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Canada's greatest conservationist finest ambassador of friendship and goodwill

"My name is Grey Owl. I come in peace." With these words, Canada's most celebrated conservationist carried a message about the world of the beaver and the vanishing wilderness to millions of people in Canada, Britain and the United States.

But who was this man who attracted audiences in ever-increasing numbers and who prompted one critic to write, "Grey Owl is probably one of the finest ambassadors of friendship and goodwill Canada has ever sent to England?"

A charlatan

Former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker said, "Grey Owl was a charlatan of the first rank and Canada's greatest conservationist." Why a charlatan?

Throughout his life Grey Owl posed as an Indian. He claimed he was born near the Rio Grande, of an Apache mother and a Scottish father. But within 24 hours of his death on April 13, 1938, an article by Greg Clark in the *Toronto Star* revealed that Grey Owl was actually Archie Belaney, who was born in Hastings, England and came to Canada in 1906, adopting the way of life of the Indian people of northeastern Ontario.

His transformation from Englishman to Indian was described by Belaney in

a letter written in 1934. "Nearly everything that I have learnt that is now being put to use and expressed in writing, comes from the Ojibways of Canada with whom I have soujourned (*sic*), on and off (mostly on), for nearly 30 years and coming under their influence whilst yet a youth, learnt their arts and language...and consider their traditions as my own."

The discovery that Grey Owl was not born an Indian outraged many who had heard his message; but the debate over his identity ignored both his contribution to the preservation of the wilderness and his love and concern for the beaver.

How it all began

Grey Owl's career as a conservationist began in the mid-1920s in Témiscouata County, Quebec. For 20 years he had been a guide, hunting and trapping. His friend and publisher, Lovat Dickson, described Grey Owl's realization of the suffering he had caused. "Things he had barely noticed before now stood as mute witnesses of the suffering his presence in these woods inflicted on animal life. When they came upon a trap and saw the body of an animal caught in it, frozen in the shape of the last contortion it had made to retain its spark of life; when traps set for furbearing animals revealed, when they came to them, the mute, icy bodies of harmless little squirrels and birds, caught there accidentally, and most of all when they came to a trap and found not the dead body of an animal but its paw, chewed off so that its owner might be set free, when these things happened as they did nearly every day, he was reminded of the sum of suffering he had brought to these creatures over the years."

Beaver colony

With the encouragement of his Indian wife, Anahareo, Grey Owl decided to abandon his trapping and devote his energies to saving the beaver from possible extinction by establishing a beaver colony. Two beavers, which



Beaver sleeps on Grey Owl's shoulder.

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