).
- I feel I am not serving the cause of wilderness preservation if the new canoeists I reach do not become active supporters of the various conservation organizations...it is imperative that these organizations, dedicated to wilderness preservation, survive and even thrive (*Path of Paddle*, p. 192).

**12. “Love...denotes strong affection for another. It is unselfish concern for the good of that for which one deeply cares....Love is...the disposition to care for the other whom one has come to know. And love is directed not only to people but also to places---river, forest, desert. These places of the heart evoke loyalty, affection, and care” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 155).**

- I think that through the film medium, I'm sharing my love of the wolf and the land and I'm also through the film trying to express my concern for the land and about the reasons why we are ravaging it: lack of sensitivity towards God's world and so on” (*Crux*, 1972, p. 11 ).
- “In Waterwalker...I went into my deep feelings about why I was so in love with the land and why it was the belief that God had created this world that he had placed us in...” (*Spirit of the Wilderness*, 1989).
- “I think that the only hope for what is left of the natural world is to rediscover that love and compassion for it that the native people talk about” (*Waterwalker*).
- Most environmental campaigns have as their premise the conservation of wilderness for the benefit of our children and their children, but that's a lost cause. We are far too greedy as individuals and as nations for that approach to work. The only approach that has any hope of success must be based on compassion for our fellow humans and for all other living things. They were all created as a part of the whole and have a right to exist. (Mason, 1995, p. 156)

13. “*Justice* is the disposition to act impartially and fairly. It involves the ability to discern when to treat equals equally and unequals differentially, and thus it implies a kind of practical wisdom” (Bouma-Prediger, p. 158)

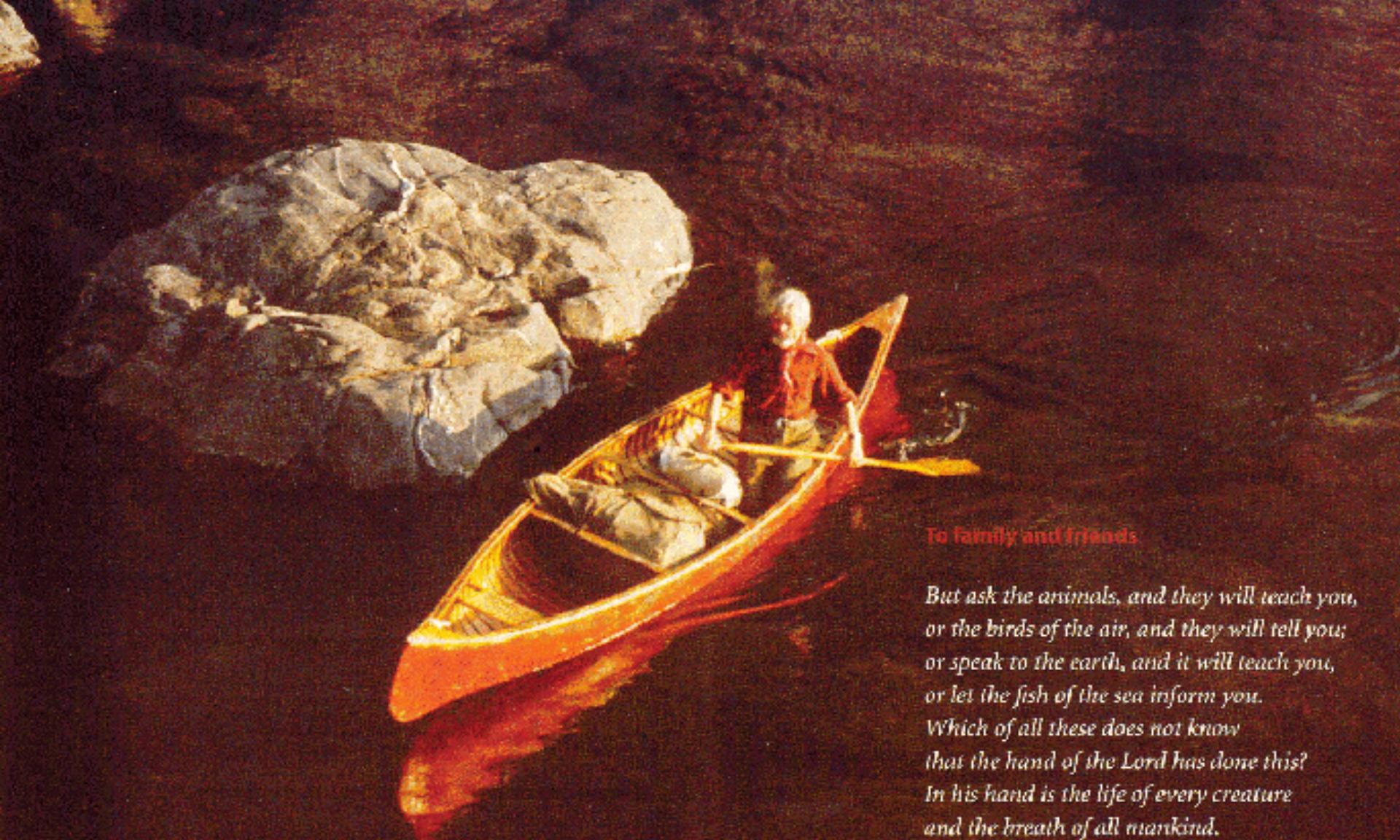
- Environmentalists are often perceived as being against all forms of progress...The organizations that I belong to are only against stupidity and greed for short-term gain. We all have to make a living, whether it be from logging, mining, tourism, hunting, trapping or employment in the city. What we should be united against is the needless destruction and pollution of the world we live in.” (*Song of Paddle*, p. 178)

**14. “Courage is moral strength in the face of danger. It is tenacity in the face of opposition. It is stubborn persistence in the face of adversity....in the Christian tradition courage was transmuted into fortitude. In the face of ecological apathy, ignorance, and fear, it takes courage to persevere. (Bouma-Prediger, p. 158).**

- “...by the time the canoe feature [Waterwalker] had gone around a couple of dozen times, she, and most of the other women in Studio D [National Film Board], were sick to death of the way in which Mason clung so tenaciously to his Christianity... (Raffan, 1996, p. 236).

# *Waterwalker*





**To family and friends**

*But ask the animals, and they will teach you,  
or the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,  
or let the fish of the sea inform you.*

*Which of all these does not know  
that the hand of the Lord has done this?  
In his hand is the life of every creature  
and the breath of all mankind.*

The book of Job 12: 7-10  
Quoted by Bill Mason in *Waterwalker*

# *Waterwalker*



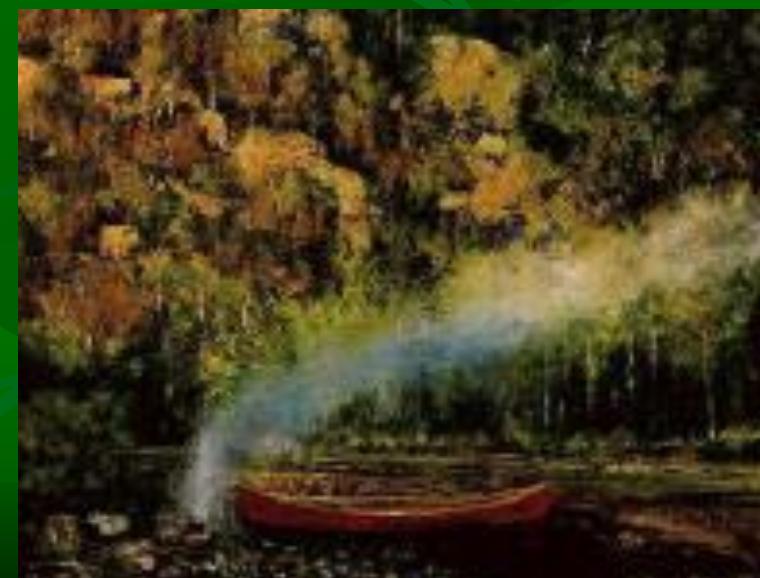
# Discussion and Conclusion

- While Mason's environmental ethic or beliefs can be derived from a number of statements he made in his writings and films, for the most part he lived rather than talked about his Christian environmental ethic.
- Such an approach to life is consistent with virtue ethics which are based upon areteology (what kind of person should I be?) and associated with being and character
- Bill Mason illustrated what a Christian ecological virtue ethic might look like in one individual
- Illustrates some virtues more than others



- Mason embodied a spiritual excitement “that drew people...” (Raffan, 1996, p. 80).
- “He is a man so...awestruck by the beauty of nature...” (Pierre Trudeau)
- “One of the things that greatly impressed me about Bill Mason is what one might call his theology of creation, which is just a way of saying he had a great love for God’s world. And he respected it; he appreciated it. He sensed that he was a steward in it and he had such a great love for God’s creation, because he knew the God of creation. That was the key....He had a message that came through in the vitality of his speaking and his living” (Rev. Bill Duffy, Mason’s memorial service, 1988)
- “there are plenty of people around here who are technically good or better than Bill Mason. But somehow when he makes a film, there’ a plus that comes out which just isn’t in theirs...it’s perhaps his ability to relate to people. It’s a human factor, his own humanness somehow comes through” (Director of Production, National Film Board)

- “Few people of any nation have been so influential in creating a sense of responsibility for the environment” (Buck, 2005, p. 12).
- Why?
  - Strong Environmental Ethic (Heintzman, 2007)
  - Ecological Virtues -- Character
  - Play Ethic (Heintzman, 2011)
  - Role of Art -- film, painting



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