

Preface and Acknowledgments

Night Chorus

Suddenly
 Yap-plaint of dogs
And whining,
 Coyote-cries
Through howling
 Of wolves.

Homesickness
 Unawares
 Smarting
Through the night
And through my marrow.

— Vandersteene, 2 June 1974

This book is about a man haunted by a vision. He pursued it because it was reality-laden, yet, strangely, its essence always seemed to elude him, despite the many talents he brought to bear in its pursuit.

Rogier (originally Roger; his Canadian colleagues used the altered form, which he preferred in Canada) Vandersteene was born on 15 June 1918, in Marke, a town deep in the heart of Flemish Belgium; he died on 7 August 1976 in the priest's house in Slave Lake, a northern Alberta town on the fringes of his Cree mission station east of Peace River, Alberta. Between those two stark bookends is a life imbued with two great loves: Flanders and the Cree people — and a religious vision that united them at a very deep level.

Flanders was the root of the man. Flanders bequeathed to him many of the principle concerns of his life: language and rights, feeling for minority status, piety toward Mary, the power of the forces of history, an Oblate heritage, which we will have occasion to explore during his colourful life. As time went on, he was more and more consumed by his other love: the Cree people. It was a passion that moved him to reject the implant of a Euro-Canadian church among his Cree friends. What he really sought was the deep veins of Cree culture, because

therein he hoped to germinate a genuine Cree Christianity. Only traditional values could be recognized as the basis for a specifically Cree way of life; Vandersteene sought to bring into actuality his vision of a strong, spiritually powerful Cree church, based on Cree conceptions of reality. What others held to be ephemeral, he held to be real: a magnificent Cree formulation of Christian life.

Like any figure larger than life, Vandersteene raises questions about ourselves. Hence this is not just a study about who he was. Any gripping biography is partly an attempt to translate personality into a flesh-and-blood person. I have found that Vandersteene cannot be dismissed as "just a priest" or "just a missionary" or "just" whatever, despite my training that values categorizing and "objectivity." Somehow he articulates essential elements about our world and the way we are integrated into it. On the other hand, this is not a tale; I have tried to configure his life as he grasped it. Even if you think, after you have dipped into its description, that the attempt falls short, my hope is that something beyond the mundane would still be important to you.

Vandersteene lived and worked in an environment quite different from ours today. Not the least of these differences is the concept of acceptable language. Some references in this text will appear patronizing. I wrestled often with this issue, finally electing to express the words as they were, rather than what we would think appropriate today. The reader will surely be aware that repeating such phrases is not to condone them.

I am very grateful to those who have supported this research. I should first indicate that the Boreal Institute (now the Canadian Circumpolar Institute) at the University of Alberta provided a seed grant; this was supplemented from time to time by the Faculty of Arts through its Endowment Fund for the Future and the Research Fund of the Vice-President (Research). At a critical point, I received funding from the Alberta Historical Society for a research trip to Belgium, which helped me see the whole project in another light.

The number of people who have made a contribution to this book is so great it resists counting. Over the thirteen years of collecting and interviewing, scores have made comments that have become part of the book, either consciously or unconsciously. One fears the inevitable: someone will surely be left out. I hope they will accept that no slight was ever intended. Rather, the book is a testimony to their contribution and our joint collaboration.

I received impressive assistance from the Catholic hierarchy, including Archbishop Legaré in MacLennan, Alberta. The Oblate Museum in Girouxville and the Oblate archives in St. Albert were very helpful. All

of the poems and most of the artwork are here courtesy of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and Fr. Jacques Johnson, Provincial.

None of this could have been achieved without the support and continual contribution of Father Paul Hernou, better known in the north as Maskwa (bear), who carries on the work of Vandersteene in the mission stations east of Peace River. A large note of appreciation is owed to the sisters in the various missions. A considerable number of the Cree people I consulted are listed in Appendix 2, but many more made comments that were never recorded, but became, in one way or other, part of my understanding.

I found all of Rogier's clerical colleagues to be forthright and helpful. During my Belgian sojourn, Rev. Omer Tanghe provided wonderful assistance, and subsequently approval to quote from his voluminous sources. The Vandersteene family, especially Pol and Mietje Dewaegheneire opened their home and hospitality to me and my wife so that we could interview the extensive family and associates of Rogier in Kortrijk. Later Pol Dewaegheneire, Willy Vander Steene (Rogier's cousin) and Walter Zinzen penned valuable comments on the text. The sculptor and folk singer Willem Vermandere drew a fascinating study of Vandersteene in interviews, presenting him through popular Flemish eyes. The Cree people from Garden Creek, Jean D'Or Prairie, Fort Vermilion, Slave Lake and Wabasca have all made a special contribution, suggesting insights about Vandersteene the man, as well as Vandersteene the legend. Many of the sisters with whom Rogier served, including Sister Gloria (d. 1983), and Sisters Bernadette and Lorraine were the source of much important information.

Right from the beginning Dr. William Krynen was supportive of this effort, and he kindly translated large sections of Rogier's poetry and literary material. Gordon Verburg, Thelma Habgood and the late Elly Englefield also assisted with some translations. Nancy Hannemann's skills as a research assistant and translator were sorely tried as she chased down obscure and sometimes non-existent letters, etc. Her talent has made this a better-documented book. Most of the best art photos were taken by Donald Spence, now of Video Video Productions on the campus of the University of Alberta. Some appreciation of his thoroughness can be gauged by noting that there remain around three hundred slides of Vandersteene's material in my files.

Early in the collecting process, Lois Larson and Marg Bolt heroically typed out the many hours of interviews I had, providing me with the textual base upon which this book is built. Both Miss Larson and Judy Sprigings contributed greatly with their computer skills throughout. Preliminary maps were kindly sketched by Catherine Boyd of

Edmonton; the final map was redrawn by Pam Schaus of the Department of Geography, Wilfrid Laurier University. Dan Gleason, my colleague while at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, graciously provided my photo.

I am grateful to the staff at Wilfrid Laurier University Press and particularly its vigorous director, Sandra Woolfrey, and the editor, Maura Brown, for their fine activity on behalf of *Dissonant Worlds*. They have made it a much better book than I had dared conceive.

Finally, to my wife Mary-Ellen, whose critical evaluation aided immensely in sharpening what I wanted to say, and who provided much-needed inspiration and assistance along the way, I owe a huge debt. Whatever problems remain derive from my own imperfect ability to see what should have been seen, recorded and commented upon. I hope Steentje will forgive me for that . . .