

# *Reluctant Pioneer: How I Survived Five Years in the Canadian Bush* by Thomas Osborne (forward by Roy MacGregor and introduction and afterward by Patrick R. Boyer)

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Volume 106, Number 2, Fall 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050699ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050699ar>

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### Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

### ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Kuhlberg, M. (2014). Review of [*Reluctant Pioneer: How I Survived Five Years in the Canadian Bush* by Thomas Osborne (forward by Roy MacGregor and introduction and afterward by Patrick R. Boyer)]. *Ontario History*, 106(2), 271–273. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050699ar>

## *Reluctant Pioneer*

### *How I Survived Five Years in the Canadian Bush*

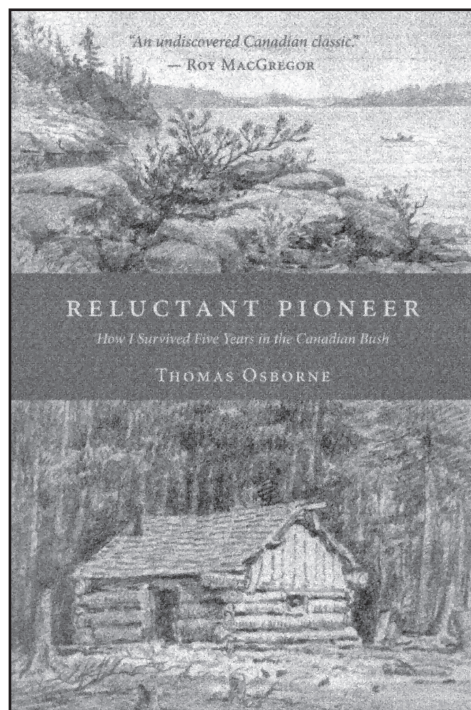
By Thomas Osborne (forward by Roy MacGregor and introduction and afterward by Patrick R. Boyer)

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2013. 264 pages. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN 978-1-92657-716-6. \$4.99 eBook. ISBN 978-1-45970-238-7 ([www.dundurn.com](http://www.dundurn.com))

Patrick J. Boyer has succeeded marvelously in bringing to light a remarkable tale from Ontario's pioneering days, namely Thomas Osborne's *Reluctant Pioneer: How I Survived Five Years in the Canadian Bush*. The autobiographical account traces the adventures of an individual whose metamorphosis from boy to man occurred in this region in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the process of recounting this story, *Reluctant Pioneer* presents an intriguing and compelling memoir, one that adeptly demonstrates how such a simple life, which was practically defined by adversity, could prove so deeply satisfying and rewarding.

The story *Reluctant Pioneer* tells is an extraordinarily interesting one. On the cusp of his sixteenth birthday in 1875, Thomas Osborne is summarily summoned to Muskoka from Philadelphia by his father; the latter had moved his family from England to the United States roughly one decade earlier in the hope of improving its lot. Although nearly the entire Osborne clan initially moved to Muskoka, only Thomas, his father, and his younger brother remain for the long term after it becomes abundantly clear that the hardscrabble, pioneering existence was suitable for only the hardiest members of their family.

The bulk of the book is thus devoted to Thomas Osborne providing a lively and en-



tertaining account of the trials and tribulations that confronted him, his brother and their father in Muskoka during the mid- to late 1870s. Osborne's graphic description of this period reminds us that it is a time, as Roy MacGregor aptly puts it in the book's Foreword, "so far in our past that we have largely lost the ability to imagine it". For example, every facet of the Osbornes' lives in Muskoka involved the expenditure of energy in volumes that seem unimaginable today. Travelling to town entailed either walking (often through dense bush), or rowing or paddling one of their boats (often through choppy waters), for the better part of two days. Similarly, the mere act of eating was a near-constant enterprise that consisted of killing, growing, picking or catching practically any form of nourishment that would help fend off starvation; Osborne resorted at one of his lowest points to reviving his withering body by consum-

ing dried grass that protruded through the snow. Such an austere existence caused the Osbornes to rejoice at their good fortune in being able to consume “treats” such as porcupine soup, “edible jelly” from a fish head, or beaver tails (not the deep-fried and sugar-dusted variety!), but even they had to admit that downing crow and loon was a non-starter because these birds were too tough to stomach! Likewise, staying warm and guarding against the swarms of bugs compelled them to be perpetually felling trees and then bucking and splitting the logs, and applying a repulsive bug dope elixir that consisted of pork fat and black tar. Boyer smartly adds an Afterword that provides the reader with a thumbnail history of what ultimately became of the Osbornes, an ending to the story that will not be spoiled here.

While the tale *Reluctant Pioneer* tells makes the book well worth reading, its boasts numerous other strengths. In terms of style, its prose is simple and accessible, and paints a wonderfully complete and vivid picture of both the range and depth of the Osbornes’ pioneering struggles. The writing is also sprinkled with wry observations that periodically inject measured doses of humour into the story. The “first few days in Muskoka”, the author dryly notes, “we had a great time, what with the flies, oil of tar, pork fat, and the smoke from the fire in the cabin”. In addition, Osborne tells his story with a healthy cadence that provides sufficient detail without overwhelming the reader with it.

The book’s content is truly its most powerful asset, and for several reasons. As far as Canadian literature in general and history in particular are concerned, Osborne’s tale represents an all too rare foil to the prevailing dour and loathsome perspective on the homesteading existence. Whereas a host of authors have portrayed

this experience as having been mired in a sea of dreadful despair, Osborne conversely depicts it as having been one drenched in delightful difficulty. Although his life in Muskoka was a practically continuous struggle against substantial challenges, Osborne remained decidedly sanguine about life and deeply in love with it. He did not actively seek thrills, and yet he revelled in enduring the terrifying moments that came his way on what seemed like a daily basis.

And it is through relaying these stories that the book delivers a truly profound message. As much as Osborne’s life is filled with hardship, persevering through those incessantly trying experiences imbues his life with a meaning that is so sweet and rich. Frantically paddling through storms on a lake or surviving encounters with bears are all incidents that drive home how the difficulties that complicated Osborne’s life were also the factors that made it all the more worth living. Merely to survive until nightfall was the ultimate aim when he arose each day, and as mundane as his routine may have been, it exemplified an approach that fully embraced life by exalting its simplest pleasures and against which our own world of instant gratification seems sadly superficial in comparison.

Similarly, the book offers much food for thought for the environmental historian. On the one hand, *Reluctant Pioneer* highlights how distant we have grown from recognizing our dependence on nature. Whereas today we are rarely exercised about the source of our next meal, Osborne’s life revolved around such basic concerns. On the other hand, his approach to acquiring his daily sustenance reminds us of the degree to which we have constructed an artificial world of socially permissible behaviours towards our flora and fauna. He does not think twice about shooting salmon and trout that congregate near the

shore of a local lake or spearing them by jacklight. Likewise, he nets as many fish as he can and hunts to kill as much game as he is able without regard to conservation regulations; on one occasion he brazenly dismisses a game warden's admonition about fishing out of season with the retort, "there is no law here". Finally, he jubilantly screams "Hurrah" after having killed a bear that had been ravaging his family's corn crops. To Osborne these were simply questions of survival, whereas today such behaviour would be likely to draw gasps and scorn.

Ultimately, this book amply rewards its readers with an elegant ode to a simpler way of life and the unadulterated joys it delivered. As a result, Boyer's peroration is an apposite one. "What we celebrate in *Reluctant Pioneer*", he writes on the book's final page, "is not only the resilient adaptability of humans, nor even the act of survival itself, but above all else the spirit of optimistic realism which infuses both".

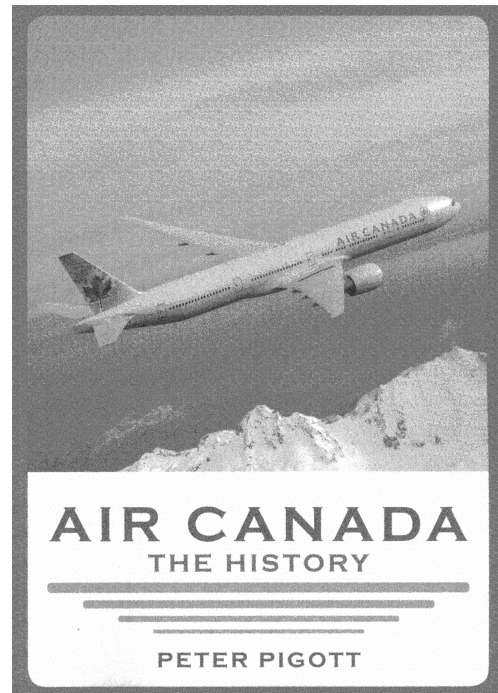
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## *Air Canada* *The History*

By Peter Pigott

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2014. 328 pages. \$35.00 paperback. ISBN 978-1-45971-952-1. \$4.99 eBook. ISBN 978-1-45971-954-5 ([www.dundurn.com](http://www.dundurn.com))

Peter Pigott has produced an interesting, fact-filled survey of Air Canada's long history, from its early rough and tumble years as Trans-Canada Air Lines (TCA) to one of today's leading global airlines. He traces Air Canada's evolution from a public to a private institution and from the "one big happy family" paternalism and sexism of the 1940s to the diverse unionized work force of today with its associated contract negotiations and occasional labour strife. He starts with the creation of TCA in the late 1930s under the watchful and protective eye of Liberal Minister of Transport C.D. Howe, followed by the early growth during the Second World War, the establishment of the first transatlantic air service, and the postwar era of rapid expansion. Other key events are examined, including the official name change to Air Canada, the impact of the oil crisis



of the early 1970s, the era of deregulation and "Open Skies" of the 1980s and 90s, and the new uncertainties of the 21st Century. Along the way he examines the impact of new aircraft and other technological developments, the advent of the jet age, the long standing rivalry with CP Air and the competition with regional and other small airlines,