

REVIEW

THE DESPERATE PEOPLE BY FARLEY MOWAT. Toronto: Little, Brown and Company (Canada) Ltd. 1959. xvi + 305 pages, end-paper maps, 11 woodcuts. 8 x 5¼ inches. Price \$5.00 in Canada.

The recent history of the Ihalmiut, a band of the inland Eskimos who lived in the southern interior of the District of Keewatin west of Hudson Bay, is not a pleasant story. These people traditionally based their economy upon the land mammals of the continental interior, particularly the barren ground caribou. The caribou were probably never a truly reliable source of food and it seems likely that even in pre-European times occasional tragic years of famine occurred. Probably the total population of the interior plains in the pre-European period never exceeded a few thousand people. Unfortunately, there can be little doubt that the coming of the white man resulted in no obvious or immediate improvement in the conditions under which the Ihalmiut lived and their numbers declined. It is Mr. Mowat's clear opinion that until very recently indeed the effects of white cultural and economic contact with the Ihalmiut, and we can infer from the vehemence of his statements that his opinions apply generally to the other Canadian Eskimo groups, has been one of unrelieved disadvantage. Unfortunately, there is much in what he says. The white man has a good deal to explain in his dealings with the Eskimo.

This is a critical book and the review that follows is, of necessity, also critical. It is, however, a significant book and it is in many ways one that will increase in value with the passage of time. Not only is it a chronologically accurate account of the movements and transitional economy of a small and now almost non-existent band of inland Eskimos, it is

also an incisive commentary upon similar problems encountered in the cultural development of other Eskimo groups. It will be read with even greater interest in future decades by those interested in the history of arctic development. The comments that follow should not be allowed to obscure the fact that this is a valuable and well-written book.

One of the most serious criticisms that can be made concerns the definite impression given by the author that the misfortunes of the Canadian Eskimos in general and of the Ihalmiut in particular were deliberately engineered by the white Canadian. In contrasting the development of the Greenland native peoples with those in the Canadian North, Mowat states, for example, that Denmark had "... a standard of moral rectitude which Canada did not appear to possess" (p. 178). He further suggests that Canada had a "... morally insensible, and apparently calculated, indifference towards the Eskimos. . . ." (p. 179, italics here and below are mine). In discussing the unknown number of Garry Lake people who died of starvation during the famine winter of 1949-50, Mowat comments that even if they had known of the desperate conditions "... there was little likelihood that the responsible authorities would, in any case, have bothered themselves about the fate of such a remote group of people" (p. 112). Finally, the author clearly and specifically states (p. 152) that the deaths among the Eskimos in the Canadian Arctic after 1951 due to starvation, malnutrition, and disease were the result of a situation "... deliberately created by the destruction of the aboriginal Eskimo way of life in favour of the white-fox trapping economy..." These are serious and complex charges and it is regrettable that they are made

with such little substantiation. The exaggeration of statements such as these is immediately obvious to anyone with some knowledge of northern development. For the general reader they have, however, a spurious appearance of authenticity. Surely the strongest charges which can be made against those responsible for northern administration are ignorance of the true condition of the Ihalmiut and indecision, stemming from a variety of motives, in assisting the Ihalmiut when it was clearly needed. Are not these charges good and sufficient reason for shame?

Another major criticism that can be levelled against "The Desperate People" is prompted by its illogical and unsubstantiated excesses both in fact and phrasing. Indeed the frequent overstatement can be so extreme as to amount to misstatement, as when the author refers to the arrival of the white trappers on the interior barrens as "the last wave of a savage flood of anarchy" (p. 24). Similarly extreme is the interpretation put on the words of Mr. Jean Lesage, in 1954 the federal minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources. Canada saw the Eskimos only as a "potential asset which could be of service in the fulfilment of her ambitions and economic hopes" (p. 204). The fact that such an attitude could be anything but continuing "callous disregard" seems not to have occurred to Mr. Mowat.

Many chapters contain biased attacks on the institutions and agencies that have come most frequently into contact with the Eskimos during the past decades. Few people would sincerely argue that the white man has been blameless in his dealings with the Eskimo but most careful readers of the book, even those with little knowledge of the north, will recognize the predilection for unfounded criticism that is one of its most obvious characteristics.

To refute one controversial opinion it seems that the base profit motive so often imputed to white men in the Arctic cannot with complete accuracy be attached to the Hudson's Bay Company. The first truly arctic post of the Hudson's Bay Company was not established until

quite late in the present century and since that time it is questionable if the arctic operations of the company have ever been really profitable. Many of the posts have consistently shown an operating loss, and many more scarcely meet their operating expenses. It often seems that only with the advent of a more stable and settled Eskimo population does the company now have the opportunity of operating profitably in the north.

Careful reading of the book suggests that too little attention is paid to the role the Eskimos played in involving themselves in their own difficulties. One example is the movement of Owlittuk's band northward from Nueltin Lake to Otter Lake in the late summer of 1950. Although it may be easy to sympathize with the motives of the band, it is not so easy to understand why a people possessing almost no ammunition nevertheless travelled to a remote area where their chances of finding sufficient food were extremely poor. Isolating themselves with only two dozen rounds of ammunition in an area where "The omens for the approaching winter were very dark" (p. 142), surely contributed to their own misfortune whatever their reasons may have been. Owlittuk may have been "deliberate" and "courageous" (p. 141), but he seems also to have been less than wise.

When all necessary allowances are made for the excesses of the book, the injustices, as they remain and insofar as they can be substantiated, are a major indictment of the administration of the north. The failure to ship ammunition and supplies to starving Eskimos when required, the long delays before needed medical supplies arrived by aircraft at outlying camps, and the seeming indifference of those in authority to repeated requests for assistance are all devastating to our image of Canada as a humanitarian nation.

The poor quality of the help given to the Ihalmiut in 1947, for example, is serious. It would be interesting to have available the government interpretation of events during the same period. Even more serious, however, is the criminal

neglect shown by the white trapper at Otter Lake who in 1947 virtually refused assistance to the starving members of a band of the Ihalmiut.

In summary we must recognize that the book may have done a disservice to the Eskimo cause by so vehemently propounding an extreme view of white infamy. The persistent overstatements, which occur throughout, are more likely than not to antagonize the very people

who are at present in the best position to improve the Eskimos' lot. This is particularly unfortunate since, at the date of publication, the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources was already well advanced on a comprehensive program to improve Eskimo welfare, a policy, incidentally, to which Mr. Mowat gives guarded approval near the end of his book.

VICTOR W. SIM

OBITUARY

R. M. Anderson (1877-1961)

Dr. Rudolf Martin Anderson, an Honorary Member of the Arctic Institute and for many years Chief of the Division of Biology in the National Museum of Canada, Ottawa, died on June 22, 1961 at the age of 84.

A reserved man, rather diffident, he was never more happy than when he was sitting at the door of a tent, legs outstretched, skinning a mixed bag of shrews, marmots, sandpipers, and perhaps one or two eiders, the while keeping both ears attuned to the murmur of wind and water, and the twittering of the birds. Indians and Eskimos alike trusted and admired him, because he shared so fully their own love of nature and its wild life.

In the University of Iowa he had been a prominent athlete, and his physical strength and endurance served him well during his arduous journeys in arctic Alaska and Canada between 1908 and 1916. The writer travelled with him up the Coppermine River during the winter of 1914-15, cracked with him the marrow-bones of the caribou that were shot, and roared with laughter at his humorous adventures, recounted in an unwavering monotone while his whole frame shook with suppressed mirth — doubtless at his success in stealthily demolishing three-fourths of the marrow-bones.

He was too individualistic, too absorbed in his own biological work, to be a forceful expedition-leader or a dynamic administrator in a museum; but he gave his subordinates every facility at his command and allowed them untrammelled freedom in carrying out their duties. In the field he was a splendid companion who cheerfully carried his share of the load and lent a helping hand whenever it was needed.

Anderson published many scientific papers in various journals, but, being an anthropologist, I am not competent to pass judgement on his biological achievements. I like best to remember him as the indefatigable traveller, cheerfully marching through the snow at the head of his weary dog-team in the waning twilight of an arctic day.

DIAMOND JENNESS