

**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

guide for visitors to Bathurst Inlet Lodge, where the author has spent many summers.

This book does indeed fill the gap and provides a useful reference for those visiting and residing in the North. It deals with only the most common species that one might encounter on a sojourn across the tundra. The book is not confined to vascular plants, as a few of the more showy lichens (*Xanthoria elegans*, *Thamnolia subuliformis*, etc.) are highlighted. Visitors interested in lichens are referred to other sources. Curiously, mosses are not mentioned in the book, although they are an important part of the arctic ecosystem and may provide spectacular shows in some areas.

The author has attempted to provide a book that is midway between a picture book and technical flora. Species accounts are arranged, for the most part, in systematic order, although some families are lumped together in strange groupings. For example, grasses, sedges, lilies, orchids and mare's tail are in one grouping, and a grouping entitled "Miscellaneous" contains everything from Primrose family (Primulaceae) through Leadwort family (Plumbaginaceae). Large families (e.g., Compositae) are given their own grouping. While many readers familiar with plant families will attempt to locate a species according to systematic order, they may be confused by the lumping of mare's tail in with the grasses, sedges, lilies and orchids and with the Miscellaneous category. However, an index is provided that should alleviate the confusion. Keys based on flower shape and colour are provided for those not familiar with the plant families. The keys are simple, free of technical jargon and easy to use. Keys are also provided for plants with berries or fruits and trees or shrubs over 30 cm tall. Many plants can be keyed using flower or fruit or, if a tree or shrub, by leaf characteristics.

The species accounts make for interesting reading. Common names, in English and where available in Inuinaktun, and scientific names are provided for each species. The taxonomy follows that of Porsild and Cody (1980) and the author refers the reader to that reference for additional information. The nomenclature of some species has changed since 1980, but by keeping the names provided in Porsild and Cody the author has attempted to alleviate confusion that can be discouraging to someone not familiar with the latest nomenclatural changes. Distinguishing features of the species are presented, as are characteristics that separate it from other similar but less common species. Technical terms are avoided where possible, but an illustrated glossary is provided for any terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader. The reader is referred to Porsild and Cody for some difficult groups (e.g., mustards, grasses, sedges). However, the reader is not warned of one of the most perplexing groups, *Draba*, and only one species, *Draba glabella*, is dealt with in the text. The habitat of the species is described and some information on the range is given. Tidbits of information, such as literal translation of the Latin name, origin of the common name, value of the plant to indigenous peoples, use by fauna and species biology, are often included. In addition, the paraphrased text has been translated into Inuinaktun and thus the book will be of value to residents of the central Arctic who cannot read English. The author is apologetic because syllabics are not provided for the translation due to problems with funding and lack of knowledge. Each species is illustrated with colour photographs. The photos are of good quality and when used together with the text, the reader should be able to identify the plant under examination.

There is also a section on botanizing in various arctic communities (Holman, Coppermine, Bathurst Inlet, Bay Chimo, Cambridge Bay, Gjoa Haven, Spence Bay and Pelly Bay). These accounts include information on the history of the community and key habitats and plants and where to find them. It is refreshing to see that the author has also dealt with the issues of collection of species that appear to be rare and with transplantation.

There are very few factual errors in the text. The most obvious is that Least willow (*Salix herbacea*) is not the most northern willow and in Canada does not grow north of 80°. However, Arctic willow (*Salix arctica*) takes this honour and is common throughout the Arctic. It is not mentioned in the text.

I would recommend this book for anyone interested in plants who is working or living in the North. While it is intended for the lay person, professional and amateur botanists will find it of value for the tidbits of information provided in the text and the good photographs. The author has done a good job of meeting her objective in providing an illustrated field guide for the plants of the "Barrenlands."

#### REFERENCE

- PORSILD, A.E., and CODY, W.J. 1980. Vascular plants of continental Northwest Territories, Canada. Ottawa: National Museum of Natural Sciences, National Museums of Canada. viii + 667 p.

Joyce Gould  
Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife  
4th Floor, Petroleum Plaza, South Tower  
9915 - 108 Street  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
T5K 2C9

- UNRAVELLING THE FRANKLIN MYSTERY: INUIT TESTIMONY. By DAVID C. WOODMAN. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. 390 p., maps, illus., appendices. Hardbound. Cdn\$29.95.

Our ways of thinking about history, literature, and anthropology have changed dramatically in recent years, and David C. Woodman's *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony* is one of the many new fruits borne of this shift in thinking. In essence, Woodman looks once more at the historical events surrounding the disappearance of John Franklin's 1845 expedition, but instead of relying on the authority of white civilization's record keeping, Woodman rereads the native accounts and stories that tell of Inuit experiences with survivors of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. The word "rereads" is important here, for the tales, collected by such men as Hall, Schwatka, and Rae and recorded in their journals, had been "read" many times before. And in those previous readings, any contradictions between Inuit and white reports were clarified at the expense of Inuit testimony. Native accounts of what they had seen in their own country were deemed faulty, the product of exaggeration or fear or ignorance, and the European words inscribed in official documents or messages buried in cairns were considered impeccable expressions of Truth.

For example, because Fitzjames reported that the men deserted the ships on 22 April 1848, common sense would clearly reject as erroneous a native report that an Inuk had visited Franklin's ships in 1849. And reject such confused nonsense is precisely what the received interpretation has done. Woodman, however, recognizes the deception inherent in that universalizing source of knowledge we call "common sense." It is not at all universal, but is a deceptive trap unconsciously laid by a persuasive and dominating culture; it is "sensible" only to a like-minded segment of the world's population who hold "common" values. Such ethnocentric thinking is precisely what Woodman tries to identify in the traditional European explanations of what happened to the crews of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. In place of such skewed interpretations, Woodman suggests alternative readings that attempt to accommodate both European and Inuit accounts.

He pursues the "sense" of Inuit accounts from a number of paths. Perhaps the most significant realization arising out of his quest is that, while the Inuit were "exceedingly reliable witnesses" (p. 321), it is extremely difficult to determine which event they were witnessing. Thus, many of the apparent Inuit contradictions to documented Admiralty evidence stem from white confusion about which British officer was visited or aided, or which "Shartoo" ("the flat one"; p. 285) or "Omanek" ("the heart-shaped place"; p. 61) was in the teller's mind when he spoke of a geographical feature. The error was not one of Inuit veracity, but of ambiguities misinterpreted by Hall and Schwatka and other early collectors and interpreters of these tales.

That Woodman's source of Inuit oral legends is the written records of whites is not only ironic, it is the origin of the confusion. Woodman