

THE FUR TRADER: FROM OSLO TO OXFORD HOUSE. By EINAR ODD MORTENSEN SR., with GERD KJUSTAD MORTENSEN. Edited by Ingrid Urberg and Daniel Sims. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-77212-598-6. 224 p., maps, b&w illus., bib., notes. Softbound. Cdn.\$34.99. Also available as an ebook and pdf.

The fur trader was 23 years old when he left Oslo to take up a job in fur trading near The Pas, Manitoba, in 1925. He was educated, of good humour, physically fit, self-reliant, and trustworthy. His name was Einar Odd Mortensen, his father ran a furniture supply business in Norway, and he wanted to have an adventure doing something risky. When he headed for Canada, he had the notion that he was promised a job with the Norwegian-based Hyer's fur trading company in Manitoba, but this was abruptly denied in a telegram received in Winnipeg stating, "Not wanted here" (p. 11). Mortensen recovered from the surprise with a perseverance that characterized his way of dealing with difficult situations during his fur trade life for the next three years.

Mortensen could not have missed strong examples of heroic Arctic and Antarctic explorers who may have given him inspiration, such as Norway's own Roald Amundsen in the Northwest Passage in 1906, and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, an Arctic explorer and ethnologist, born in Manitoba, who led three expeditions into the Arctic between 1906 and 1918.

Editors Urberg and Sims in Alberta, with assistance from Gerd Kjustad Mortensen, daughter-in-law of Einar Odd Mortensen Sr., have sorted through Einar's records, diaries, and photographs to assemble a 200-page account of Einar's adventures in Canada from 1925 until 1928 when he returned to Norway. The photographs are excellent, although Mortensen did not provide captions leaving the editors to write them from available records. The most endearing photo (p. 114) shows a litter of seven puppies from which Mortensen picked six to become his own dog team. He proudly declared them to be the best team in Manitoba. Coming up with captions for the photos was the easy part; the tough work was dealing with Mortensen's racist descriptions of Indigenous life. The editors devoted an introduction of 29 pages and 112 endnotes to a discussion of this topic. Mortensen may have intended to publish an account of his Canadian experience but his early manuscript was put away incomplete. Gyldendal, a large Norwegian publishing business, published an edited version in Norwegian in 2007, from which this English version was published in 2022 by University of Alberta Press.

There are two maps in the University of Alberta edition, one showing Canada from coast to coast and the other with Manitoba in the centre and sizeable portions of Saskatchewan and Ontario to the west and east. This latter map does a good job of showing places Mortensen visited in his work as a fur trader and it foretells another problem with editing *The Fur Trader*: the location of Mortensen's

first winter's fur trade post—Pine Bluff. Endnote 1 in the book explains that the location of Pine Bluff remained unconfirmed. It may have been 52 km downstream from The Pas on the Saskatchewan River or 110 km upstream. Gerd Kjustad Mortensen made a great effort to visit the site of Pine Bluff in 2011 and did manage to take a flight over the downstream region, near or on Cedar Lake, but as yet there has been no exploration of the upstream region about 40 km northwest of Cumberland House. Both of these possible sites are hard to reach because of marshy conditions. Mortensen's material for Pine Bluff's location is more likely written for the site near Cumberland House but this too has contradictions.

Mortensen's activities as a fur trader are presented in roughly chronological sequence but there are long breaks in summer periods and the outcome is, for the better, more anecdotal than exactly timed. There is a long section on the evils of mosquitoes for example. He is good at teasing himself about being a greenhorn who needs to learn how to harness the dogs for the sleigh, how to walk with snowshoes after breaking one of his Norwegian skis, and how to spot flaws in the furs brought to the trading counter. In these anecdotes Mortensen shows how things were done at the lowest, least bureaucratic level in the fur trade, which in some other narratives is too low a level for the authors to bother discussing, thus making Mortensen's minutely detailed descriptions well worth reading.

Getting along as a young manager of a trading post is similarly enlightening to read. He watches how a card player can shuffle the deck so fast that he cannot see the switching of cards but he won't complain about cheating because it would make no sense to lose a knowledgeable colleague in the fur trade. Mortensen is so green and so unsupported by a corporate authority that he must use his smile and perseverance to survive. It is these disclosures that make *The Fur Trader* an engaging human story.

Fur trade historians will find that Mortensen's skills and experiences compare well with anecdotes in Heather Robertson's (1984) book, *A Gentleman Adventurer, the Arctic Diaries of Richard Bonnycastle*. The two men were born into very different circumstances, but they were the same age and they survived as fur traders in much the same way during the same time period, from 1925 to 1928.

After the rejecting telegram, Mortensen soon found employment with Ben Dembinsky of The Pas serving as a fur trader, sometimes in a small post nearby a First Nations reserve or a large Hudson Bay Company post. In the 1920s and without training or a senior supervisor, Mortensen likely would have traveled as much as 700 km one-way to cover the region from The Pas to Oxford House and on to God's Lake. He travelled as his clientele did, by foot in moccasins, wearing snowshoes, in a canoe or a version of a York Boat. He ate his meals alongside his hired helpers, slept outdoors in the winter, and disassembled and re-assembled a new-fangled outboard motor. He also taught his helpers how to use the winds in a sail to save fuel for the motor and reduce human effort. He enjoyed memorable

summer trips in the complex waterways around the Hayes River, in the vicinity of God's Lake and Oxford House.

Mortensen, Bonnycastle, and my father Gerald Malaher (1984) were working in the fur trade at a time when the business needed young men capable of making the shift from isolated circumstances and slow journeys toward modern innovations in communication and travel. They each succeeded on their own but together they showed what could be done in the 20th century.

The book would be improved with an index and a list of photographs with captions. Finding and mapping the location of the Pine Bluff trading post, as well as the many travel routes in the region generally, would be an important detail in the story of Mortensen's time in the area. Locating the post and travel routes would require expert archival research and experienced ground searching, potentially achieved through collaboration between regional First Nations graduate student researchers.

#### REFERENCE

- Malaher, G. 1984. *The north I love*. Winnipeg: Hyperion Press.  
Robertson, H. 1984. *A gentleman adventurer: The Arctic diaries of Richard Bonnycastle*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys.

*David Malaher*  
*2-2001 Nordic Place*  
*Whistler, British Columbia V8E 0A6, Canada*  
[david@malaher.org](mailto:david@malaher.org)