

To Great Slave and Great Bear:
P.G. Downes's Journal
of Travels North from Ile à la Crosse in 1938
[Part I]

Edited and Introduced by R.H. COCKBURN¹

ABSTRACT. The narrative of P.G. Downes's trip by canoe, boat, and plane from Ile à la Crosse to Great Bear and Great Slave lakes in 1938, in which he presents a detailed account of his feelings, thoughts, and experiences, as well as his observations on individual men and women, northern lore, and geographic characteristics of the region. The journal will appear as five installments in *Arctic*.

Key words: Ile à la Crosse, Lac La Loche, Swan Lake Portage, Clearwater River, Athabaska River, Slave River, Fort Smith, Great Slave Lake, Mackenzie River, Great Bear Lake, Eldorado, Cameron Bay, Yellowknife, Chipewyans, John Hornby, George M. Douglas, Paul "King" Beaulieu

RÉSUMÉ. Voici le récit du voyage par canoë, bateau et avion de P.G. Downes à partir de l'Île à la Crosse jusqu'aux Grand Lacs de l'Ours et des Esclaves en 1938, décrivant en détail ses sentiments, ses pensées et ses expériences, ainsi que ses observations sur des hommes et des femmes particuliers, le folklore du nord et les caractéristiques géographiques de la région. Ce journal paraîtra en cinq épisodes dans *Arctic*.

Mots clés: Île à la Crosse, lac La Loche, lac du Cygne, Portage, rivière à l'Eau-Claire, rivière Athabasca, rivière des Esclaves, Fort Smith, Grand Lac des Esclaves, fleuve Mackenzie, Grand Lac de l'Ours, Eldorado, baie Cameron, Yellowknife, Chipewyans, John Hornby, George M. Douglas, Paul "King" Beaulieu

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INTRODUCTION

From 1936 through 1940, P.G. Downes spent his summers satisfying both his compulsion to travel in the far North and his consuming desire to learn everything he could of its geography, history, lore, and inhabitants, the study of which was to remain his paramount intellectual and imaginative interest until his death in 1959. The trip described here — "wanderings" was the word he used — was one Downes had long wished to make. He had seen the eastern Arctic in 1936 and 1937 and had also, during those two summers, come to know the canoe route that leads from Pelican Narrows, Saskatchewan to Brochet, at the northern end of Reindeer Lake. Leaving Pelican Narrows in early August 1937, bound for Churchill to board the *Nascopie*, Downes was already writing of "next year" in his journal: "Yes, maybe the Peace, the Mackenzie, the Liard — who knows?" As his plane rose and headed south, he caught a last glimpse of the houses and tents of Pelican, "and then just the bright red roof of the Company store, and a silver thread to the northwest, Medicine Rapids, and the way to the North."

An adventurous disposition; wanderlust; the challenge of testing himself in a hard land; historical, anthropological, and scientific curiosity — all motivated Downes. So too did an intangible affinity with the boreal wilderness north of 55°. In the winter of 1935-36, once he'd finished reading *John McLean's Notes of a Twenty-Five Year's Service in the Hudson's Bay Territory*, he wrote the following in his diary: "Extraordinary and fascinating; would give anything to have a copy. Great

nostalgia — mental — for this region." A curious, though perhaps comprehensible, turn of phrase. The Scottish literary critic David Daiches has written that we are "born nostalgic," are frequently haunted by "something other, something before." If Daiches is correct, then Prentice Downes, a New Englander, was born nostalgic for the bush and the Barrens.

After graduating from Harvard in 1933, Downes became a teacher at a private boys' school (Cockburn, 1982), where, despite a nagging awareness of the limitations of his profession, he established a reputation as an outstanding teacher. When, in the pages that follow, one finds Downes enduring "little starves" and agonising about the cost of a pair of moccasins, it must be remembered that a teacher's salary in those years did not go far. The reader will also find that Downes is subject to melancholy. In 1934 a girl whom he loved was killed in an accident, and for some years thereafter, dogged by a deep sense of loss, he sought to escape, or at least temper, his malaise by striking out for Canada as soon as the school year ended. "Well," he notes in the first entry of this 1938 journal, "back in the North again I feel much better and no longer lonesome." Only a week or so earlier, Downes had been present among well-to-do Bostonians at graduation ceremonies on the flowered, shaded campus of Belmont Hill School. Now, here at Ile à la Crosse were "mangy-looking" trappers, halfbreeds, strong tea, mosquitos, and, there beyond the hard-used canoes drawn up along the shore, the cold waters that would lead him northward.

Although Downes was to be revisited by bouts of despondency in the months ahead, he would have no cause to regret

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this trip. The canoe journeys he was to undertake north of Reindeer Lake in 1939 and 1940 were to prove far more arduous and challenging than any of his 1938 experiences and were to hold a special place in his memory; nonetheless, his wanderings in '38 were decidedly rewarding. One of the few white men of his day who preferred to travel with Indians, we find him starting out by canoe from Ile à la Crosse to Lac La Loche with a Cree, then going on to Waterways in company with two Chipewyans. From there he paddles on alone, down the Athabaska and the Slave to Fitzgerald, after which he reaches Eldorado by boat. Turning south at summer's end, he flies to the raw boom town of Yellowknife, then returns by boat to Fort Smith before flying "outside."

The trip itself, in the context of northern experience, was nothing special. Hundreds of men travelled similarly every year during the thirties. Even Downes's solo journey by canoe, while commendable, does not bear comparison with other canoeing feats of the period in that country. What is more, of all the men who went north in those years, many stayed on, did not fly south with the geese; some were better canoemen, better woodsmen, could, in time, tap longer, richer veins of experience. And to allude to such individuals is to say nothing of those HBC men, Mounted Policemen, missionaries, trappers, and prospectors whose lives were inextricably of the North. By comparison, Downes might seem to have been no more than an amateurish interloper. That he was not is attested to by his book *Sleeping Island* (1943), than which there is no more trenchant or memorable account of the traditional, timeless character of the subarctic north, which was so soon to be erased by war's upheavals and the encroachments of bureaucracy, commerce, and technology. The same insight and interests that animate *Sleeping Island* are abundantly evident in this journal. Here is "King" Beaulieu, reminiscing about his grandfather, who travelled with Mackenzie and drew a map for Franklin; here is John Hornby, living still in the memories of those who knew him; here, too, is an ageing but vigorous George Douglas, sharing with an avid Downes his knowledge of northern geography, men, and affairs; here are traders, trappers, policemen, miners, prospectors, priests, prostitutes, drifters, boats' crews and captains — nearly all of them now long since gone to their graves, but in the full flush of life in these pages written almost half a century ago. Here, as well, are painful descriptions of wretched, destitute Indians, passively suffering the vicissitudes of game cycles and the penalties of history. And of course there is the country itself, observed keenly by Downes from the air, from canoes, portage trails, and campsites, from boats, and from barges under tow, and, at last, from the shorelines of Great Slave and Great Bear.

Still, this is a journal, not a book; it was written in every sort of spot, often under trying conditions, and was never revised. Some of its passages are cryptic or tantalisingly incomplete; some matters are expressed clumsily, others disjointedly. Some facts are wrong, some assumptions mistaken. Some readers will find some of Downes's opinions disagreeable. It would be churlish to complain, however; rather, we can be thankful that Downes possessed the resolve to keep so full a

record of more than ten weeks' travel. He remarks herein that these diaries "are packed with small details interesting to no one, I suppose, except myself." Time has proved him wrong. Because so little of worth and scope has been written about the old North in its last days, this narrative is now captivating, strongly atmospheric, and of some value. It is also very long. The impulse to delete was often felt but nearly always resisted; it seemed to me that for every reader who might find river travel, say, or geology, or anecdotes about obscure persons tedious, there would be another to whom such things would be of interest. Editorial clarifications and elaborations, on the other hand, occur with some frequency; they, it is to be hoped, are more helpful than obtrusive.

Finally, before joining Downes, the reader should be forewarned that he uses terms that have come to be regarded as offensive since his day — "Chip" for Chipewyan; "Huskies," not Inuit; and "breed" or "half-breed," instead of Metis. That Prentice Downes did not employ such words pejoratively in themselves will become clear as one reads the journal. And of course, as the informed reader knows, these terms had been in common use in the North for many generations and have only fallen from favour during the past three decades. To have "sanitised" the journal by substituting the idiom of the 1980s for that of the 1930s — to have revised the past in order to make it conform to contemporary sensibilities — would have been to distort and falsify what was then perfectly ordinary.

June 23rd: Prince Albert, Sask. — Ile à la Crosse

Overcast, smoky. Pulled out today! Unbelievable but true. Went down as usual at nine o'clock, the usual crowd of Goldfields-bound hopefuls. Reports began to filter in — "Goldfields clear!" "Ile à la Crosse overcast, but visibility fair." So at last I was with five others down at the river — the North Saskatchewan — at the dock. Five of us jammed, squeezed, and fought our way into a small Fairchild already crammed with mail. One of the party simply could not get in and was left disconsolate on the dock. After much fussing and the taking out of some mysterious part of the engine, which was soldered on the dock in a makeshift fashion before our eyes, we got going. The plane, instead of rising, actually seemed to sink into the water. It was impossible to rise, so back to the dock. The question: which passenger was to be the victim? The assistant asked the pilot, "Which will it be, passenger or gas?" Everyone sat tight — and they drained one tank. This time we did manage to get off after a very long run down the Saskatchewan. The flight was interesting but uncomfortable, as I was sitting on a bag of mail (which must have been all small wooden boxes) with my head touching the ceiling. My legs were inextricably tangled with those of a Swedish gentlemen who faced me. The lakes which began to appear beneath us were very different from those of the Precambrian, being shallow and having few if any islands and non-indented shorelines — lacking entirely the jagged, fingerlike characteristics of Precambrian area lakes. I counted 97 lakes, of which only two had an island in them. Evidence of decreased precipitation over the last few years is very evident, many lakes having

retreated to as little as one half their original size, with the timber and original shore standing well back from the lake. This is a feature admirably observed from the air. The lakes are so shoal as to appear very muddy. At one point the smoke was so bad that, looking to the north, we could see nothing. We flew at about 4000'. As we neared Ile à la Crosse it thinned out, and we came down to find four other planes in here also, all bound north. I went to see [Ed] McLean, the Post manager, a fine fellow, young and bred-in-the-tradition of the Company [Fig. 1]. He was born at Pelican Narrows. His father ["Daddy" McLean] an old HBC man. Lunched with him and his wife and then wandered about. Had tea. Supper. Chatted. We have many mutual acquaintances. Start for Wapatchuanak tomorrow. Ile à la Crosse is not much of a place to see; its ancient glory or glamour has pretty much departed [see Kemp, 1956:28]. It looks very civilised. The country is of course of low relief and rather characterless. The natives are to a man half-breeds. A hospital, school, and large mission are here. The mosquitos became obvious at once. Four white trappers were in — a very mangy-looking crew compared to the Brochet crowd [1937]. Well, back in the North once again I feel much better and no longer lonesome.



FIG. 1. "My outfit": P.G. Downes at Ile à la Crosse.

June 24th

Bright and fair, still smoky, very hot. I set out at 9 o'clock for Wapatchuanak (the narrow place where the water runs swiftly) with George Murray, a half-breed Cree. Travelled along without much incident. We have a small 1½ kicker. After a short while it balked, and George had to take it apart. However, some skilful work with a safety pin revived it. At lunch I discovered that George is the brother-in-law of Jim Cumines at Brochet, his sister being Mrs. [Adelaide] Cumines

— or, locally, "The Big Lady" [see photo in Hunter, 1983: facing 81]. We lunched near Halfway Point. Moved on again, with fires beginning to show to the west, three distinct smoke columns. Very low relief, and the country has been burned over so many times that there is a great preponderance of birch over spruce. Occasionally high sandbank shores give the suggestion of either wave-cut kames or eskers. No sign of exposed rock, but the "stonewall" beaches, built up by ice-shove, are very noticeable. Ile à la Crosse Lake is a long and comparatively narrow one running a bit east of north. Late in the afternoon we reached the end of the lake and turned east to the narrows. The lake narrows to a bottleneck — the water is very swift and this is really the beginning of the Churchill River. The swift water is followed by a series of rapids which — with good water — are not at all bad. We ran through them with the engine and I enjoyed it very much — though I cannot say that as a rule I am particularly fond of rapids. I thought George handled the canoe extremely well. As we rounded the last bend, the "settlement" suddenly burst into view on the right bank. I believe it was one of the loveliest sights I have ever seen in the North. The sun was low in the west — and suddenly, shooting around from the rapids, unexpectedly, the brilliant white of a tiny mission church half hidden by the very green foliage. The unexpectedness of it was most startling and pleasurable. There seemed to be quite a few families in, with meat racks up and tents pitched. A sort of light-colored shad fly, or caddis fly, was extraordinarily abundant — great swarms of them. Landed, and found that Alex Ahenakew was in swimming on the other side of the portage, so decided to wait for him. Meanwhile George wandered off to a tent of Cree friends. I saw the youngsters playing with a puppy which was tied up. This seemed odd, and then George came and told me it was a wolf pup. It was very tame, tawny, and one would not have taken it for other than an ordinary puppy. The dogs here are very long-legged and appear to me quite superior to any other Indian dogs I have seen on this side of the Bay. I heard a couple of youngsters talking Chip. Alex at length appeared. He is a big man, obviously Indian, and wears spectacles. Mutual acquaintances were discussed and his clerk and outpostman appeared; one of them is named Rate (?) [W.A. Wright], the other had been at Cree Lake during the winter. No caribou there this winter, but thick two winters ago. Not since the famous winter of 1909-10 had they been so far south or so numerous. We had an enormous supper. George was invited in, and everyone did his best. After supper we chatted at considerable length on a variety of matters. Alex does not seem to be particularly versed in tribal lore and indeed, though not at all reluctant to say what he knew, was quite barren as to material. The evenings get cool here — last night it was down to a degree above freezing. Old Magloire Maurice, an ancient French Canadian, an extraordinary linguist of over eighty years, appeared [Fig. 2]. He speaks with equal facility Cree, Chipewyan, French, or English. He reminisced about the old days in great style and also had several interesting items to add. For instance, he said the notion of both the *weetigo* [see Downes, 1943:53-55] and *puagan* [Downes, 1943:67-69] are quite foreign to the Chips. However, the Chips believe that



FIG. 2. Magloire Maurice.

when a man dies he is reborn when a child is born. To a Chip the Northern Lights are simply “the reflection of the morning.” He says that formerly it was a strict custom among the Crees for a son-in-law to never speak directly to his parents-in-law. As a graphic example he cited the case of the fellow who was alone in the tent with his mother-in-law when the latter’s dress caught fire. Noticing it, he announced in a loud voice that “My, there is much smoke in the tent!” When the poor lady needed more assistance he was forced to rush outside and shout, “Our tent is full of smoke inside!” in order to bring aid. Alex vouches for this observance among the old timers and says it had a special name, which I do not now recall, meaning “to speak of one’s wife’s parents with respect” — or, in the third person. The old man [Maurice] did considerable reminiscing about the last days of the big brigades. He chuckled, telling of the buffalo pemmican, which he says they would cut into big slices with an axe — “and sometime you would cut through and find an old moccasin right in it! They were not very careful how they made it in those days!” The natives here are almost all Chips. There are Chips down at Clear Lake also. The Water Hen River band are still pagan — the same band Frank Reid [HBC manager, Pelican Narrows] told me about last year. Meadow Lake area: still using drums, and up to a short while ago stoutly refused treaty. Cree Lake is much like Reindeer in character, a large lake, island-studded. Outpost operated there in winter from Wapat-chuanak. Alex says that in the spring the marrow of the caribou shin increases fast and the shin bone becomes very thin: they are easy to run down then. Some jumping deer [white-tailed] here. Neither Magloire nor Alex had ever heard of the *mimigwesso* or such [see Downes, 1943:55-57], though Alex

said he had vague notions of some sort of a definite *apsinis* or dwarf. The old notion of the *weetigo* was [that it was] full of ice — “all ice inside.” Alex told me of his being at Cree Lake one time and seeing an Oochi [gambling] game between two Crees and a bunch of Chips from Fond du Lac go on for four days and nights. Alex has had a very good education [as a young man, he studied divinity at Wycliffe College, Toronto], and is all white man as far as convention goes. He has two daughters here, Marie and Elizabeth (called “Savage”). The latter is really a very pretty girl. Alex never heard of scapulamancy, but he told me of tossing rabbit skulls to learn what was going to happen to whom. However, it has become more of a game than anything else. We talked on and on for hours. He said often they would use a fox skin, the head, as a covering for their own head — sort of a camouflage — when hunting. This was in reference to my speaking of the Arthur Heming pictures [see Heming, 1921]. We turned in at 12:30.

June 25th

Bright and very warm. As Alex was obviously busy with accounts and had spoken as of our leaving today, and with the further complication of George’s not having any place to eat but here, I decided to set out again. We pulled out about ten, and ran up the rapids with the little kicker doing admirable service. Only in one spot did we really need to give it assistance. The water was just right. Ran on to the portage and there photographed the other wolf pup, a black one known as “Ten Bucks,” and then once again pushed on. It was very hot on shore. The “fish flies,” a sort of flat-winged, soft shad fly are about in clouds. They are a great nuisance. They are one of the few insect pests which do not bite; nevertheless, they settle and crawl on you and are cold and nasty. George discovered his jackknife was gone and blamed it on “dos Chip-wyan kid.” The trip down the lake in the face of a head wind was without event of note. The canoe jumped about so much I was unable to get any notes down. We got in about six o’clock. There is remarkably little spruce on the lake front — all poplar and birch: burnt over so many times, I suppose. The number of birds of the tern-gull genus is rather surprising. I saw two which I take to be “Black Skimmers”; must look this up. Crows. The usual song sparrows, many blackbirds, one cowbird, grackle, goldfinch. Ducks always starting up — mallards particularly abundant. Also ring-necked plover. In evening Ed McLean and I went over to see Dr. [P.E.] Lavoie [medical superintendent at Ile à la Crosse]. Had a most interesting evening there. He became interested in the locations of the old posts as a result of the letter sent by Prof. [A.S.] Morton of U. of Sask. relative to the matter. He has located these, and the cellar of the H.B. burned by the N.W. Co. in 1811. From this site he has dug up several copper kettles, a set of six plates melted together, and such like. His actual work is discouraging enough, what with extremely limited equipment and conveniences. No X-ray machine. A bad measles epidemic swept through here last winter. As George said to me: “We hear the sickness come from south was not bad. When he get here he bad. Peoples dying all over.” I must get a copy of the book on

Pond: *Peter Pond: Fur Trader & Adventurer*, H.A. Innis. Irwin & Gordon Ltd, Toronto, 1930. The map in it is particularly striking and of great interest. Mrs. McLean and Glen came over. The copper kettles, which are in various sizes so that they could nest, are in surprisingly fine shape, and speak well for the craftsmanship of almost 150 years ago. Few of these northern posts of today — that is, the actual buildings — are on the original locations. There was a surprising amount of shifting about: trial & error as to convenience — protection from weather — soil for gardening — firewood supply and such.

June 26

Overcast. Wind strong SE. Slept late. The day featured the school picnic. I should explain that there are two schools here, the large R.C. mission school and a little log cabin 12-pupil affair which the few non-R.C.s send their children to. It is conducted by a young chap named Bert Stevens. The McLeans' boy, Glen, the Ahenakew children, and the children of Mr. Redhead attend. Though it was blowing hard, we all set out in the scow powered by two big Johnson outboards. The scow worked as if it were of rubber rather than wood. We landed on a large island and soon had a very jolly time, each according to his or her inclination. An interesting group — here they are: Mr. & Mrs. Ed McLean, H.B. Co. — fur trader — Scotch; Mr. Webber & wife, radio operator; Mr. Slim Kennelly & wife, professional gambler and free trader (occasionally); Mr. Redhead & Cree wife, Dept. Natural Resources; Mr. Stevens, young school teacher; P.G.D., Belmont, wanderer; Mrs. Ahenakew, Cree; another Cree woman; and innumerable children of all ages. Some went in swimming. The water was cold. Some of the kids climbed trees and chased each other through the bush. We settled down behind one of the old beach levels. Most of these sandy islands — and they are all sandy — have several beach levels. I have never seen such a profusion of fresh-water snail shells as along these beaches — myriads. Also saw a pelican. I had a long chat with Fred Redhead who used to be in the Pelican Narrows — Reindeer Lake country, and so we had many common acquaintances. He tells me that one Jim Corrigan, an ancient at Canoe River, was one of [J.B.] Tyrrell's canoemen [see Tyrrell, 1896]. The picnic was a great success; tremendous quantities of cake and such were eaten. Finally went back. I had been scheduled to go on a trip with Dr. Lavoie to the old sites, but he was apparently unable to make it as his boat did not set out at all. One sour note. While wandering about, I found one of the old copper kettles and threw it down by a little spruce, intending to take it back and thinking that no one would take note of it, as it was very battered and black. However, as fortune would have it, "Slim" did, and of course claimed it, taking it home in triumph. My claim would have appeared dubious, as I had just tossed it there, so I said nothing. So lost out on a real relic of the past. Ed worked on quite late and Mrs. McL. & I chatted on. She knew Solomon Merasty [a Cree with whom Downes had travelled in 1936: see Cockburn, 1984a] when he was tripping for Revillon. Also, her description of the first [sic] Mrs. Grey Owl's trip around Stanley [on Lac la Ronge] was most illumin-

ating. The beadwork here is excellent, but unfortunately the patterns have become standardised and follow almost exclusively the flower & leaf motif. Here they use the mitt-moccasin and bead all the top right down to the toe, as well as a turned-down beaded cuff. Most unusual. This is a great place for stroud mukluks. I saw a youngster with a nice beaded buckskin jacket, the first I have seen. A person could stay here for some time and still find a good deal to do to keep him busy.

June 27

Bright & Hot, wind strong SE. Did not do much in the morning but chat with Fred Redhead who later pulled out. I should get to see old Jim Corrigan, who was on Tyrrell's Dubawnt trip. In the afternoon I set out with Dr. Lavoie to visit the sites of former posts. The H.B.C. post constructed [in 1809-10 by Peter Fidler] and then burned by the N.W. Co. in 1811 was located and excavated by the doctor, as I have previously mentioned. It is a mile or so northeast of the present post, about halfway out on a point variously named, among which names are "Deadman's Point" and "Landlubber's Point." The cellar and chimney pile are quite obvious. It was here that the doctor found the copper kettles, etc. Just where the post was rebuilt has not yet been determined. Thirty or 40 yards to the west of the site in the bush can be found the cellar holes & chimney ruins of the dwelling houses. At this time the N.W. Co. establishment was where the H.B.C. is now located. The very first establishment of [Benjamin] Frobisher, and then Pond, was apparently where the Mission now is. The position of the posts on the other side of the lake and also on a point north of here is as yet undetermined. Later we went and visited the site of Fort Black. [Samuel] Black established this post for the North West Co. on the east side of the lake near a little bay, a lovely location. Now it is overgrown with bush. But the cellar holes and very large chimney remains can be found. I have marked this on the map. The doctor is most enthusiastic about it all. Such data as he has received from London is vague as far as actual locations are concerned. I must be sure to send him a copy of the "Kelsey Papers" when I get back. We at length returned and had a nice supper with a leg of deer meat (jumping deer — they have them in this country up as far as Wapatchuanak but not to Cree Lake). After supper we set out again to visit old Jim Corrigan, but found he had gone to Beauval. Anyway it was a nice trip. Chatted of many things. It seems the doctor is a native of my old jumping-off place, Rimouski [Downes had visited the North Shore of the Lower St. Lawrence in 1935 and 1936]. He spoke of the old man who, when asked the distance from Green Lake, replied, "42 pipes!" — a pipe being the rest and smoke allowed the canoe-men of the fur brigades every couple of hours. I often think of diaries and letters, how treacherous and really false they are. They are most inhuman in that they catch but one mood and are so barren of the *real* experience one may be undergoing. They catalogue events, monotonous or exciting, as the case may be, they reflect our interest to a degree in *external* objects, but as a record of experience they are most inadequate.

One needs either a greater writing skill and more time and opportunity, or a different medium. Did I note that I met and chatted with Dersch (RCMP), an ex-Eastern Arctic man? Devon, Ellesmere, etc. [Downes later noted in the margin: "This was Constable [P.] Dersch who accompanied [A.H.] Joy on the first phase of the famous Doctor Krueger search." Dersch performed valuable service, but not in the company of the legendary Joy. Dr. H.E.K. Krueger and his German Arctic Expedition of 1930-32 had disappeared in the Canadian Archipelago. The RCMP search was planned by a dying Inspector Joy in Ottawa, and was led by Corporal H.W. Stallworthy and Constable R.W. Hamilton. Following a hunt beset by extreme hardship, "Stallworthy reported...his conviction that Dr. Krueger and the members of his party had perished somewhere in the vicinity of Meighen Island, or Isachsen Island, in the winter of 1931-32 (Fetherstonhaugh, 1940:249-250)."] The doctor had a most curious little stone pipe found on the shore near Ft. Black. I have never seen one just like it. It seemed made of a shaly, fine-grained material — almost slate. Got home quite late. There are a number of cows here because of the Mission. They graze at night to avoid the bull-dog flies which are very bad in this country. Indeed, this seems a country particularly suited to insect life of all sorts. I saw a tremendous cloud — literally a cloud — of some small, soft insect the other evening, millions of them. The cloud made sort of an odd roaring noise. "The flying box car," the huge single-wing Canadian Airways Junker, came in yesterday. It flies so slowly as to seem suspended in the air. Miss [Lorene] Squire from [Harper] Kansas, who took the bird photographs [which Downes would have seen in the June 1938 *Beaver*], is coming back here again soon. I expect to pull out tomorrow.

June 28th

Raining so hard this morning that I decided to wait for it to let up before starting for La Loche. Actually I have lots of time and am in no hurry. Result was rather a pointless day of reading, speculation, and waiting. Ed McLean and Gordon, his clerk, are very busy at the books, as those of May close out the year. Shall certainly pull out tomorrow. Ile à la Crosse is an interesting place for its historical background; however, there is not a great deal more. Treaty is no longer paid here, as all the natives are breeds of one degree or another. Beadwork here always glass rather than seed beads. Saw two pelicans flying.

June 29th

Bright & fair, very warm. Decided to pull out for Portage La Loche. All ready to go when it was discovered that my mosquito bar, which had been made for me, had been taken by error. So had to have another one made. George's sister made one up in no time. The netting is red and rather poor but should suffice. So another parting. Certainly no one has treated me with greater kindness than the McLeans. We got away at about 11 o'clock and set out into a calm, brilliant, hot day. Few cumulus clouds. Cotton batting in the NW. Swung to

west up Aubichon Arm of Ile à la Crosse Lake. The growth is mostly birch and poplar. The relief is uniformly regular, low and subdued. The water is filled with small green particles of vegetable matter. George says it sometimes becomes "thick like paint." We are using his canoe, a big 21-footer. Buffalo Lake (the topographical map calls it "Peter Pond Lake," though it has been known by the former name for centuries) is a bad one for wind — large and exposed. Indeed, all these larger lakes lying within the paleozoic area are bad lakes for wind as the low relief and absence of islands means a full exposure to the wind, with nothing to break the seas. We had lunch about halfway up the Arm; after setting out, I discovered that I had left my pocket knife behind. George was quite good-natured about going back. Ducks appear more and more numerous as we go along. There seems little smoke — the heavy rain possibly ending the bush fires. Bulldog flies are numerous and follow us. They are savage biters and can give one a good bite even through one's shirt. They resemble a large horsefly, but have a thicker body, and the belly is striped like a bee — yellow and black. Saw no moose though watched closely, as flies were so bad one would expect the moose to be down at the water. An extraordinary country for flies of every description. I have never seen such a variety of strange flying insects — little ones and big ones. We seem to go through zones of different species. For instance, we will suddenly run through a cloud of little pale green flies — then some big mayflies — then sandflies and midges — then some outlandish-looking fly I have never seen before. These shallow lakes seem to be a paradise for them. Toward supper time we ran through to Churchill Lake — a big one, and the lack of relief makes these lakes particularly large in appearance — and turned into Buffalo Narrows. There appeared a little settlement of sorts, but it looked very black and threatening in the NW, so we decided to get as far as we could. The few who were here were all making up smoked whitefish. This is really an attractive place. I saw a little youngster on the shore playing with a bow & arrow — pointing to the sky and giving the high, tremulous call of the flying loon: an excellent imitation. At our noon mug-up the spot was littered with gull eggs. "Cheep-wyans — dey been eat here!" says George. After passing through the Narrows we set out across the lake on a traverse to Fleury Pt. At this time we ran into a blizzard of tiny white ephemeridae which covered us. They were most interesting, albeit also annoying. They light on you, and then commences a very odd operation. They begin to pulsate and the wings shrivel up and suddenly you see that the creature is crawling out of one skin — which he leaves with you — and becoming an enlarged insect of darker shades. George's cap became literally white with cast-off skins from these little creatures. Ducks are everywhere, passing back and forth in strings and bunches — all kinds from occasional shag to teal. Also had a fine study of a most composed and deliberate pelican, who finally flew away with great lumbering flaps of his wings, which show black & white when he flies. We pulled into Fleury Pt. — there are a few temporarily abandoned shacks — and decided to camp, as it was black in the west and looked like wind. This is an excellent spot. The egg-eaters have also camped here — and

eaten more eggs. We rigged up the tarps as it looked like rain. George has a toothache. Incidentally, he has an axe which he found by his house and sharpened up — obviously one of the 1811 HBC ones as the site is right in back of his house. I shall try and trade him for it. A great deal of winter fishing in this area. It is said the fish are not as wormy here as they are to the east, i.e. Pelican Narrows, and the dogs seem to show it: Ile à la Crosse and Wapatchuanak dogs have in the past been quite renowned. Mud- or water-hens (coot) kept up the most garrulous sort of cackling. After sunset the shore was alive with small toads; I saw a mouse darting about after them. All manner of birds here, and many mosquitos. Fortunate that I have a mosquito bar. We should have purchased some whitefish at the Narrows, but I forgot to do so. Tried unsuccessfully to catch a jackfish when we saw one huge one coming in to shore. But no success. Surprising, as usually the plug, a pikie-minnow, never fails on jackfish.

June 30th

Bright and fair. Started at a reasonable hour. Light n. easterly wind. Passed Sandy Pt., many ducks and a flock of about 50 Pelicans. Most imposing. Strings of ducks everywhere. Pushed on toward s.w. shore. Little cabooses along shore used for winter fishing. Looking to west, quite a high scarp or line of hills can be seen, rather irregular [the Grizzly Bear Hills]. One wonders at these hills in an area so flat. As morning wore on more clouds began to appear and the wind to freshen from the east and northeast. About noon, with the sea making up — and it takes very little wind for a rough, choppy sea on these islandless lakes — we ran to the shore at Buffalo River, termed “Dillon” on the Top. map. A small settlement of Chips here and a H.B. Post. I went up to the house and found a big Swedish fellow in charge. I did not get his name. Gave George a quarter to get a couple of whitefish. Had lunch with the manager [J.R. McDonald], who is very fed up. He has resigned, and has been waiting a month for the man to relieve him. But his relief is now reported in the hospital. This is the post where [Bill] Nichols shot the Chip girl and then himself some four or five years ago (successful as to self but not the girl). As we were having lunch, a severe thunder squall swept over us, followed by a terrific hailstorm. Once this passed, it calmed down and I decided to set out again. Picked up a nice pair of gloves for 90¢ and a pair of moccasins for \$1.50. Bull River is reported to be very low. No sooner were we on our way than it began to blow hard again, so we were forced to cling close to shore. This means much extra mileage, but cannot be helped. Late in the afternoon a boat set out from shore and it proved to be Buckley, of the fish camp. He was highly curious about us, said he thought we were the police. He pointed out the general direction where we might find the river. When he was leaving, he asked George in Cree (which I understood) what I was doing, and George said he didn't know. This is always the first question: who I am, what I am doing. We cruised along, hunting for the river. George has become vague, saying he has come this way only once. We at

last spotted the mouth of the river and ran in through shoals to it. A small band of Chips were camped here, fishing. The men were in the bush hunting, so the children and women hung about while we got supper ready. One of them talked Cree very readily to George. Several birch bark canoes on the shore. Eventually, after they had satisfied their initial curiosity, they left us; but soon a young and not unattractive girl appeared with a note asking for some flour in exchange for some meat. It was very well written [Downes preserved the note between the pages of this journal: “Please Sir, Give us some flour or bannock we'll give you a little meat.”]; she, I later found out, had just returned from school. I obliged her, and we were given a bag of moose meat. The whitefish was excellent. The Portage [La Loche] Chips are reported very poorly off, as Portage Lake is a poor one for fish. We decided to push on while light remained. So on again, up this weed-choked, sluggish river. It is so shallow and choked with weeds that we were forced to take to paddles after a short while. The banks are low and the river is bordered by lush grass, backed by poplar. As we went on, the woods appeared badly burned. Clouds of mosquitos acted as company. Tomorrow we shall take to poles. We have about 40 miles of this in prospect. New moon this evening. Camped in burned over area. Mosquitos abominably thick. George says old-timers used to talk about fights with “Atcim Puatok,” “men who hunted Crees just like they were moose.” Also *apsinis* — they used to track them along the beach at la Plonge: “they little people who take up nets and break them.” Had never heard of *mimigwesso*. He says there is one old man in the Water Hen band who can still do shaking tent act or the “sabóčhigan.” Many jackfish roiling about as we ascend this river; once I saw one stick its ugly snout right up into the air. “Nipsia” — willow; “Kitchimos” — sweetheart; “Nitchimos” — my sweetheart; “moochigun” — lots of fun. This river is not a large one, being on the average some fifty yards wide. Lovely evening. George is a very agreeable fellow, hardworking and willing. Water Hen should be visited before it is too late. Meadow Lake would be a good base to work from.

July 1st

Bright — wind very strong from north. Up early and considerable difficulty awakening George. Had a big breakfast of moosonias, bannock, and tea. George making poles. Mouse got under my mosquito bar, could not get out, and dashed madly about all over me. Some more ingenious mosquitos managed to get through, for the mesh is rather large. Owing to there having been a severe fire all through this country last year, there is lots of dry wood — some fine dry jackpine which makes a splendid fire. Started out, and from now on it has been poling, poling, poling. The river soon changed its character, became narrow, with a long series of shallows and rapids. I lost track of the number, but we must have poled up fifteen shallow rapids — just one after another until the portage was reached. Had the most extraordinary experience with a jumping deer. As we rounded a bend George saw a jumper lying

close to the bank. It was a doe, and just lay all bunched up, watching us. We poled right up to within four or five yards of it. I thought it must be injured and went ashore. When I got to within a few feet she jumped up and was away. Shortly afterward a huge black wolf was spotted right next to the shore, running. The river has become a mere stream. By noon we had finished the rapids and the river took on the aggravating character of an endless series of wide-looping meanders through huge meadows. The bottom was very sticky for poling, usually too shallow for paddling, and too choked with long, trailing underwater weeds to use the engine. Need I state that we had a head wind — and a stiff one — all day? Came at last to a campsite and portage. Had a good lunch here and a bit of a rest. Arms and shoulders pretty sore from unaccustomed exercise. Everywhere the bush has been ravaged with fire right to the water's edge. Got under way again — poling. Eventually the "river" opened into vast meadows; an irritating endless meander. The meanders seemed to tend east, though we made some northing. Poling is difficult, as when you thrust you often have to use considerable force to yank the pole from the mud. The trick in poling is to keep the thrust in line with the canoe, so that you are shoving straight ahead with as little lateral shoving as possible. This is particularly true going up rapids — for to force the canoe laterally against the cur-

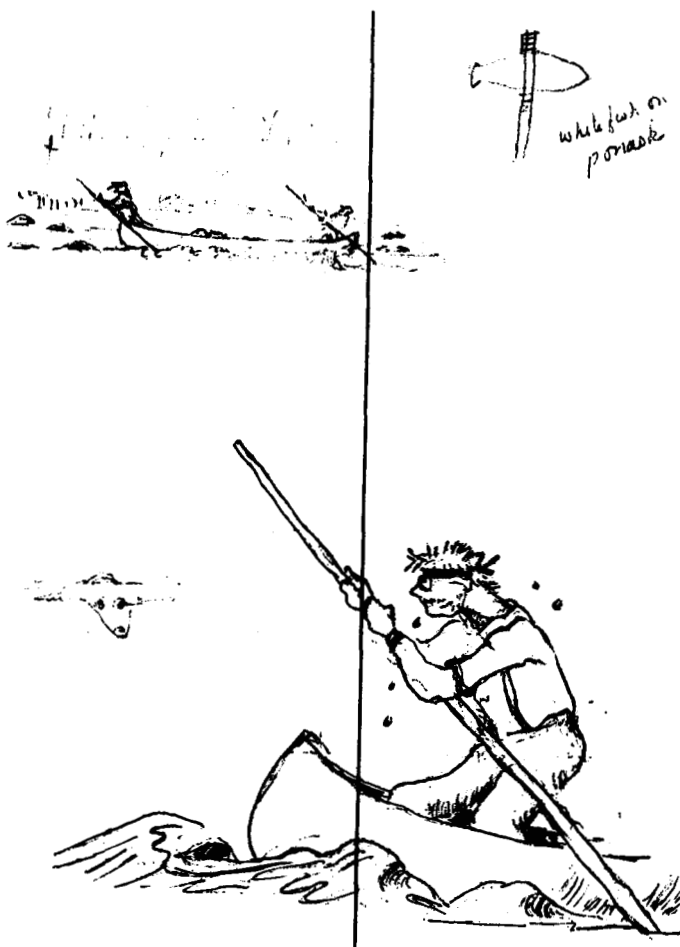


FIG. 3. "It is fairly important to keep one's balance."

rent is very bad. Incidentally, it is fairly important to keep one's balance [Fig. 3]. Sometimes rocks or mud seize the pole and will hardly release it. This brings about a most distressing situation. Clouding up all afternoon, and we made several stops because of heavy downpours. When this happens, we just stop and huddle under a couple of old tarps. George is really admirable and very patient. Even in the rapids, where I occasionally stupidly misread the water and set the bow on a shoal or rock, he directs me with kindly patience. I poled bow and George stern. Though I ache now, it has been excellent experience and I am glad for it. [Downes was to refine his poling technique on the Cochrane River in 1939.] Very little moose sign — country too burned up. Saw a huge owl. Many young ducks in the stream. In the meadows one might believe oneself to be back on Eel River or the Ipswich [in Massachusetts]. Bird life is most profuse. Solitary sandpipers — "si-si-ou" (Cree) — are everywhere; redwings, one kildeer, heard many warblers (Maryland yellow throat), song-sparrows, marsh wrens, crows, swallows, a black tern (black skimmer), and eventually nighthawks. Endless, endless poling through the meanders. For hours we saw a high stand of poplar. We would approach — and retreat — approach, and retreat. Late in the afternoon we came to the one and only campsite for miles, a high clay knoll. We stopped for a smoke. Evidently a much used spot. In fact the only suitable camping spot for miles. However, we determined to push on to Methye Lake [Lac La Loche], where the Portage La Loche Post is located. Clouded up fast and the NW wind increased, bringing more rain. We kept on through the interminable meanders until it began to get dark, when George suggested, "We make fire?" Crawling out on the bank, we dismembered an old stump, upsetting the housing plans of a colony of red ants, and boiled the kettle. Then on again — poling, poling. Fortunately I did not forget my gloves this time [as in 1936, when paddling from Pelican Narrows to Reindeer Lake; see Cockburn, 1984a] and so my hands are in good shape. It seemed very cold and raw when we stopped. Soon it became dark; but just at sunset there was a lovely rainbow — in fact a double arch to the NE. The meanders seemed to shorten; and then, to our mutual surprise and annoyance, another series of rapids suddenly appeared. George said that he remembered nothing at all about these. Nevertheless, we poled up these and several more — one a long swift one. It was so dark that it was impossible to see the stones and boulders. More a matter of feeling one's way along than picking it by sight. We got through without any apparent damage to the canoe. Then once again the meanders commenced, and on we went. It was now really dark, as the long northern twilight was obscured by the clouds, the sky being now completely overcast. We took what must have been the wrong turn, for we found ourselves in a narrow, weedy little channel, and as we were discussing the matter and trying to see which way the current flowed, we suddenly burst into the main channel again. It was all very confusing and discouraging, as we had been going since five in the morning. Nevertheless there was now nothing to do but to push on to the lake, as there was nowhere to camp in this endless marsh. The rapids had given us a false hope: we had thought the roaring of

them was the lake and its waves. At last, the lake — and a fine high sandy camping spot on the left just before coming out into the lake. Even George was too tired to “make fire,” so we took some poles from an abandoned Chip site and put up the mosquito bars and crawled in. If it was going to rain — let it. I do not know how late it was, but it must have been somewhere around ten o'clock or later. Forty miles or so up upstream — rapids, mud and clay bottom, weeds, and head wind — long day's work. I went to sleep quickly. The last thing George said: “Long time since I pole, last summer last time. You ever pole 'fore?” But Methye, or La Loche, Lake was at our feet, roaring in the wind.

July 2nd

Bright & fair, very hot, wind NW. When I awoke, the sun was high and hot. Not as stiff as I had every right to expect to be. George was up making the fire. I cleaned up and shaved, and, while we were eating, a canoe of three miserable Chips appeared. They are on their way to Buffalo River. The raggedest, dirtiest, most patched-up and forlorn outfit I have seen. They sat around for awhile — drank what tea we had left, had a smoke, asked George who I was and what I was doing, and eventually pushed off. A good many of the Chips in

this section speak English. George says it is the same everywhere. People always ask “What you take him here for, what he do here?” George says he always tells them, “I don' know myself!” Though the breeze was fresh the lake was not very rough. The Chips informed us that the HBC post is on the east side, where the mission is located. Shortly after pulling out we could see the buildings. The location is that of the former Revillon post, the HBC having moved down here, as I understand it, from the head of the lake. We pulled in to shore, with a few curious Chips watching, and I went up to see Mr. [Phil] Power. He is the new manager here and has only been in a few days himself. [Stan] Keighley, who was here, has resigned. I am sorry to have missed him, as he is the author of the map which I got from [Father Joseph] Egenolf at Brochet last year. [The Keighley map, which purported to show the route from Brochet to Nueltin Lake, was virtually useless, as Downes found out the next summer.] Fixed George up for grub and gasoline, and he boiled up, then pulled out about one o'clock. I do not envy him poling back down Bull River. He has been a delightful travelling companion; one could not wish for a better man. I was sorry to say goodbye to him. I am out of the HBC Saskatchewan District now and in the District of Mackenzie [Mackenzie-Athabaska]. The old Revillon house is in a state of considerable disrepair and general collapse. [The HBC erected a new one the following summer.] Very hospitably received by Mr. Power — an old timer in the North and faced with this wreck of an establishment [Fig. 4]. The house is collapsing, the store is out of all meats and salt. The natives are in the poorest, hungriest, most miserable state of destitution I have seen in the North. Power says this is the worst spot he has ever struck. He knows everyone I have known in the North. He was a [provincial] policeman for the Cumberland House area and has some wonderful tales. He was at Fond du Lac previous to this post. Later in the afternoon a Chip named William Janvier came in and said that he and Nigorri Tous-les-jours — Bill January and Nigorri Everyday — were going to Fort McMurray Monday, and so I decided to leave with them. In return, I put up the grub, though there is nothing but flour here. This is a very fortunate arrangement. A most astounding thing. While Paul [Williamson, the HBC apprentice] and Power were in swimming, I heard a knock at the door and a little Chip girl and a still younger child of three or so were standing there, one of them with a plate with three small plucked ducks on it. Each also had a tiny baby duckling in her hands. I took the plate of ducks into the house. When Power and Paul came back, we went out to see the chicks and pay the girls. They were sitting on the steps patiently waiting, but the 3-year-old had killed her duckling and was eating it raw — starting with the guts. She had the mangled little morsel in her own small hand. The Chips are all half starving here. This is a poor lake for fish — too shoal. The country is all burned up — no game — and they make poor hunts. While I was in the store a chap came in and traded four .30-.30 cartridges for some flour. I traded a new axe for George's old one. His, which I have already mentioned, is obviously one of the old hand-forged and hammered axes and quite a prize to me. Some notes and comments from the evening's chat: “Chappie” [RCMP



FIG. 4. Phil Power, HBC manager, Lac La Loche.

Constable Marcel Chappuis, with whom Downes had travelled on Reindeer Lake in 1937] and the brawl in which he shot through the ceiling as he cried "Cease, I fire!" The old man who married the Cree and was working in the garden the following day and who, when summoned, replied "Tell her — seven times las' night, today no more — no more can do." The fellow shot through the head up in a tree at The Pas. The matter of Nichols who shot himself and the Chip girl at Buffalo River has an angle I had only heard rumours of before. Power says it was impossible for him to shoot himself once through the chest and twice through the head. Obviously, one of the Chips did it in retaliation. But the investigation was very cursory. There are rumours that the case is to be reopened. Power says he knew Grey Owl when he first came into the country as an Englishman named Archie Belaney. His first wife, Anna Harrow [Anahareo] was a Mohawk. [In fact, Anahareo, an Ojibwa, was Belaney's third wife; his first was a woman of the Bear Island band of Ojibwas, of Lake Temagami, Ontario; leaving her, he later married, then abandoned, Catherine Holmes in England.] It was common knowledge that he could not speak a word of any Indian dialect — least of all Cree or Ojibway. Power spoke of a game with a rabbit bone — the slipping of it over the finger — which I am unacquainted with. Oddly enough, William Janvier, although a very black Chip, has grey-blue eyes. It will be necessary to portage all our stuff over the 12-mile carry Monday. While looking about in the garden I saw some evidence of ancient habitation and picked up a fair quartz scraper. How little I think of the outside now that I am in this country.

July 3rd

Sunday. Bright & fair. We all did very little today but sit about and chew the rag. Power considerable of a raconteur, and has plenty to draw from. Made several abortive attempts to see the priest, Father [Jean-Baptiste] Ducharme, before connecting. There is already a feud on between P. and him because he told the Chips that Power is crazy. This was brought about by the opening meeting between the two, when Power announced he thought the place was terrible. Father Ducharme has been here 22 years. Like all of them, he is a black bearded mad-man [Fig. 5]. Had quite a chat with him and one or two interesting things developed out of it. I would not have gone, but Power kept egging me on as he wished to hear what might be said about him. They had some sort of a celebration today with a great and gaudy parade, carrying all manner of banners. A very barbaric spectacle. [This was the procession of Our Lady of the Visitation, patron saint of the mission.] There is really a terrible bunch of Chips here — infinitely impoverished, dirty, diseased, lame, halt and blind, and very dispirited. Part of the band has moved across the lake and is reputed to be better than this starving outfit. Ducharme was on his verandah (the priests — he has a young Italian assistant here [Father Bragaglia]; the last young one went mad and had to be taken out — have a huge pale green house) surrounded by crawling Chips as well as older ones. [The priest

who lost his mind was Father Marcel Landry; he later recovered and continued to serve as an Oblate missionary.] We talked very generally. He believes the population to be quite constant. Says that the Chips are better off when they do not go out to the hospital during epidemics, for they lose their grip seeing others dying about them and are unused to the surroundings. He made the interesting comment that he believed the sorcerers used a special language. Also spoke of a curious custom: man died and was put in coffin — lid put on and nails driven in — the first one by the wife, and then each relative one. He says the water level is at its minimum — says it goes in 10 year cycles. Went back and swapped yarns with Power. He is a fine fellow. He had one marvelous tale about a woman in the famed pagan Water Hen band. For years they have resisted treaty. A big pow-wow was held recently, and the Indian Agent extolled the advantages of their coming under the protection and aid of the King. An old woman stepped up, pulled her dress down, and pulled forth an enormous breast. Shaking it in the face of the Indian Agent, she cried: "I have brought up 14 children on this without the help of your King — and I can bring up more. We don't need or want your King!" Power is absolutely fed up with the assignment to this place and threatens to pull out. Lice have been reported from the upstairs bedroom. The Chips were to come for me this evening but did not show up. I got our grub together — what there was. The store has very little, and I expect we will live on jackfish and tea. Anyway, there is no point in getting much. They eat up everything anyway — and a slim grub supply means a quick trip. We had a long talk on Power's war experiences, which were considerable. Finally to bed.



FIG. 5. Fr. Jean-Baptiste Ducharme.

July 4th

Overcast & rain. Wind NE. William and Nigorri appeared and, indeed, had been waiting for some time. We started out in a tiny hunting canoe after usual adieus to mine kind hosts. Looked very much like rain. Paddled up east side of Methye Lake for a distance, then disembarked for the long portage. Started to rain hard, so we repaired to the shack of one Francois and eventually had a lunch of bannock, tea, and lard there. It is easy to see the grub will not last long. I find we are not going over the regular portage, but by the Swan Lake trail, which is considerably longer. [This portage of nearly 20 miles begins at the NE end of Lac La Loche; it can be followed on the 1:50 000 sheet for McLean River, Saskatchewan (Energy, Mines and Resources, 1975).] Just why this should be so I do not know, except that William has his canoe cached there [at the far end]. The regular old portage [the renowned 12½ mile Methye, or La Loche, portage between Lac La Loche and the Clearwater River] has horses and wagons. [A dubious assertion. See Ells, 1936.] The three of us started, with William's dog "Coffee" packing all the bedding of the two of them. Poor Coffee is wretchedly scrawny and it seems impossible that he could carry such a load [Fig. 6]. He follows me, and then comes Nigorri. The latter two usually fall far in the rear, and you can hear the screams of pain from Coffee as he is beaten by flung sticks. We all use shoulder-packing [not tumplines], as is the custom with the Chips on long cross-country traverses. The trail is deeply marked and comparatively good, though very wet. We went on and on in a northerly direction, occasionally stopping. The country has been pretty much burned over. Occasionally, however, we would come out of the scrub into lovely park-like patches of Banksian pine (jackpine) and a carpet of caribou moss. Really very lovely despite the rain. Then there would be groves of spruce over white caribou moss — sphagnum — the spruce bearded with that parasitic moss. Everyone's packs became heavy with water. Somewhere along the line of march I did something to my right hip which made walking very painful. Advice to a person recently from the ease of city life: don't try to pack like

and follow a Chip. William, whose long strides I have been dogging, is a very fast walker, though he doesn't appear so. Watching his feet in front of me an all day performance, and quite interesting: they never step on anything, branch or stone, that can be stepped over — just conditioned to this, I suppose. The Chips as a rule are great walkers. One thinks of the Crees as primarily water people, but the Chips are noted for long land traverses. My leg became worse as the afternoon wore on. I do not know what can be the matter with it. A sharp, grinding pain in the hip and also the outside of the knee. Nothing to do but scramble along. As we trudge on through bog, muskeg, sand, William never says a word. Nigorri and Coffee are way behind each time we stop. On the whole, the trail passes over quite level country and over very sandy soil. Indeed, the sand is so fine and soft that the walking is difficult. Fortunately there are few upgrades. Considerable in the way of small boulders — but no large erratics at all. Poor old Coffee! When we stop, he just flops down with his load. He is carrying all the bedding, a tarp of William and Nigorri's, the hatchet, and both tea pails. As all of this has become wet, it is a tremendous load. The trail is littered with sticks, good stout ones about 2' long. These are sticks flung at or used to beat dogs, particularly in winter travel. Nigorri is very non-committal and speaks no English. We camped just before a small creek. Remarkably little water en route. We did pass a fair-sized pond which William says is one of four ponds draining into La Loche. Whether we are over the height of land or not I cannot tell, as the country is so flat, and any little creeks flow across the trail. Much evidence of other former campsites. I ought to lose any incipient waistline from this day alone, regardless of the rest of the summer. William is excellent about camp-fire, shelter, etc. Nigorri a stolid follower. Pouring rain as we made camp. William says we have a long way to go yet. Hope my hip does not stiffen during the night. Even William admits his shoulders are sore. These fellows are very clever about making up ingenious packs. I wish I might remember all the little things which mark the bush-wise Indian — innumerable small things which we would never think of. Each operation of starting a fire is a work of art. On a wet day, split up big wood. William rigged up the tarp. My mosquito bar is torn but it is too dark to fix it. We have eaten mostly lard, bannock, and tea today. The top of the jam was green with fungus — some of that old Revillon stuff. [The HBC had taken over Revillon Frères in 1936.] A lot of the stuff is three or four years old. We scraped off the top and found it quite acceptable. Finally turned in with the rain coming in through the great holes in the tarp and the mosquitos coming in through the great hole in my mosquito bar. We must be miles off from the regular portage. I don't know how far we have walked, but the pace has been steady and rapid all afternoon and it is now late. The regular portage is 12 miles. William is most vague about the distance on this. I have been busy getting Chip words. It is an extraordinary-sounding tongue. Spoken very subdued and low — with amazing short-clickety syllables and "gak" noises. When I finally crawled in my robe I ached all over. Well, this is what I came for. Rain. Rain — Rain. Everything soaked.



FIG. 6. "Coffee."

July 5th

Rain all day — clearing at nightfall. Awoke to sleeping robe damp and head and folded pants & shirt in a pool of water. Raining hard. Sat about and shivered for some time before commencing the weary way. Hip so painful I could not sleep on it. William & Nigorri have run out of tobacco. An annoyance to me, as every time I roll a cigarette Nigorri asks for "seltuey" in a very ungracious manner. When travelling with Indians always be sure before starting that they have their own tobacco — even if you have to buy it for them. It saves much annoyance. Started out, and country maintained same character — rather flat, poplar, small birch, Banksian pine, open glades. Eventually began to rise a bit and one had the impression that to the left — i.e. west — the land must fall away abruptly — seemed that we were walking along the edge of something. Rain obscured seeing much. Mosquitos bad when we stopped. Made one stop, when through trees I got a glimpse of a wide valley and high escarpment — the valley of the Clearwater! Soon we descended from the level upland very steeply, a wretched trail, all roots and windfalls and mud. The descent is a long one, several miles, following a stream valley. Glimpses of the opposite escarpment revealed, even in the rain, a beautiful high mountain wall carved into irregular shapes and clothed in contrasting greens of poplar, birch, & spruce. More of the beauties of this lovely valley later. Soon we were abruptly at the edge of the river and we boiled the kettle [Fig. 7]. William disappeared and then came back with the canoe, and what a "st-chi" — a tiny, patched, disreputable



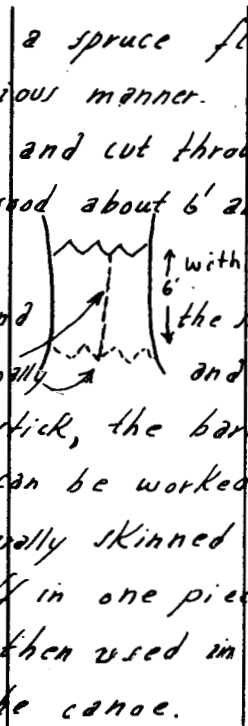
FIG. 7. End of the Swan Lake portage: Nigorri Tous-les-Jours and William Janvier.

grey canoe — not much more than 14' long — this for 3 men and their loads! The faithful Coffee came staggering in. The beast has not had one morsel but a dead baby rabbit for the two days, and no telling how many days before that. He is to go back home now; his carrying function is over. We sat under the canoe and let it rain, though due to its size, some part of us

received a good soaking. When the rain let up a bit we embarked for the other side, where there is a portage, as we are just above a long rapid. Our freeboard is about 2" amidships — and we each sit with knees bent up. On the portage we make but one trip — viz: William the canoe and a small pack; Nigorri two packs; myself my pack, my bed roll, the axe & hatchet, teapails and rifle. This portage is a long one of ½ a mile or more on the north side. As we plodded along at a terrific rate, who should appear but Coffee, who had swum across to follow us! He of course, poor faithful animal, received nothing but blows and shouts. He was driven off, but watched us from the shore as we paddled downstream. As we paddled along, the cloud curtain would occasionally lift and reveal the wonderful high escarpments of either side. The limestone and glacial till has been carved and dissected into lovely flowing turrets and small peaks which, clothed in dense tree growth, descend very steeply to the valley floor. If we had not approached over the flat upland plateau, one would believe that the river was bounded by a chain of mountains of considerable height. Just how high the top of the escarpment is above the river, I do not know — possibly 6-700 feet. It reminds me of the upper valley of the Mississippi on the Milwaukee-St. Paul run. Very little exposed rock is showing, and practically none at the water's edge. I saw one exposure of horizontally bedded limestone soon after the rapid on the north side. The river swings from one side of the escarpment to the other. It has cut through a previous bed of alluvial clays and sand, making on the bends steep sand or clay banks 10-40' high. Fine examples of cross-bedding appear. There is a lush growth of grass at the water's edge backed by willows and alders. Some magnificent spruces on occasion; descending, we went through groves of unravaged spruce, huge and magnificent. The actual valley from escarpments is very wide. I have never seen topography just like this — it is marvelous, and it is unfortunate indeed that clouds and rain prohibit much photography. Signs of rats are plentiful. We saw one, and Nigorri drew it right up to the canoe by making a most curious sucking, squeaking noise. We eventually put ashore and made camp for the night. Coffee strolled in, having swum from island to island. The mosquitos are terrible — hordes of them. They crawl through my bar with the greatest of ease. Before forgetting: Power's account of the medicine man at Stanley and the contents of his medicine bag. A sleepless night in prospect. Despite an afternoon of paddling and current we have not arrived at the regular portage. We must have come in miles above it. When one is travelling with Chips, stand on no ceremony of eating, for if one does, one gets nothing to eat. You get the habit yourself of quick, darting movements with your knife at the frying pan or jam pot. If you stop to remove a bug from your cup of tea, you are liable to find the food all gone. These chaps are considerable of a contrast to the Crees I have travelled with — much quieter and less joking. Also they pay no attention to your own comfort or welfare. And indeed pay no attention at all unless you make the first move. The strange tongue is spoken very low and with a curious enunciation of each syllable in hard little tones. We stopped to patch the canoe, and William made a spruce flooring in a most ingenious

manner. Select a large spruce and cut through the bark to the wood about 6' above the ground thus [Fig. 8]:

William made a spruce flooring in a very ingenious manner. Select a large spruce and cut through the bark to the wood about 6' above the ground thus:



Near the ground split longitudinally and using a sharpened stick, the bark all the way around can be worked loose — the tree literally skinned and the bark taken off in one piece. This matting is then used in the bottom of the canoe.

FIG. 8.

with the axe. Near the ground the same. Then split longitudinally, and using a sharpened stick, the bark all the way around can be worked loose — the tree literally skinned and the bark taken off in one piece. This matting is then used in the bottom of the canoe. One patches small holes with spruce gum by placing the gum over the hole and then applying a stick afire or glowing. Then apply cold water or saliva. Nigorri has the odd habit of lifting his paddle up and sucking the water off it — the handle — as it runs down from the blade. William says he has heard Chips speak of scapulamancy. This river is most peculiar in that on the bends it often shoals to a few inches of water and then abruptly drops to a great depth. Tremendous quantities of this fine sand must be carried down — though the water quite justifies its name in being extraordinarily clear.

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