

ecology of arctic and subarctic birds and on the bookshelves of nonprofessionals who are intrigued by the natural history of the North.

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THE LADIES, THE GWICH'IN, AND THE RAT: TRAVELS ON THE ATHABASCA, MACKENZIE, RAT, PORCUPINE, AND YUKON RIVERS IN 1926. By CLARA VYVYAN. Edited by I. S. MACLAREN and LISA N. LAFRAMBOISE. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1998. ISBN 0-88864-302-0 311 p., maps, b&w illus., bib., notes, appendices, index. Softbound. Cdn\$29.95.

In 1926, Clara Vyvyan and a friend, Gwendolen Dorrien Smith, traveled from England to Canada and then west to Edmonton, north down the Athabasca, Slave, and Mackenzie Rivers, west up the Rat River and over the Richardson Mountains to the Porcupine and Yukon rivers beyond, and finally to the Bering Sea, Seattle, and back to England. Thirty-five years later, Vyvyan published *Arctic Adventure*, an account of their trip. Now, after almost four more decades, comes *The Ladies, The Gwich'in, and the Rat*, whose core is a reprint of *Arctic Adventure*.

The Ladies, The Gwich'in, and the Rat contains a lengthy introduction, followed by the text of *Arctic Adventure* (accompanied by almost 60 black-and-white illustrations). Also included are eight watercolors by Gwendolen Dorrien Smith, two appendices (one contains Vyvyan's field notes, located in an unnamed English repository, and the other lists North American Plants collected by Smith), and end notes for both *Arctic Adventure* and the field notes.

In search of the wild and the sublime, confident from a trek in the Balkans, prepared by reading and correspondence, Vyvyan and Smith set off on their adventure in May 1926. The first few legs were a piece of cake: second class on the S.S. *Empress of Scotland* across the Atlantic (pleasant but for eastern European bodily and food smells); the train ride west to Winnipeg and Edmonton (memory of birds and breaking spring), and north to Waterways. Then

came adventure, beginning with the tight quarters and enforced sociability with a variety of people on steamers down the Athabasca, Slave, and Mackenzie Rivers. At Aklavik, where the two travelers stayed with Soeurs Grises for two weeks, the trial of an Inuit accused of murder was in progress. Vyvyan apparently accepted the judgement of one member of the RCMP that Inuit minds were "like the mind of a 12-year-old child" (p. 74). Many local characters and their heavy drinking also held the women's attention.

At Aklavik Vyvyan and Smith met their Gwich'in guides, Lazarus Sittichinli and Jim Koe, who would lead the way for them and push and pull their canoes up the swift, shallow Rat River to the Continental Divide. Neither woman had paddled a canoe before. The trip up the Rat was trying, the mosquitoes voracious, the muskeg clutching. The photographs of this section of the trip speak volumes. The guides were heroic in their struggles to get these two women to the Pacific drainage. On the Divide, the women experienced "ecstasy" (p. 135).

On the other side of the Divide, Lazarus and Jim shot a grizzly and devoured its meat—a "revolting scene," thought Vyvyan (p. 141)—and then left the two women, as prearranged. While Vyvyan gave grudging acknowledgement to their "faithfulness and labour," she also remarked that their wages—three pounds per day—had been too high (p. 142). On paddled Vyvyan and Smith to Old Crow and Rampart House and, with help here and there, to Fort Yukon. There Vyvyan happily buried herself in back issues of the *Atlantic Monthly* to await the arrival of the steamer that would take the ladies—by then a tourist curiosity—down the Yukon River to another steamer bound for Seattle. After a brief side trip from that city to climb in British Columbia, the intrepid ladies again took to the rails, this time eastward toward home. Their adventure had lasted more than five months.

This reprint of *Arctic Adventure* is handsomely produced. The editors have obviously taken considerable care with the manuscript. The photographs and watercolors enhance the publication greatly, as do the introduction, appendices, and endnotes. But why has *Arctic Adventure* been republished, other than as a labor of love? In a foreword we learn that the original has long been out of print. Furthermore, the editors find it "flawed" by an aggressive stylist and errors, and so in this version they have standardized capitalization and improved upon hyphenation and paragraphing.

But how important was *Arctic Adventure*? Many took the same route followed by the ladies, although few have written about it as fluidly as Vyvyan. Canoeing up the Rat River to the Divide was a marked accomplishment. (I know that country personally from a 1972 dog team trip with Fort McPherson Gwich'in in search of caribou in the spring, a much nicer season than summer to travel on the rivers and muskeg east of the Divide.) But many other currently inaccessible books detail the period 1910–40, and some provide more sharply etched characters or immediate memories or insight on Native people. Vyvyan

admitted that when she reconstructed her trip some 35 years after it happened, the North was “little more than a memory” (p. 3) and the journey “difficult to connect” (p. 2) with herself. She questioned her recall. Indeed her details on posts and people are often sketchy, her observations misty and occasionally somnolent. In her published text she mentions things taken from her “diary,” but these do not appear in the appendix of “field notes” (cf. p. 51, 208); the two might not have been the same.

Those hoping for in-depth engagement with the lively discussions on travel, especially women’s travel, in recent years, will largely be disappointed in this work. But the editors did not set out to make this the book’s strength, and in the end they should be thanked for making *Arctic Adventure* newly available, enhancing it with photographs, and publishing the Field Notes. These accomplishments, together with the editors’ excellent introduction (especially on Vyvyan’s Gwich’in guides), will prepare the ground for future critical work on this text.

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REACHING NORTH: A CELEBRATION OF THE SUBARCTIC. By JAMIE BASTEDO. Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1998. 255 p., map, b&w photographs, bib. Softbound. Cdn\$16.95.

Arctic readers across the North will know naturalist and writer Jamie Bastedo from his quirky radio spots on northern nature, which aired periodically on CBC North in the early 1990s. Bastedo’s concept for this radio program was to report live, and always from an outdoor location, to inform people about the natural history of the Subarctic region of the Canadian Shield. At their best, these radio programs were immediate and entertaining, and amply demonstrated their host’s impressive knowledge of the Subarctic ecosystem, his thirst for adventure, and his zany sense of humour. Bastedo has edited an eclectic assortment of expanded scripts from these radio programs, and together they comprise the essence of *Reaching North*.

In this work, as in his earlier book, *Shield Country: Life and Times of the Oldest Piece of the Planet*, Bastedo remains bent on making the natural history of the Subarctic better known. Unlike his earlier work, however, which was more willfully didactic in tone, *Reaching North* is more conversational, perhaps as a legacy of the original broadcast of these pieces, and it wraps northern science in the lives and passions of a delightful series of northern characters. What it lacks in overall coherence (most chapters read as stand-alone essays) it makes up for with carefully chosen topics and lots of good stories. Bastedo explains his focus this way:

Instead of trying to wrestle [the Subarctic’s] totality into view...I pin my hopes on intimacy...for ultimately it is only through the lens of personal relationships that we can befriend those things that loom large and sometimes baffling in our lives. My goal in this book therefore is not to portray the quintessential nub of this oceanic wilderness. Rather it is to evoke something of its sense and spirit through one-on-one encounters (p. 11–12).

In the opening chapter, for example, readers meet Katsunori Nagase, a Japanese fanatic whose life’s work, it seems, is photographing the northern lights, the intensity of which can be predicted, according to Bastedo, on any given night. In a chapter all about snow, readers meet the Snowman, University of Manitoba glaciologist Bill Pruitt. Although Pruitt’s story will not be new to Northphiles, the way Bastedo interweaves his biography with the science of snow is fresh and refreshing. On through the book, in chapters about rocks, fire, and northern adaptations of plants, mammals, birds, and fish, Bastedo serves up for readers encounters with the science of these various phenomena but also with people who bring the stories to life. And along the way, he situates himself in the text as well, as an “awestruck celebrant of the subarctic” (p. 12).

A chapter entitled “Living Down Under” is vintage Bastedo. It tells the story of doing a live program on beaver ecology in mid-winter, perched atop a lodge in a frozen swamp somewhere near Yellowknife. Although likely funnier on the radio, the tale works nevertheless in print, and describes the erstwhile host/author attempting to emulate a beaver’s culinary prowess by immersing his (Bastedo’s) head in a bucket of water and attempting to bite and chew an apple under water—on the air and in subzero temperatures!

Amid continuing patter about the beaver’s adaptations to the North, such as their diving reflex and thermo-regulation, Bastedo’s next trick, as described in the book, was to wheedle a microphone into the lumen of the lodge via an air passage. He reports that instead of hearing nothing (which he fully expected), CBC listeners were treated to “high whimpering sounds followed by rhythmic thumps and low grunts” (p. 82). He writes: “I had no answers. I think I was startled by our acoustical success. As I said, I think it’s too early for mating. They usually show no interest in these matters until early February. And they prefer to do it in the water. But then again...” (p. 82).

From sounds of the imagined beaver rut, *Reaching North* surefootedly travels to many other places on the Canadian Shield around Yellowknife, finishing deep inside the earth’s crust via the McDonald Fault that creates the East Arm of Great Slave Lake. Having taken readers into the world of various geologists who have studied it, Bastedo dwells on the rock, and reveals his abiding affection for the Shield:

The fathomless forces that created the McDonald Fault and ultimately control its destiny bring into sharp focus the ephemeral nature of life ... I find a sense of comfort, even camaraderie, when regarding such time-worn rocks in