

MOUNTIE IN MUKLUKS: THE ARCTIC ADVENTURES OF BILL WHITE. By PATRICK WHITE. Foreword by EDITH IGLAUER. Madeira Park, British Columbia: Harbour Publishing, 2004. ISBN 1-55017-352-9. 248 p., maps, b&w illus., bib., index. Hardbound, Cdn\$34.95.

You will not find Bill White (1905–2001) listed in any Arctic bibliographies or biographies. He has, hitherto, appeared in the pages of Henry Larsen’s autobiographical *The Big Ship* (1967), an account of the Arctic voyages of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police schooner *St. Roch*, which gained fame when Larsen navigated it through the Northwest Passage in 1940–42 and again in 1944. That feat made Larsen and *St. Roch* the second to navigate the passage, in the wake of Roald Amundsen and *Gjøa*. Bill also wrote his own account of *St. Roch*’s 1929 maiden voyage to the Arctic, which appeared in Harbour’s regional series *Raincoast Chronicles* nearly two decades ago.

Howard White (1983), the publisher at Harbour and father of *Mountie in Mukluks* author Patrick White (and no relation to Bill), wrote an earlier book about Bill entitled *A Hard Man to Beat*. Based on Bill’s own writings, it focused on Bill’s post-Mountie, post-Arctic career as a labour organizer. All this means that while Bill White is a legend in Vancouver, and to a handful of people who remember him fondly in the Arctic, he is unknown to most Arctic scholars or aficionados of the North. Thanks to Patrick White and *Mountie in Mukluks*, that will now change. Based on Bill’s reminiscences, the book is Patrick’s carefully edited rendering of reams of material provided by Bill through the years. What comes through, however, in his own words, is pure, unadulterated and “cuss-filled” (so says the book jacket) Bill White.

“One of the most un-cop like cops who ever built an igloo,” Bill White was a hell-raising troublemaker who faced the choice of jail or joining law enforcement. He chose the latter, signing up for Canada’s famous Mounted Police. Never one to mince words, Bill termed his training as “pretty much all bullshit...it was really nothing more than a modified Boy Scouts program. You could spend days learning how to peg a bloody tent” (p. 27–28). And yet Bill found delight. “The best part of basic training was learning the Criminal Code. There’s a lot of goddamn strange things you wouldn’t expect...For instance, it said that it was against the law to try and screw a dame on a boat. Us recruits got more laughs out of that book than any other kind of smut we managed to smuggle in there” (p. 28).

In December 1929, after his brief stint wrestling nude female Doukhabor protesters into lock-up and patrolling the border for bootleggers, Bill was granted his request for a transfer to the Arctic. He headed to Vancouver, where the RCMP was about to send its newly built schooner *St. Roch* north.

St. Roch, built in North Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1928 to serve as a supply ship and floating police detachment for the RCMP, regularly motored into the

Arctic under Henry Larsen’s command until 1948. During that time, the tiny wooden craft and her skipper became a legend. Bill White left *St. Roch* in 1930, during the first season at Cambridge Bay. Writing from the perspective of a crewmember on a maiden voyage and a newly promoted captain, Bill took issue with Henry and *St. Roch*’s later celebrity, pointedly “myth busting” with anecdotes. Bill’s critical eye and words notwithstanding, he betrayed a soft spot for Larsen, reinforcing accounts of the Norwegian-born captain’s humanity and determination. “Now Henry may’ve had his faults, but there’s few you’d rather have at the wheel when it came to weaving through ice” (p. 65).

Bill’s harshest criticisms were reserved for his fellow white residents of the Arctic, including other members of the RCMP. His highest praise went to the Inuit he met. Terming most other accounts of the North by whites “bullshit,” Bill wrote with unreserved praise about his Inuit friends, including his closest confidant, Mahik. Hunting, trapping, building snow houses, eating Arctic cuisine Inuit style, Bill heaped scorn on posturing RCMP members who could not adapt to life in the North and Hudson’s Bay Company employees who exploited Inuit (“grandstanding” is his most polite description of their behaviour). The picture he painted of the Arctic in the early 1930s is quite different from what you find in other reminiscences.

Bill White headed out of the Arctic after two terms of service in Cambridge Bay, sailing home on *St. Roch* in 1935. When he got to Vancouver, the Depression was in full force. Rather than tackle unemployed marchers demonstrating against the government, White left the RCMP: “I joined the Mounties to see the North,” he said, “not to go around beating up unemployed Depression victims” (p. 222). Bill went on to a new life as a shipyard worker, labour organizer, union president, and family man. It would take 40 years before he returned to the Arctic, on a final sentimental journey to the scenes of his youth.

Bill’s tale ends with this trip and a final comment on *St. Roch* and “a stunt they pulled during the war. The government wanted to put on a show to beef up Canada’s hold over the north, so ordered Henry to take the *Roch* into the eastern Arctic, figuring to blow a bunch of smoke about conquering the Northwest Passage. This was a bit of a joke because the so-called Northwest Passage was a busy bloody highway by this time with trading posts all along it and supply ships like the *Chimo* and *Aklavik* going this way and that every year” (p. 227–228). The regular voyages of the Hudson’s Bay Company vessels notwithstanding, as well as Bill’s ever-critical eye, the 1944 voyage of *St. Roch* was more than a stunt: it was an important chapter in Arctic navigation. No other vessel had yet, nor has since, navigated that “more northerly route” across the top of Victoria Island and past Banks Island (other than by icebreaker).

Mountie in Mukluks is a delightful read, full of opinions and full of life. Other opinions are out there, but this is an essential book if you are a student of the period and Canada’s activities in the North. Unvarnished, delightful,

and sympathetic, it offers a refreshing look at the activities of the RCMP, trappers, and traders in the Arctic. It is substantially augmented by a sampling of some of Bill's many photographs of the people and places he encountered. While they would perhaps be better suited to glossy reproduction on coated paper, the quality of reproduction is still good. An inveterate and skilled photographer, Bill White captured incredible scenes that add to the value of the book—and that's no bull.

REFERENCES

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