

The Spell of the North

Barbara Kelcey

Volume 29, Number 1, Autumn 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad29_1re03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Kelcey, B. (1999). The Spell of the North. *Acadiensis*, 29(1), 138–145.

The Spell of the North

ON 1 APRIL 1999 THE NEW TERRITORY of Nunavut was declared in Canada's eastern Arctic. The impressive local celebration was broadcast to the rest of Canada and there were information displays and minor festivities in southern cities. Television images and the internet will help illustrate and document Nunavut's identity in ways unlike any other Canadian territory. Publicity generated by the media has provided a relatively uninformed southern population with an unusual amount of information about the region.

Nunavut, along with its western counterpart (as yet unnamed), Northern Quebec, Labrador, the Yukon Territory and the northern stretches of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba are all part of the region which the south refers to as the North. The lines marking the physical constructs of the North can be illusory even to those who have to think about the region, and they are even more abstract for those who rarely consider it. On some maps of Canada, cartographers just leave it off, summing up a commonplace southern understanding. It has a geographical space, but for the rest of Canada the North somehow still remains "that place up there". In many ways books written about the North reflect this same consciousness.

The northern region of Canada is a "place of dreams", explains William Morrison in *True North: The Yukon and Northwest Territories* (Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1998). The image is as much about "how we want to see it" as it is about "what may actually be there". Judging from recent publications about the region, the place and the myth still hold a spell — the spell of the midnight sun as it were — for writers of popular works as well as academic studies. In part this is because the North is still largely inaccessible and climatically inhospitable; Canadians prefer to make visits to warmer climes, not colder ones. "Some say God was tired when He made it;/ Some say it's a fine land to shun", wrote Robert Service in "The Spell of the Yukon", adding "maybe;/ but there's some as would trade it./ For no land on earth — and I'm one".¹

Almost a century after Service described the spell of the Yukon, writers and adventurers continue to explore the same theme for all the North. Arctic adventures and memoirs have always been the backbone of the northern bibliography, most often recorded by men representing the "Holy Trinity of the North" — the Bay, the Church and the RCMP. Readers never fail to be intrigued, it seems, by their exploits. But as *True North* explains, there is a fundamental dichotomy for those who document the region: the knowledge that for some the North is a homeland and for others it is a frontier. All of the books considered in this review reflect the second perspective.

Morrison's *True North* is almost an anomaly among recent northern books because it is a general history, a textbook introduction to the economic, political and social development of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Previously the two volumes Morris Zaslow contributed to the McClelland and Stewart Centennial Series were the only real overview histories of the region.² Unlike these, *True North* does not get bogged down in details and is an easily read text, peppered with dry humour and lots

1 *The Best of Robert Service* (Toronto, 1940), p. 1.

2 Morris Zaslow, *The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870-1914* (Toronto, 1971) and *The Northward Expansion of Canada, 1914-1967* (Toronto, 1988).

of illustrations. Morrison's book forsakes Labrador and the northern provinces by defining the North as the almost four million square kilometres covered by the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Anyone who has written about the North will accept that as a wise choice despite the omissions.

Morrison's approach is systematic and predictable. His consideration of First Nations peoples of the North is followed by sections examining early explorers, traders and missionaries. *True North* will frustrate some readers as it tends to de-emphasize colonialism, imperialist expansion and the exploitation of the indigenous population and the natural resources of their homeland. Instead, Morrison chooses to fall back on earlier interpretations which cast traders and missionaries as more benign than perhaps they were. Morrison focuses on the Yukon in the last chapters of the book; the Klondike Gold Rush and the building of the Alaska Highway each form the core of a chapter. Morrison is the co-author, with Kenneth Coates, of a history of the Yukon and of the Alaska Highway and his choice of subjects in this most recent work reflects past research.³ *True North* fails to address issues raised by more recent studies and by current events in the eastern Arctic, such as the development of Nunavut.

Paul Simpson-Housley, *The Arctic: Enigmas and Myths* (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1996) is a short study of an issue that often gets glossed over in other books about the North. It concerns "Arctic Pioneers", and here the Arctic is defined as a fanciful region north of wherever the explorers of ancient Greece and early modern Europe might have been. The book includes a section on mermaids and mermen in Norway and the ghostly mirages of northern seas. Simpson-Housley suggests that polar atmospheric and weather conditions can spawn illusions, and he cites interesting pseudo-scientific evidence to explain images of mermen. Simpson-Housley notes that sightings such as these "engendered fear in mariners" (p. 65) which caused them to avoid the area and impeded the development of knowledge concerning the North.

Any book which addresses Arctic myths and mysteries must also have the obligatory chapter about Sir John Franklin.⁴ *Arctic Enigmas* is no exception. Simpson-Housley's consideration of Franklin concerns cannibalism during the expedition and subsequent arguments about it in the Victorian press. What is refreshing about Simpson-Housley's chapter, "Of Lost Ships and Cannibals", is his ability to succinctly relate the context of the mystery. This is true as well of the subsequent chapter, "The Race to the North Pole" which examines the debate about Peary's and Cook's claims for reaching the Pole.

Richard Weber and Mikhail Malakhov, *Polar Attack: From Canada to the North Pole, and Back* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1996) and Don Starkell, *Paddle to the Arctic: The Incredible Story of a Kayak Quest Across the Roof of the World* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1995) are books that both aptly communicate a style of masochism which has prevailed among southern travellers to the Arctic for

3 Kenneth S. Coates and William Morrison, *Land of the Midnight Sun: A History of the Yukon* (Edmonton, 1988); Kenneth S. Coates and William Morrison, *The Alaska Highway in World War II: The American Army of Occupation in Canada's Northwest* (Toronto, 1992).

4 Probably no northern explorer/exploiter has enjoyed more coverage than Sir John Franklin. Recent publications include William Barr, ed. and trans., *A Frenchman In Search of Franklin: De Bray's Arctic Journal, 1852-54* (Toronto, 1992) and David Woodman, *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991).

several centuries. The Arctic, like mountain tops it seems, is there, so it has to be conquered in one way or another. It is not perceived as a hot-blooded female waiting to be ravished like its supposed imperial African counterpart, though; it is a more glacial maiden, stubborn yet predictable, even while it is devious and dangerous. This is particularly evident in *Polar Attack* which describes how Weber and Malakhov attempted to reach the Pole, on foot. They were “unsupported”, which means there were no drops of supplies or other assistance from outside forces. The race to be the first unsupported team to reach the Pole was much like Peary’s, and *Polar Attack* describes the contemporary competition as well as these two men’s experiences. The book relates the failure of their first expedition as well as the subsequent success of their 1995 trek to the North Pole. One reviewer describes the book as “all-absorbing for the reader”. Certainly the trek must have been so for the participants, as any lack of attention to detail would have meant certain death on the ice, but the tedious discussion of daily routines, the daily measure of rations, repetitious descriptions of landscape and records of the mileage covered is hardly compelling stuff. The reader comes to wish they would just get there, plant the flag and find their way back. *Paddle to the Arctic* is a similar book, describing Don Starkell’s attempts to kayak the Arctic coast from Hudson Bay to the mouth of the Mackenzie River. The book is, primarily, a detailed description of daily incidents.

These two books are new contributions to a well-established northern genre where the white man or woman from the south sets out to tackle the Arctic frontier, writes a book about the experience and then uses the proceeds to set up another adventure. The self-inflicted deprivation is cast as courageous instead of what it really is. The story of “heroic” whites from the south penetrating the cold “unknowns” continues to be a successful theme for writers capitalizing on the romance of the region.

Ian and Sally Wilson, *Gold Rush: Reliving the Klondike Adventure in Canada’s North* (Vancouver, Gordon Soules Book Publishers, 1996) fits loosely into this category as well. It is an excellent example of writers who are wilderness adventurers capitalizing on their own ineptitude and an historical anniversary. Gold was first discovered in the Klondike in 1897, and the Gold Rush followed one year later. Apparently caught up in the anniversary excitement, the Wilsons decided to follow the Stikine trail to the Yukon through the northern interior of British Columbia. They chose this route because it appeared less altered than the other routes across mountain passes from the coast, or by ship via Alaska. They are propelled by “the spell” of the North as they manage the hardships of learning how to pack and ride horses, and explore the renewed virginity of the Stikine trail.

Although this is their fourth wilderness adventure book, in order to heighten tension the Wilsons cast themselves as neophytes but, like other contemporary northern adventurers, they can never actually recreate the experience. What they are spinning is a yarn written under skies patrolled by technologies unknown to the Stampeders. Nor are these new gold seekers hurried on by the desperation of the times, accompanied by greed and avarice or driven by the need to get to the Klondike before anyone else. *Gold Rush* is a nice story about a summer trip which was a little more difficult than most. The book is self-styled as a national best-seller and, like *Polar Attack* and *Paddle to the Arctic*, it is not a book about the North. It is a book about southern dreams.

Southern dreams and northern realities is the theme of Charlene Porsild, *Gamblers*

and *Dreamers: Women, Men and Community in the Klondike* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1998). Porsild's focus is on the people who migrated to Dawson City in search of wealth and who established homes and built a community. This is a shift from the more common tendency to focus on the adventure of the Rush itself. Her examination of the demographics of the Rush challenges the myth of a dominant American presence. *Gamblers and Dreamers* makes it clear as well that white southerners were not lone actors in the history. One of the strengths of the book is Porsild's first chapter, which describes those who originally lived in the Klondike and how the location of gold in their homeland affected their lives. From this beginning, Porsild explains how Dawson City developed into a mining community after the initial stampede, analyzing its social hierarchy and how it was shaped by Dawson City's geographical location. No book about the Klondike would be complete without addressing the issue of prostitution in Dawson City. The discussion in *Gamblers and Dreamers* sheds light on the moral expectations of the community and how it policed those expectations in the entertainment industry as a whole. Porsild's examination of labour and work in Dawson City provides a perspective for understanding the sex trade in terms of the broader world of wage-earning unskilled labour.

Since prostitution in the Klondike has always been a focus of Gold Rush history, it was predictable that the centenary would generate at least one book about the demimonde of Dawson City. Bay Ryley, *Gold Diggers of the Klondike* (Winnipeg, Watson & Dwyer, 1997) explores prostitution from a feminist perspective, highlighting issues of gender and sexuality and examining community responses to the industry. Unfortunately, the 80-page study falls short because it views prostitutes and their work in isolation from the Gold Rush, other women in the community and the context of the time. What emerges is an overlong essay that capitalizes on southern demand for tales of prostitution and lasciviousness in the Dawson City of the Gold Rush.

Women have not been as excluded from the written record about the North as might be expected. Indeed, there is a small library of diaries and memoirs that women from the south have written about their experiences in the North of the Gold Rush and the Northwest Territories. In the first three decades after the Second World War, women published solid accounts of their lives in the North as missionaries, teachers and nurses, and as the wives of missionaries and policemen. Women capitalized on their travels in the North in much the same way that male explorers did, using the uniqueness of Arctic experiences as justification for publication. As well, many earlier works of this nature have been republished. Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North: An Account of a Woman's 1908 Journey Through Canada to the Arctic*, edited by David Richeson (Saskatoon, Western Producer Books, 1986), is an example of this and is well worth reading.

Another is the very recent *The Ladies, the Gwich'in, and the Rat: Travels on the Athabasca, Mackenzie, Rat, Porcupine and Yukon Rivers in 1926*, edited by I.S. MacLaren and Lisa N. LaFramboise (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1998). This book concerns the travels of Clara Vyvyan⁵ and her friend Gwendolyn Dorrien Smith who undertook an incredible journey up the Mackenzie and across the Rat and Porcupine Rivers to the Yukon in 1926. They are best described as Edwardian lady

5 Clara Vyvyan, *Arctic Adventure* (London, 1961).

travellers (rather than Victorian lady travellers): women who had the time and inclination to see parts of the world which were then exotic and remote. Vyvyan and Smith travelled to Aklavik on the Hudson's Bay Company paddle wheeler. They spent some time there while Smith nursed a sprained ankle and Vyvyan observed the local white, Dene and Inuit inhabitants. Her descriptions offer a rare contemporary view of life in the North.

MacLaren and LaFramboise have written a fine introduction to this new edition. They provide a detailed description of the landscape and excellent annotation. They also include Vyvyan's field notes and the watercolour sketches that Gwen Dorrien Smith made during the journey. Their additions strengthen the original, and provide an unprecedented southern perspective on the North of the time. Lady travellers of the period wrote detailed descriptions of journeys in the tropics and this work belongs with the best of those, as northern travel writing at this time is part of the same literary genre.

W. Gillies Ross, *This Distant and Unsurveyed Country: A Woman's Winter at Baffin Island, 1857-58* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) considers the North from a woman's perspective as well. Ross is well-known for his work on whaling in the North.⁶ It is no surprise, then, that this book is more about whaling in Cumberland Sound in the middle of the 19th century than it is about Margaret Penny, primary author of the journal that is the core of this book. Penny kept the journal while living aboard her husband's vessel, the *Lady Franklin*, in the winter of 1857-58. The journal is sparse but Ross has skilfully annotated its humble entries to provide a more detailed account. He also provides a thematic introduction that describes the whaling industry, the vessel's home port of Aberdeen and the principal characters: William and Margeret Penny and their family, Matthus Warmow, a Moravian missionary, and the crews of the *Lady Franklin* and the *Sophia*, which accompanied it.

As Ross notes in the introduction, the journal was not exclusively Margaret Penny's (it was started by her husband) nor was it intended for future publication. It is not a diary; Mrs. Penny makes few personal observations and does not reveal her intimate feelings about the experience. She does, however, make observations about the native presence, noting the bleakness of their life and remarking on several occasions on how generous they were despite it. Those looking for the intimacy of a diary or personal memoir will be disappointed by *This Distant and Unsurveyed Country*, but this is an important contribution to the bibliography of the North.

This Distant and Unsurveyed Country, *Gamblers and Dreamers* and *The Ladies, the Gwich'in and the Rat*, are well-researched, solid academic studies. This distinguishes them from many of the other books examined in this review and reflects a shift in the literature. Academic studies of the North are finally beginning to examine its indigenous peoples and the political development of the region and to shift the focus away from the white intruders. Mark O. Dickerson, *Whose North?: Political Change, Political Development, and Self-Government in the Northwest*

6 W. Gillies Ross, *Whaling and Eskimos, Hudson Bay 1860-1915* (Ottawa, 1975), *Arctic Whalers, Icy Seas: Narratives of the Davis Strait Whale Fishery* (Toronto, 1985), *An Arctic Whaling Diary: The Journal of Captain George Comer in Hudson Bay, 1903-1905* (Toronto, 1984).

Territories (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1992), for example, provides background information for the uninitiated on the political development of the region. It has statistics and diagrams for readers searching for basic facts, and Dickerson highlights the challenges of diversity that the North presents to modern planners and analysts.

Northern historiography has traditionally featured the ubiquitous Bay Men, dauntless RCMP officers and ever-suffering missionaries. In the last decade new work has begun to address the adventurers themselves, rather than the adventure, but older style works continue to appear. John Parsons and Burton K. Janes, *The King of Baffin Land* (St John's, Creative Press, 1996), Doug Byer, *Northern Service* (Calgary, Detselig Press, 1997) and James Houston, *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1995) are all examples of this.

David R. Gray's *Alert, Beyond the Inuit Lands: The Story of Canadian Forces Station Alert* (Ottawa, Borealis Press, 1997) focuses on the government official, but in new ways. It is not clear, though, how he can chronicle the start of a military base at the northern tip of Ellesmere Island which still operates under extensive secrecy, and for which few, if any, official records are available. That does not mean the short volume is not useful or interesting. It offers insights into the lives of the "frozen chosen" — the newfound explorers wearing green uniforms who are certainly better equipped than the Royal Navy explorers of the last century. The presence of the Canadian military, like that of the RCMP, declares southern Canada's sovereignty — or so it would appear! Gray's book provides some sense of conditions for Canadian military personnel in the North, explaining Operation Boxtop (the three times a year supply mission), the problems of water supply and the kinds of entertainment available at CFS Alert. It also includes brief consideration of what it is like to serve at the post. Much of the book, though, is concerned with environmental issues. Given that Gray is a natural historian and scientist, this is perhaps not surprising, but he fails to pursue questions he raises concerning Inuit lands and sovereignty. Gray refers to these omissions as "confidentiality issues". In many ways *Alert, Beyond the Inuit Lands* is yet another book written to capitalize on what one early missionary called the "ungetatibleness" of the place.

Doug Byer's *Northern Service* is an account of his father's years as an RCMP officer in the North and fits within a well-established northern genre as well. Stan Byer was a member of the crew of the *St. Roch*, the first supply vessel to transverse the Arctic passage from west to east. Byer joined the crew in 1948 as detachment officer, ship's purser and third engineer. *Northern Service* is an anecdotal memoir with lots of dialogue. Because Byer's career included working on land, at sea and as a bush pilot, the book conveys the excitement these diverse experiences offer.

James Houston's *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller* recounts Houston's role in developing the Inuit art industry, although the subtitle is somewhat deceptive. The focus is primarily on Houston's personal growth rather than on the business side of Inuit print-making. He is an artist himself, which is why he went north in the first place, and his account provides colour and substance which raise his story above many others. There are the ubiquitous descriptions of learning Inuktitut, saving an airplane from destruction on the ice, learning to hunt seals and travelling Inuit-style across the wastes. Houston, though, never ceases to amuse the reader, and he also provides colourful, detailed word paintings of the eastern Arctic and its inhabitants.

Houston's descriptions of Inuit social customs are refreshing as they are not tainted

by missionary zeal or academic zest. They are simply observations based on years of personal contact. How useful is Houston's book for an academic audience? Questions derived from reading countless accounts of Inuit "friendship" written by white men, and nagging concerns about patronizing attitudes and colonialism, will no doubt trouble some readers. Houston's observations, however, reflect his considerable experience on the ground and he makes important points. Missionaries' attempts to enforce sexual constraints on the Inuit, he notes, were about as successful in the North as they were in the south. Inuit myth, he observes, casts white men as the descendants of dog children. Only through those puppies are whites related to the Inuit — a humbling assessment worthy of note.

The Hudson's Bay Company and its impact on the North continues to be a popular subject. Parsons and Janes' *The King of Baffin Land* tells the story of W. Ralph Parsons' life with the Hudson's Bay Company. Parsons, who grew up on a Newfoundland outpost, went on to become its last Fur Trade Commissioner in 1931. *The King of Baffin Land* describes how Parsons expanded the fur trade in the eastern Arctic and came to oversee the trade of the Hudson's Bay Company. He resigned in 1940 following three years of administrative change within the company. There are interesting details about Parsons' life, but it would have been useful to have more critical analysis of the Hudson's Bay Company's legacy, the fur trade and the south's perception of the Arctic. *The King of Baffin Island* draws on Parsons' personal papers, but it is a biography rather than a memoir and thus lacks some of the insight and reflection which Parsons himself might have provided. Parsons was a significant figure at a time when great changes were occurring within the Hudson's Bay Company and the North more generally. He deserves recognition in the history of these changes, however critical the acknowledgement might be.

Missionaries in the North have often written about their Northern ordeals and self-perceived successes, frequently using their books as fund-raisers for the cause. The memoirs of missionaries are no longer as popular, perhaps because it is no longer fashionable to give any positive recognition to the men and women who attempted to Christianize Canada's North. With a number of court cases relating to missionary work in the North remaining to be settled, it may be some time before a greater consensus will emerge concerning the impact of missionaries.⁷

Ronald Rompkey, ed., *Labrador Odyssey: The Journal and Photographs of Eliot Curwen on the Second Voyage of Wilfred Grenfell, 1893* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996) provides a fascinating view of missionary work in the northeast. This book exquisitely describes life in the small fishing villages along the coast of Labrador in the late 19th century. Eliot Curwen was one of the two doctors and two nurses aboard the hospital ship *Albert* on the non-denominational medical Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen. Curwen was a curious man, and this emerges in his descriptions of people, their homes and the challenges of living along

7 Kerry Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* (Montreal and Kingston, 1993) and Kenneth S. Coates, *Best Left As Indians: Native-White Relations in the Yukon Territory 1840-1973* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991) provide critical assessments of the effect of the missionary effort on northern Canada. Robert Choquette, *The Oblate Assault on Canada's Northwest* (Ottawa, 1995) and Martha McCarthy, *From the Great River to the Ends of the Earth: Oblate Missions to the Dene, 1847-1921* (Edmonton, 1995) are less critical in their assessment.

this isolated coast. His observations include acute descriptions of the appalling social conditions, and Curwen took excellent photographs which illustrate his observations. Rompkey supplements Curwen's journal with letters and reports from other members of the expedition, including Dr. Alfred Boabardt and Wilfred Grenfell. These help provide context but break Curwen's narrative, which was written for his family. Curwen's diary serves as a reminder of the diversity of the North, still enigmatic and mysterious.

As books on missionary intervention, Hudson's Bay Company experiences and RCMP policing in the North make clear, Canadians still see the North as something distinct from their southern experience. Despite regular airline schedules and highway access, the region is characterized by a slower pace, and there is, after all, still a midnight sun to cast its spell. The main themes in the literature on the North have not changed substantially over the last century. The interest in exploration and explorers which developed among an audience unable to avail themselves personally of the physical adventure offered by northern frontiers persists. Despite the warm suns of a northern summer, those in the south still see the North as cold and geographically inhospitable — and judging from the recent northern bibliography see this as part of its charm. As Morrison noted in *True North*, we continue to grapple with a distinction between “how we want to see” the North and “what may actually be there”.

BARBARA KELCEY