I would like you to all close your eyes. Close your eyes and picture a place that is deep in your heart. I will pause for a few moments while you enjoy your place. There is a remote chance your place may not be connected with nature, but it most probably will.

It is a great honour to be recognized with this gold medal as a result of my connection with geography and Canada. A simple definition of geography is “the study of place.” I did not take art at university, I took honours geography at the University of Toronto. Although I never expected to make a living in art I knew that I would always be an artist. You do art to be an artist. I took geography so that I could get free trips (through my summer work) into the wilderness to paint like Tom Thomson and the boys. I was a Group of Seven groupie. And it worked! I got to Algonquin Park, Newfoundland and twice to the Arctic. My favourite geographical exploring came in the summer of 1953, when I worked on geographical mappings for Fenimore Iron Mines in Ungava (now Nunavik) in northern Quebec. We were four “white” men and two Inuit, Jimmy Emataluk and George Kowkay. They said they knew that their people had never walked on the land we were exploring, and we knew no white guys had either. So we were likely the first humans to tread on
that ground. We named the lakes — Finger Lake, Irony Lake and others. Now, wealthy American, German and Canadian fishermen fly in during the summer to catch Arctic char and speckled trout.

Although everyone in this room has a strong sense of place, I fear that a significant number of the upcoming generations will have no special place deep in their hearts. I am told that the average North American youngster spends seven hours a day, seven days a week looking at an electronic screen. In many cases they are filling their faces with junk food for the body and their brains with junk food for the soul. There was a cartoon of two young boys sitting on a stoop. One youth says to the other, “What are you going to be if you grow up?” If you grow up! We are facing a generation of young people who have a good chance of dying before their parents do ... from obesity, early onset diabetes, depression, suicide or substance abuse. This is part of the package of the “screen” life style. How much time do these kids spend out in nature? None! What kind of voters will they be? What kind of stories will they tell their grandchildren? About the good old days of Grand Theft Auto? A wise elder of the Cowichan tribe on Vancouver Island said, “We have been asking, ‘What kind of world are we leaving for our children?’ but we need to start asking ‘What kind of children are we leaving for our world?’”

A large part of my remaining years will be dedicated to confronting this juggernaut that has invaded our kids’ psyche. If they have no feeling or awareness of their own place what kind of caretakers for the planet will we have? This issue is front and centre for the work of the Bateman Centre in Victoria.

The whole meaning of my life since I was a teenager in the 1940s has been to share the joy of being in nature and paying attention to place.

I was lucky enough to go around the world in 1957 and ’58 in a Land Rover with my buddy wildlife biologist Bristol Foster (the future director of the Royal BC Museum, then director of Ecological Reserves of B.C.). We visited a number of cultures that have now virtually disappeared. The life work of National Geographic Explorer in Residence Wade Davis is on this urgent topic. In the 1960s I started giving lectures titled “The Disappearing World.” I stated that if you liked to say “goodbye” you should be very happy because in the late 20th century we are wiping out more of our natural and human heritage than has ever happened before or ever will again. Eventually we will have one bland and limited environment of species and culture. This, of course, will not only be boring, but also unstable and dangerous.

We need to slow down and pay attention to the marvelous variety we still have in our natural and human heritage. I recently came across a wonderful quote from that great early 20th century painter, Georgia O’Keeffe. She said, “Nobody sees a flower, really. It takes time to see a flower ... like it takes time to have a friend.” We need to take time to get to know our environments and our culture. In other words, our heritage.
Perhaps this love I have for heritage may be due to my birth. I was born on the 24th of May. Any Canadian knows that this was Queen Victoria’s birthday. Americans, of course, do not know that, and oddly enough, neither do the British. So I was born on the same day and month, but in a different year from Queen Victoria. Whatever the reason, I have always been a bit of a monarchist. I was thrilled, therefore, when in 1981 Governor General Schreyer asked me to do a painting as the only wedding gift the people of Canada were to give to Prince Charles. We gave Lady Diana some jewels. I immediately decided on a loon family. The distribution of our Common Loon is almost the same as the map of Canada. I knew that Charles was a birder and enjoyed the Canadian north. Also there are loons in his beloved Scotland where they are called the “great northern diver.” I put in two babies and predicted the royals would have two children.

Of course, I had to decide on the size. My urge was to make it very large, but I knew that in competing for wall space with the great Buckingham Palace collection of masters like Rubens and Canaletto, my painting would likely never be hung. For advice I turned to Sir Peter Scott (Scott of the Antarctic’s only child). He is a fellow wildlife painter and mentor to Prince Charles. He said that he would ask the butler at High Grove, which is Charles’s house not far from Slimbridge, Sir Peter’s Wildfowl Trust. The butler came back with the following advice. The painting could be any height, but no wider than 11 inches, including frame. I assumed he had found the only wall in the house with no picture, and that it was a slender space between the scullery and the upstairs maid’s room. That proportion was obviously ridiculous, so I made the painting a moderate 24 by 36 inches.

It happened that we were in England the summer after the wedding and Birgit and I decided to take a look at my painting among the royal wedding gifts displayed in St. James Palace. We learned that there were six-hour line-ups to see the gifts so we arrived two hours early. It was raining but we had umbrellas. Did you ever queue in the rain with umbrellas? The umbrellas overlap and shed onto the next one. Only the shortest person stays dry. During the hours of waiting I struck up a conversation with the people behind me. They were a busload of Scots who had started the day in Glasgow, at 4a.m. Eventually my ego got the better of me and I had to tell them of my painting in the palace that was the gift of the people of Canada. Being Scotsmen, they were unimpressed. It is very difficult to impress a Scotsman.

When we got inside there was a bewildering array of “gifts” ... a project by the Boy Scouts of Tunbridge Wells, a doily from Little Miss Muffett from Sussex. Almost everything was heartfelt and humble ... but no gift from Canada. I then tried to avoid the Scots. Finally in a large end room were the gifts from nations. These were more high end and went on and on but no gift from Canada. Just before the exit doors was a huge bullet-proof glass case full of gold and jewels ... the gift from Saudi Arabia. It had its own guard. Squeezed between it and the door was a little standing peg board, the kind with the little holes you see in hardware stores. On it were three paintings. Mine was the bottom one, from knee level down. It was hanging beneath
the gift of the people of France, by the famous Raoul Dufy. So I was honoured by that.

Of course, everyone was dazzled by the Saudi treasures. Then they would look up, see the exit and head out without a glance at the paintings on the peg board. Since we had waited so long for this moment we decided to wait a bit longer to see if anyone actually looked at my loons. Minutes passed and no one did. Finally one man bent down and actually looked at the piece. I could not resist tapping him on the shoulder, shaking hands and introducing myself, and congratulating him on his perception and taste.

I will close by re-quotting Georgia O’Keeffe in a slightly different way: “Nobody sees their place, really. It takes time to see your place ... like it takes time to have a friend.”

Finally I would like to repeat that familiar line to which we seldom give thought, but that has profound meaning ... “O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.” To that I am always sure you will say “Amen.”

Thank you.

Robert Bateman
MY LOONS
AT ST. JAMES PALACE
Queue for Royal Wedding Gifts, St. James's Palace, London
Sept 26