

The Wilderness Observed: A Review Article

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There is something artistically intractable about the interior of British Columbia. The land itself looks so much like a great enigmatic artifact that interpretation seems supererogatory, and the vastnesses refuse to be submitted to patterns in the artist's mind, as the planes of the Provençal hills and houses were beaten into the idiom of Cubism by Cézanne and his successors. British Columbia has had no Cézanne, let alone a Picasso; it has not even given much encouragement to the successors of the Group of Seven, and the same might be said of writers. No one has succeeded in breaking the Rockies in to prose in the same way as Frederick Phillip Grove tamed the plains in *Over Prairie Trails*. I speak with the sadness of experience, for I am conscious that the one among my own travel books that signally failed to do justice to the physical temper and texture of the country it set out to describe was *Ravens and Prophets*, the book I wrote on British Columbia. So it is with a knowledge of the difficulty of the task the author has attempted that I recognize one of the few really evocative books ever written on the wilderness of the far Canadian west in Edward Hoagland's *Notes from the Century Before*, which he describes in the subtitle as *A Journal from British Columbia*.¹

The art of good travel writing is a devious one. The best approach is always oblique. The man who sets out with the intention of describing a country as directly as he might take a landscape photograph or draw a map is headed for failure. The man who sets out with some ulterior objective, to investigate a social problem, to satisfy an urge of historical curiosity, to prove a crackbrained theory, is more likely, as a kind of divine bonus, to receive the particular gift of tongues that enables him to evoke the land through which he quests.

Hoagland's particular search was historical, one of those quests that

¹ *Notes from the Century Before: A Journal from British Columbia*, by Edward Hoagland. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1969. 273 pp. \$8.50.

might easily have produced a narrative of excruciating sentimentality. When he started up the Stikine River in 1966 on a series of travels that would take him over a territory stretching from Atlin on the edge of the Yukon down to Hazelton on the Skeena, he was setting out to catch the dying glimmer of the frontier: "My interest was in the continent rather than Canada, and I would be looking at the Missouri Basin not so long after Parkman."

Hoagland is an American, imbued with the idea still current among many American historians of the westering advance, decade after decade, of a frontier society that at each stage recapitulated the experience of the previous stages, so that what happened on the Stikine and the Bella Coola in the 1930s (and was fading out in the middle 1960s) is regarded as fundamentally similar to what happened in the American midwest a century before. I am not convinced by this kind of continental historicizing. I consider that the fact that pioneer homesteading on the Missouri led to permanent settlement, while pioneer homesteading on the Stikine was a passing phase, points to basic differences between the two situations; I believe, in other words, that our North American history has been almost as localized — within very broad drifts of continental change — as European history, and that the failure to appreciate how differently various regions have evolved is part of the political trouble with North America today; we have followed the dream of unity so far that we have spoiled the much more attractive reality of diversity.

But, though my personal historical crotchets lead me to distrust profoundly the assumptions on which Mr. Hoagland based his quest, I regard the results as superb, since the theory has merely provided a framework within which a man with a fine sense of the colour and drama of actuality could deploy a remarkable descriptive and narrative talent. Hoagland makes no great claims for himself as a hardy explorer. He travels by bush plane and boat, occasionally by car and jeep over rugged roads, but he avoids the harder ways of journeying and admits it: "I am no outdoorsman really, and I found that, if the truth be told, I would just as soon *imagine* the grandeur of the pack trip from what I'd already seen rather than undergo the pummelling rains we would be involved in." Imagination, a remarkable way of letting his lines down through the ice of other men's memories, a multiple curiosity, an avidity of note-taking, and a magnificent verbal agility and zest; these, rather than brute endurance, form the equipment that Mr. Hoagland brought with him when he stepped off the river boat at Telegraph Creek on the Stikine to begin his real quest, and they stood him in far better stead.

Thousands of endurers and achievers have wandered over the map of the British Columbian north and confided their experiences to stonily laconic journals; even immobilized in age, as Hoagland notes, the veterans of Telegraph Creek "write inarticulately in their diaries at night instead of watching T.V." Hoagland, in a "Journal" which is so plainly a work of artifice that it cannot be his original unworked notes, has given each river and each decaying settlement and each ageing man an individual and convincing characterization, and in the process he has created a marvellously comprehensive image — in words rather like the great mural of the north that Jack Shadbolt painted at the Edmonton airport — of a wilderness society in its very last moments. How near the end it all was can be judged by his own comment, looking back over that trip after a return two years later: "It hadn't been too late in 1966, but then in 1968 it suddenly was." Anyone who was in the Cariboo and the Chilcotin and the Skeena country in the early 1950s, as I was, and returned at the end of the decade, will know precisely what he means.

I have generalized enough. Let me get to some of the detail of *Notes from the Century Before*. For his agile powers of description, take this paragraph, part of the account of a boat jaunt on the lower Stikine.

Again we skylark between the drift piles and swampy Islands and crocodile logs, making the seething brown river a raceway, an obstacle course. The sun is low. The thick shoreline is that of a jungle river. Hundreds of great trees are stranded about in the shallows so that parts of the estuary look like a naval graveyard. We swing near a beaver house, and swing near an eagle plunked in a tree. From time to time a seal surfaces and dives — whole herds go upriver during the salmon run. Besides the continual gulls, we start up a flock of ducks every couple of minutes, thirty or forty ducks, and since the boat zips along as fast as they do, we wheel them towards shore like a troop of horses, until they gradually outdistance us.

Note that the place is evoked by the combination of action and observation; in the same way Hoagland presents admirable panoramic descriptions of the north country by telling of a trip by bush plane in which we are perpetually conscious of the pilot feeling his way under the clouds and through the mountain passes, conscious of the plane's lolloping and straining, at the same time as we are aware of the shape of peaks, the glimmer of glaciers hanging in the saddles, and the emerald of high goat pastures invisible from the valleys below.

Like all good describers, Hoagland has a touch of the epigrammatist, the power to create a complex image in a single sentence. "Although his eyes are hollowed, it's a foxy, amused, humane face; it's a face you

would want on your jury." "The squirrels we saw were eating mushrooms, sitting up, holding them in their paws, like big toasted buns — mushrooms that were bigger than they were." And, like all good impressionistic historians, he has an ear for the vivid, isolated fact that needs recording, somewhere, somehow, lest it be forgotten. This, for example, on sturgeons: "The Bear Lake Indians caught one occasionally and kept it alive as long as they could, tied in the shallows, cutting steaks off its sides." On miners and their ways: "For firewood the miners merely girdled a tree they were going to want the next year and let it die and dry out where it stood until they could push it down." On blue bureaucracy: "Nipple Mountain became Knipple Mountain back in Victoria."

There are recipes for making pioneer homebrew, detailed descriptions of the different ways of trapping various fur-bearing animals, an elegy on the dying breed of Tahltan Bear Dogs, and a fascinating note on a method of curing moose skins that surely has survived from the days of the palaeolithic hunters:

Emma takes me to see her work shed. She has two hides scraped white hanging from the rafters, ready to be cut into vests and moccasins. The first process was to cook the raw skin in a pot together with the moose's own brains, she says. This soaking and cooking was repeated four or five times, drying the skin in the sun in between. The meat side was scraped with a sharp rock on the end of a pole and the hair side with a piece of leg bone, split and sharpened, which she shows me, and the hide was stretched on a stretcher and kneaded and tanned.

One could continue for pages extracting such details, or talking of the little sketches of wilderness careers which Hoagland gleans from his notes, like his accounts of the celebrated Gunanoot, the Tsimshian outlaw from the Skeena, but the real substance of the book lies in his attempt to reconstruct the patterns and the mores of a pioneer society from a series of conversations and interviews (not always easy because he stuttered and his subject was often deaf) with the men who still followed the wilderness life. All but a few were old men whose activities had greatly diminished; a man in his fifties, the last of the wolfers and last of the professional explorers on foot, seemed, among them, a young man still.

In this context the title of the book is somewhat misleading, for these are not in the main "Notes from the Century Before." It is true that the pioneer life in the region between the Skeena and Atlin Lake, with the Stikine as its centre and the Telegraph Trail to the Yukon as its tenuous spine, began in the 1870s when the miners moved northward from the

exhausted diggings of the Cariboo, but the homesteaders who set up their farms in self-subsistent isolation came later, mainly towards the turn of the century, and most of the men Hoagland interviewed wandered into the country, usually looking for gold, after the first world war, a time when many men sought a return to equanimity by leaving civilization behind them and accepting what was then regarded as an admirable and a viable way of life. During the depression the people who lived virtually without money in places like the Stikine valley, and farther south in such valleys as those of the Skeena and the Bella Coola, were actually a good deal better off than many of those who stayed in the cities or on the one-crop farms of the prairies. With their varied crops and their cattle, their hunting, and their fishing, they rarely knew physical want except when they travelled far into the uninhabited wilderness, and to the pleasure of living in a pristine world they added the satisfaction of sitting out the age of crisis with the knowledge where most next meals would come from. Perhaps this is why Hoagland found that over settlements dominated by former trappers and homesteaders and river men, like Telegraph Creek, there lingered a feeling of the thirties, while in the mining towns like Atlin the flavour was that of an earlier decade.

After the second world war there was no such movement to the wilderness as there had been after 1918. The patter of adventuring, or perhaps the mere standards of comfort, had changed. The ageing men and women who had gone there in previous decades, and the Indians, were left to wind up what Hoagland calls "a mode of living, a most ancient mode of living going back to when the Greeks landed in Sicily or the Danes settled in Iceland."

The result has been an emptying of the wilderness of a kind that has not happened since man first penetrated these regions. "It can never have been emptier, because the handful of trappers are gone and even the Indians have been sucked south and centralized." The men are departing, and the animals are returning, bears and wolves where they have not been seen for half a century, beavers coming back to dam long deserted streams, jackpines covering the pastures, primevality reasserting itself.

But not, evidently, forever; the wilderness must be well and truly raped before it can finally be left in peace. When Hoagland returned to the region two years after the journey he describes in *Notes from the Century Before*, he found

the circle of wilderness taking a terrific pasting. The damming and flooding, the logging and road-building, the hundred helicopter bases were leaching it from every angle. Though it was still good ground for a novelist, an alarming number of the oldtimers had been dispersed to hospitals, and my memory of this later summer is a cacophony of get-rich schemes, of white-Indian disparagement and conflict, and Californians immigrating and buying up the homesteads, buying whole chunks of valleys, even to the trading posts and weather stations. There is a frank new air of rapine.

It is obvious that, even in the remotest regions, the old wilderness way of living, which had some vitality even twenty years ago, is at last dead, and we must be grateful that a writer as perceptive and as evocative as Mr. Hoagland should have got there in time to write what is partly an immensely useful historical source book and partly a very moving threnody.

The way of life has gone, but the land is still there, and the moral implicit in all that this book has to say is that man succeeds in living there when he comes to terms with it, and not when he tries, with too harsh a disregard for its ecological balances, to shape it to his own desires. Clearly a new invasion of the wilderness has begun, and the technologies it commands are far more powerful than anything the old pioneers possessed. Surely, before this can go beyond some fatal point of disequilibrium, we should decide — if not on a policy for the wilderness — at least on a philosophic approach that might save what is humanly desirable from indiscriminate exploitation and destruction. As Mr. Hoagland remarks: "In the confusion of helicopters and mineral promotions, the question in British Columbia has become the same as everywhere else: How shall we live?"

But disregard, if you wish, that didactic conclusion. The main thing is to read *Notes from the Century Before* not for what it argues, but for what it creates in the mind's eye. For it is hardly likely that such a book can ever again be written of the distant valleys of the north and their fading settlements.