

NORTH TO ALASKA! FIFTY YEARS ON THE WORLD'S MOST REMARKABLE HIGHWAY. By KEN COATES. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1992. 304 p., map, b&w photos, notes, index. Hardbound. US\$29.95.

Reading this book is something like driving the Alaska Highway: I began with a sense of anticipation; encountered many interesting people and places along the way; endured some long, repetitious stretches; occasionally feared that I had lost my enthusiasm and sense of direction; and, in the end, found the trip rewarding. As an experienced armchair traveller, I recommend *North to Alaska!* to others, but not without a few caveats and qualifications.

I certainly can recommend the book to readers whom Ken Coates evidently had in mind as he wrote it. These are not primarily professional academics and northern specialists, but rather people who have experienced the Alaska Highway, as well as those who wish they had and may yet do so, if only by way of this book.

Having virtually been raised on the highway himself, Coates is an ideal author for this kind of book. His father, a civil engineer with the Canadian Department of Public Works, moved his family to Whitehorse in 1964, where the elder Coates worked on reconstruction of the highway's Yukon section. The younger Coates was seven years old at the time, and he was raised in the Whitehorse-Alaska Highway culture for the next 10 years, until he left for college. Among the many "highway stories" in the book, Coates's personal recollections of living, working, and travelling on the highway are among the most vivid.

The book is built mainly upon the recollections of dozens of people who have participated in the Alaska Highway adventure. They are introduced chapter by chapter: the first groups of Canadian and U.S. office workers, farmers, students, salesmen, engineers, civil servants, and others who were drawn north by the prospect of exciting, high-paying jobs; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officers and enlisted personnel who built the original, incomplete "pioneer" road in 1942; the U.S. Public Roads Administration officials, contractors, and workers who built the "permanent" highway in 1943; the reconstruction and maintenance teams who followed in the years after; the residents of communities and service stops along the highway; and finally the truckers, tourists, and other travellers who drove the "Alcan" as it evolved from a rough-cut pioneer road to the modern, paved Alaska Highway.

With this emphasis on people and their personal experiences, there is limited discussion of larger issues, such as the geopolitical forces giving rise to the highway project, conflict among early promoters of coastal and prairie routes, strained relations between Canadian and U.S. government agencies, and the socioeconomic impacts of the highway on the Native and non-Native communities along its route. What Coates does say about such matters, however, is significant and leaves the reader wanting more. One learns, for example, that neither U.S. nor Canadian military strategists ever believed that the road would serve any critical military purpose and that they apparently were quite right. The war was always far away, and the brief Japanese thrust into the Aleutians in 1942 created little sense of urgency among the highway builders. Essentially, the highway was a convenient but not essential link between the airfields along the Northwest Staging Route, which was used to shuttle U.S. war planes to the Soviets. A joke among highway workers at the time was that they were "building a road for the Russians to march down."

In addition to pointing out that the road was militarily unnecessary, Coates also suggests that, in the years since the war, highway traffic volumes have not justified the millions of dollars required to rebuild, pave, and maintain it. Although tourism has been important, "the fact remains that the highway has not attracted the thousands upon thousands of visitors promised by highway promoters." That the highway has never had a sound military or economic rationale accounts in part for the reluctance of Canadian authorities to embrace the project from the start, the continuing refusal of British Columbia's government to assume responsibility for the B.C. segment of the highway, and the difficult and drawn-out U.S.-Canadian negotiations on paving the highway.

According to Coates, the highway has suffered from an even more basic problem: "It was an American highway—in design, conception, and ultimate purpose—built largely across Canadian territory." And, he might have added (given other observations scattered throughout the book), Americans have not always been fully respectful of Canadian prerogatives affected by the highway enterprise. Essentially, the main purpose of the highway has been to funnel lower forty-eight states travellers through Canada to Alaska.

Coates offers a number of such generalizations that help place the Alaska Highway into a larger frame of reference, but most of the text is devoted to countless smaller highway events and experiences. It is in telling this more limited story that the book tends to bog down (at least for the reader who "wasn't there"), particularly in the long, middle chapters dealing with construction of the pioneer and permanent roads. Here we read repetitiously of mud, mosquitos, cold, and poor food; of many lonely men, few women, and the uses and abuses of alcohol; and of unending operational snafus and repeated washouts. A stronger editing hand would have helped in these chapters, which seem patched together from a large stack of memorabilia.

Photographs can enhance a story about a dramatic construction project in a spectacular natural environment, and many of the 100 black and white photographs in this book contribute nicely to the narrative. Many of the pictures, however, are also rather humdrum, with barely informative captions, like "Survey crew in the field," "A six-by-six mired in the mud," "An army camp," and "Highway workers in 1942." Again, the editors might have been more helpful.

To stretch a parallel a bit, the golden anniversary of the Alaska Highway, like the quincentenary of Columbus's first voyage to the New World, commemorates an ambiguous legacy. Some of us are not sure we are proud of it or what. Yet, we still have the adventure and, as Coates tells us, the Alaska Highway is, if nothing else, a great travel adventure. Moreover, the adventure is accessible to the many and not just the wealthy few.

I completed my literary trip with a renewed sense of the beauty of the highway environment. In a passage near the end of the book (p. 266-267), Coates, a true aficionado, describes his own trip along the highway one winter night:

Homes near the highway, gas stations or small settlements, sit bathed in unnatural illumination, islands of light in the midst of a black wasteland. . . . Sparks from the winter moon bounce off the snow-covered landscape, their brilliance magnified many times by the virginal carpet. Mountain tops glow in the winter light, ice-covered lakes shine with unexpected brilliance. On those special nights when the northern lights sparkle colourfully across the sky, the beauty of the scene can defy description, crossing the thin barrier from majestic sight to spiritual experience.

It has never really been the highway that matters so much, but rather where it's at.

Thomas A. Morehouse
Institute of Social and Economic Research
University of Alaska Anchorage
3211 Providence Drive
Anchorage, Alaska 99508
U.S.A.

BARRENLAND BEAUTIES. SHOWY PLANTS OF THE ARCTIC COAST. By PAGE BURT. Yellowknife: Outcrop Limited, 1991. 246 p., 1 map, figs., colour photos, identification keys, index, bib., glossary. Softbound. Cdn\$21.00.

There are several technical publications dealing with arctic flora on the market. However, these are used primarily by professional botanists and undaunted amateurs. Casual visitors to the North and northern residents have few field guides to help them with identification of even the most common plants. The author has identified a void in the market and has attempted to fill it by providing an illustrated field guide. The book originated out of a need to provide a