

A photograph of Robert Bateman, an older man with grey hair and blue eyes, wearing a blue zip-up jacket over a red shirt. He is crouching outdoors in a natural setting with dry leaves and green plants. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Robert Bateman's View of Development: Instant Pudding

by Mike Davis

Robert Bateman. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

This is a second article based on an extensive interview with Robert Bateman. See our Spring 2012 issue for the first article "Robert Bateman: Spokesperson for Nature."



"Growth is good, growth is bad," says Robert Bateman. "During the 20th century we seem to have been obsessed with bigger is better and growth is a virtue. But unbridled growth of almost anything can be disastrous. This especially applies to human population. It is hard on the present generation but also on future generations and especially on nature. This view from the air of a Nairobi slum brought it home to me. Without a change in philosophy the future of human settlement will look increasingly like this. Soaring above I have painted two white-backed vultures, perhaps one of the few creatures that will be compatible with this blighted future."

"The biggest threat to the Niagara Escarpment is human development," declares Robert Bateman, world-famous artist and one of the founding members to serve on the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC). "I was honoured to be appointed by Bill Davis, one of the best premiers Ontario has ever had, if not the best.

"Local politicians on the Commission wanted to develop the Escarpment as fast as pos-

sible," he remembers. "I was really shocked that they were not interested in making the Escarpment special at all, let alone preserving and protecting it." Yet he wasn't in favour of saving it just for human recreational use. He took the role of spokesperson for nature.

"My view was one of the worst things you could do for the large things in nature is to put a public park on the Escarpment."

NEC the Enemy

Bateman vividly remembers walking into some regional NEC meetings. "I had to walk a pha-

"I am of course against quarries, but I am a realist and a geographer. Quarries can be staged, but it must be done with sophistication."

lanx of signs and placards showing that people considered the NEC was Stalin and Hitler and dictators all rolled into one. A certain element of public opinion is the mentality 'my home is my castle and you better not tell me what to do with it.' I was horrified by the philosophy even of rural Ontario, to walk past those protestors who seemed like they would be nice ladies, gentlemen and kids I would like, but I was considered their enemy."

Bateman mentions the popular saying of the mid-20th century "You can't stop progress." Then he muses "on this planet Earth, what is progress? New politicians believe in a new definition of progress which concentrates on quality of life and on protecting the world for our future generations. So there is hope." He has a balanced approach to perhaps the most contentious issue concerning the

Escarpment.

"One of the major threats obviously is quarrying," he says. "I am of course against quarries, but I am a realist and a geographer. If we build more houses and roads to service them, we need aggregate and rock. Where are we going to get it? There is too much acceptance that we have to grow, and the faster the better. Large growth is terrible if it means using up Earth's resources and destroying nature for future generations. But quarries can be staged, how they're handled, the pace at which they're handled, but it must be done with sophistication."

Continued on page 38

Continued from page 31



"In for the Evening" ©Robert Bateman. "Although farming has changed in many ways and has become more like mass-production factories," notes Bateman, "there are still places where one can see the timeless activities of man and nature."

Instant Pudding

Bateman has a unique perspective on much of current development. "We are destroying our natural heritage and human heritage with a vengeance. We have really powerful and fast tools and a growing population exponential curve. We are replacing our heritage with what I call Instant Pudding. It is so sweet and smooth and convenient that it is extremely popular, it is very easy and it is spreading all over the planet. It is very boring. You can't tell if you are in Mississauga, or San Diego or the suburbs of London."

Bateman sees the threat of conformity, whether it be monoculture tree plantations, or endless subdivisions.

"We know in reality that uniformity in nature is unstable. Living in this one mass is boring, dangerous and stupid. But it is very popular and it is covering up the planet and the Escarpment is suffering from that same malady. There are huge pressures to spread

instant pudding all over the Escarpment and I deplore that."

He mentions the concept of the French "*pays*" which means a countryside. "They are not official political things but they have their own personalities. All the farmers for centuries have felt when they are in one area there is certain personality, a certain climate, a certain permeability of the soil, therefore a different settlement pattern, a different type of crop. It's everything, it's the topography, the settlement patterns, history. Everything shows up in this landscape. It has a personality and a quality. You could even tell from a photograph where a place was.

"I want my great-grandchildren to be able to drive across the future Ontario at the turn of the next century and know they are in the Niagara Escarpment and it is a precious treasure that has personality. That the natural and human heritage of the Escarpment is intact." **EV**

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