ESCAPE TO THE ARCTIC:

R. M. BALLANTYNE'S CANADIAN STORIES

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The flyleaf of my copy of *The World of Ice* is inscribed to "Frank Wilkins from his Auntie Hannah, Christmas 1897." Two other books, *Ungava* and *The Young Fur Traders*, have decorative bookplates, one from a school board and one from a Sunday school, each recording some achievement on the part of a Victorian boy in his early teens and marking his presentation copy of one of Ballantyne's novels as a reward. All three copies are part of the now sought-after Nelson uniform edition of "R. M. Ballantyne's Books For Boys," published in 1897, three years after the writer's death. This collection of his most popular stories featured decorated cloth covers on which a large, central drawing suitable to the novel inside was surrounded by wild animals, an Indian in head-dress and a hunter; in addition the title-page and frontispiece had full-colour illustrations of momentous and exciting events. All this was guaranteed to excite the imagination of any boy longing to escape the disciplined existence of school and home, but it was also carefully calculated, like Ballantyne's stories themselves, to appeal to the innumerable adults who approvingly bought and presented copies to their sons, nephews and achieving students well into the twentieth century.

The tradition of reading and giving Ballantyne's boys' books began in 1848 with the publication in Edinburgh of *Hudson's Bay*. At the time Ballantyne himself was twenty-three, and had recently returned from a six-year stay in the remoter parts of northern Canada as a clerk to the Hudson's Bay Company. The first book, the record of a British boy's adventures and observations in the frontier outposts of empire, was an immediate success. After that Ballantyne never looked back: having discovered the mid-Victorian boy's need to identify with the exploring, trading and colonizing heroes of his time, he spent the rest of his life successfully catering to it. But this is not to say that his books were either uninspired or uninformed, like those of so many of his contemporaries, though there were exceptions. For Ballantyne had a distinct advantage over most other writers of Victorian children's literature--he knew from first-hand observation and experience the world he wrote about, at least in his books about the Canadian north. The phenomenal popular success of his later work--the many reprintings at home and abroad--was due largely to his ability to make those experiences come alive for his young readers. He did this by satisfying children's natural, driving curiosity to know not only the *what*, but also the *why* and the *how*. It is this embellishment of action with credible reasons for action--the precise, detailed motivation behind events--that made his work so highly popular for generations, and that continues to make it entertaining reading today.

Ballantyne's position as an apprentice clerk caused him to be transferred from one isolated fur-trading post to another and gave him a unique opportunity to observe the daily routines of trade and travel in much of northern Canada. His recording of that life began in a diary he

kept from the beginning of his journey, was developed in long letters home to his mother, and concluded in *Hudson's Bay*, the first chapters of which he wrote while still in Canada.[1] *Hudson's Bay* is essentially autobiographical--Ballantyne calls it "this veracious book" of his experiences--and its episodic pattern is based on his convenient assignment to posts in various parts of the country. At each stop the young writer-clerk recorded his impressions of the locality, its inhabitants and their customs, gathering the wealth of information that justifies the book's sub-title, *Everyday Life in the Wilds of North America*. He described in detail the routine duties of his job and those of his fellows, their living conditions in the various forts and other trading establishments, the exotic recreations available to them, including snowshoeing and buffalo-hunting, their reactions to the inclemencies of weather, particularly the rigors of winter, the difficulties (and pleasures) of travelling, and more than anything else, their encounters with Indians. One chapter of more than thirty pages is devoted to Indian manners and customs, with many names of individual tribes, such as Crees, Saulteaux, Sioux, Blackfeet, Chipewayans, Crows and Flatheads, to delight his young readers who liked making up lists.

Generally, Ballantyne demonstrated that patronizing superiority towards Indians which many Englishman of his time felt for "lesser breeds without the law." In so doing, he was not only perpetuating one of the cultural convictions of his time, but he was also, perhaps unconsciously, laying groundwork for the popular success of his later work. That is to say, those parents who were little inclined to have their children's reading cause disruptive questioning of their own comfortable views, and who found no cause for alarm in Ballantyne's first book, would be more readily disposed to buy and recommend his later work. (Perhaps this is one of the built-in limitations of children's literature--it can never be an instrument of social change or intellectual advance because in order to sell to parents the work must subscribe to the opinions and beliefs of the philistine majority.) In any case, Ballantyne almost invariably condescended to the Indians he encountered, calling them either "these primitive children of the forest" or "savages." He also continued to make derogatory comments about their moral character, though as George Woodcock has pointed out, the evidence he offered, particularly in reference to cannibalism, was greatly exaggerated.[2]

The point that Ballantyne impressed upon his readers, however, was that the Indian needed help, and that it was the duty of every English man or boy who journeyed to the colonies to follow Christian principles of behaviour and to offer a strong guiding hand to ensure the Indian's eventual salvation. Similar exhortations to Christian conduct are even more in evidence in later books, where prayer and meditation are frequently portrayed and advised as part of the traveller's (and the reader's) regimen. One cannot help but reflect that although such counsel to young readers seems little more than conventional piety now, it no doubt had a healthy influence on sales to the schools, Sunday schools, and Auntie Hannahs of Victorian England and Canada.

In *The Young Fur Traders; Or, Snowflakes and Sunbeams*, Ballantyne's second book of Canadian wilderness adventures, there is a movement away from autobiographical record. Ballantyne had

completed his literary apprenticeship and now confidently considered himself a novelist. In his preface to the new work he spoke of having "taken the liberty of a novelist--not to colour too highly, or to invent improbabilities, but--to transpose time, place and circumstance at pleasure; while, at the same time [attempting]. . .to convey to the reader's mind a truthful impression of the *general effect*. . .of the life and country of the Fur Trader."[3] The element of personal reminiscence shows through, however, in both characterization and plot. The hero, Charlie Kennedy, a thinly disguised Robert Ballantyne, also is an apprentice clerk to the Hudson's Bay Company and also is transferred from one outpost to another with clock-like regularity. While the plot would no doubt be condemned by E.M. Forster as being merely an "and then" sequence (this happens and then this and then this), it also shares those qualities of movement and surprise usually associated with the picaresque. For Ballantyne's forte was action, either happening or impending, and the novel is full of it.

His readers always knew in advance what to expect; they had only to glance at the chapter headings, those brief capsulized summaries regrettably no longer fashionable, which told what the next dozen or more pages had in store. Chapter One, for example, abruptly "plunges the reader into the middle of an Arctic Winter; conveys him into the heart of the Wildernesses of North America; and introduces him to some of the principal personages of our Tale." And what young reader would not be impatient to get on with chapters telling of "the return; narrow escape, a murderous attempt, which fails; and a discovery"; "an unexpected meeting, and an unexpected deer hunt; arrival at the outpost; disagreement with the natives; an enemy discovered, and a murder"; "the chase; the fight; retribution; low spirits and good news"?

Most of this action takes place against a natural backdrop of arctic winter: "onward they pressed, without halt or stay, day after day, through wood and brake, over river and lake, on ice and on snow, for miles and miles together, through the great, uninhabited, frozen wilderness" (p. 320). In order to impress upon his readers the difficulties and trials endured and overcome by his heroes in such a demanding climate, Ballantyne resorted again and again to extended descriptions of the environment. The following passage is typical:

> Winter--cold, silent, unyielding winter--still drew its white mantle closely round the lonely dwelling of the fur traders of the far north....Snow covered the whole land, and the frozen river, the swamps, the seabeach and the sea itself, as far as the eye could reach, seemed like a pure white carpet. Snow lined the upper edge of every paling, filled up the key-hole of every door, embanked about half of every window, stuck in little knobs on the top of every picket, and clung in masses on every drooping branch of the pine-trees in the forest. Frost, sharp, biting frost, solidified, surrounded and pervaded everything...Winter, cold, silent, unyielding winter, still reigned at York Fort, as though it should reign there for ever. (pp. 308 -9)

Ballantyne never tired of remarking on the degree of cold his heroes encountered in the north: "at York Fort, on the shores of Hudson's Bay,

where the winter is eight months long, the spirit-of-wine (mercury being useless in so cold a climate) sometimes falls so low as fifty degrees below zero; and away in the regions of Great Bear Lake, it has been known to fall considerably lower than sixty degrees below zero of Fahrenheit'' (p. 32). Passages such as these were not intended merely to convey factual information, for Ballantyne skilfully inserted them at critical points in his narrative to heighten suspense as well as to offer sugar-coated lessons in imperial geography.

Nonetheless, the informative character of Ballantyne's work certainly contributed to its popularity, for it satisfied the desire of a large segment of the British population (both children and adults) to know more of the romantically distant Canadian north. This was the region where some of their real-life national heroes, the Arctic explorers, were continuing to define the bounds of Victoria's empire. The fur-trader shared the burden of exploration and endured the same trials of climate in the process of opening up this distant territory. Ballantyne was shrewd enough to recognize the parallel hardships and to fashion his fiction to capitalize on the widespread public interest in arctic exploration.

Ungava, A Tale of Esquimaux Land, Ballantyne's third book about the Canadian north, is without doubt his best. Published in 1858, while he still clearly remembered his own experience in the north, it describes the establishment of a trading post in Ungava on the east coast of Hudson Bay. Ballantyne, by now the detached, omniscient author, carefully traces the danger-ridden journey from Moose Fort north along the shores of James Bay to the site of the new post at the mouth of the Caniapuscaw (Kanaaupscow) River. (One of the incidental pleasures of reading Ballantyne comes from being able to trace the movements of his heroes on real maps from the precise directions he always provides.) The expedition is led by George Stanley, an Englishman ''past the meridian of life'' yet with ''the vigour of his youth not yet abated.''[4] Those who set out with him include his wife and ten-year-old daughter Edith, two younger men--Dick Prince and Frank Morton--who possess abundant measures of strength and courage, a crew of veteran *voyageurs*, and two Eskimo interpreters. The Eskimos, Ooligbuck and Augustus by name, provide the narrative with instant credibility, for coincidentally they are the very men ''now chronicled in the history of arctic adventure as...the well-tried and faithful interpreters to Franklin, Back, and Richardson in their expeditions of north-west discovery'' (p. 38). The ensuing adventures are the stuff of boys' dreams. There are trips in birchbark canoes and, in winter, by snowshoe and dog-team; there are parlays with Indians and Eskimos; characters are lost and later found, injured in the wild and then rescued; there is unlimited fishing with incredible catches; there is hunting by all manner of means for duck, goose, polar bear, seal and walrus; and there is practical information on how to fit out an expedition, survive a blizzard, build an igloo, and barter for matchless furs with the natives.

One of the most significant aspects of *Ungava* is its reflection of Ballantyne's enchantment with the Eskimo. The novel is filled with detailed descriptions of their way of life, with particular attention paid to their appearance, character traits, methods of preparing and storing

food, eating customs, building of shelters for summer and winter, ingenious use of wooden spectacles to protect them from snowblindness, methods of hunting and of whaling, and travel by kayak and oomiak. Ballantyne was particularly delighted by their open, frank, and happy disposition: "instead of the stiff reserve and haughty demeanour of their Indian neighbours, they danced and sang, and leaped and roared, embraced each other and wept, with the most reckless indifference to appearances" (p. 203). Later he pointed with admiration to their industrious habits, which he also found more congenial than those of the Indian: "next morning the Esquimaux were up and away by daybreak, with their dogs and sledges, to bring home the remainder of the walrus meat; for these poor people are not naturally improvident, and do not idle their time in luxurious indolence until necessity urges them forth again in search of food. In this respect they are superior to Indians, who are notoriously improvident and regardless of the morrow" (p. 322).

By the time he composed *Ungava*, Ballantyne's increasing confidence as a writer was reflected in his use of humour, a quality conspicuous by its absence in his earlier work. His description of an Eskimo waiting beside a seal-hole to spear his dinner is a case in point:

> At his feet lay a stout barbed seal-spear, the handle of which was made of wood, and the barb and lower part of ivory. A tough line was attached to this, and the other end of it was fastened round the man's waist; for when an Esquimau spears a seal, he prepares to conquer or to die. If he does not haul the animal out of the hole, there is every probability that it will haul him into it. But the Esquimau has laid it down as an axion that a man is more than a match for a seal; therefore he ties the line round his waist--which is very much like nailing the colours to the mast. There seems to be no allowance made for the chance of an obstreperously large seal allowing itself harpooned by a preposterously small Esquimau; but we suppose that this is the exception to the rule. (p. 313).

In the earlier work, and throughout *Ungava* as well, one finds the subdued strain of Ballantyne's moral purpose. In each of his books, Christian principles of behaviour are encouraged by the example of one central character after another. Without exception his heroes are upright, honest and God-fearing men, not above the venial sins of an occasional drink or a comforting pipe, but men who do their duty to God and the Queen without fail and who win through every adversity as a result. The writer's consistent use of such exemplars of moral perfection may seem archaic in an age of constantly shifting moral perspectives, and the critical contemporary reader may argue that the failure of these heroes to wrestle with serious temptation renders their moral example suspect. But for the Victorians these platitudes of piety were expected and meaningful, particularly in writing for the young. Ballantyne's subscription to the public moral conventions of his time assured his acceptance and in no small measure contributed to his success.

In his last novel about the Canadian north, however, Ballantyne's desire to moralize got the better of him. *The World of Ice* (1860) contains a number of passages in which contrived homilies distract the reader's attention and intrude on the free flow of the narrative. There

are other distractions as well: commentaries on the life-style of the Eskimos that were fresh and new in *Ungava* are repetitious and boring when they appear again, and descriptions of the cold, effective in earlier works, are strained in *The World of Ice* by awkward comparisons with the weather in England. There is also far less of the action which Ballantyne managed so well in his earlier work. The plot, which focuses on the activities of a ship's company marooned in the arctic ice over winter, has little momentum or direction. The efforts of the men to keep up their morale, which cause them to "publish" a weekly newspaper, the *Arctic Sun*, and to present a play entitled "Blunderbore; or, the Arctic Giant," offer little to kindle a boy's imagination or, for that matter, little incentive to read on. It is difficult to say whether Ballantyne had forgotten what the north was really like by the time he wrote this novel, or whether he was cynically grinding out a potboiler to capitalize on the great success of *Ungava*; but measured against the achievement of his earlier work, *The World of Ice* seems hardly to have been worth the writing.

When he wrote his own experience in the Canadian north, Ballantyne produced meaningful and memorable work. Despite their period quality, despite even the misguided Victorian assumptions about the white man's racial superiority, *Hudson's Bay, The Young Fur Traders,* and *Ungava* still repay the time invested in their reading. They offer a world of excitement and adventure, of challenge and achievement, that is rarely found in contemporary literature, and they remind children (and adults) of the possibilities for individual action in a world where the passive, conformist response is all too easy.

NOTES

[1] Ernest Rhys, "Introduction" to R. M. Ballantyne, *The Young Fur Traders; Or, Snowflakes and Sunbeams* (London, 1856 repr. 1908), p. vii. Rhys offers anecdotal material about Ballantyne not found elsewhere.

[2] George Woodcock, "Introduction" to R. M. Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1848 repr. 1972), p.xvi. Woodcock's Introduction sets the work into historical perspective.

[3] R. M. Ballantyne, *The Young Fur Traders; Or, Snowflakes and Beams* (Edinburgh, 1856), p. i. Page references are to this edition.

[4] R. M. Ballantyne, *Ungava, A Tale of Esquimaux Land* (London: Nelson, 1858 repr. 1897), p. 10. Page references are to this edition.

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