BY CANOE TO THE BARRENS

The Arctic prairies, Ernest Seton Thompson. Harper and Row, 1981. 415 pp. $8.50 paper. ISBN 0-06-090841-6.

In the spring of 1907 Ernest Seton Thompson set off north from Edmonton in a livery rig, to begin a journey of over 2,000 miles that was to take him six months to complete, by canoe down the Athabaska River system, through Great Slave Lake and onward to Aylmer Lake, till he reached the treeless country of the Arctic plains. His declared intention was to find the summer range of the great caribou herds, to document the wildlife seen along the way, and to explore the largely unknown waters of Aylmer Lake. His, he thought, was only the fourth white expedition to penetrate so far north, and for the last third of the journey he would be travelling beyond the knowledge of the native guides. In spite of various adventures and one near disaster he did what he set out to do, though at considerable cost. His romantic dreams, both of the Indian life that he had promoted with such devotion in New York City, and of the paradise of the north lands, came up against the reality of the native Chipewyans and the harsh climate, and suffered grievously. This is one theme of the book: the diary of a sensitive and scrupulously fair man, forced to come to terms with his own illusions.

The Arctic prairies was published in 1911, and it is reprinted now, in a photo-reproduction of the original edition, as one volume of the Harper Nature Library, advertised as "new paperback editions of outstanding nature classics." It appears with Seton's illustrations and maps, and the index, but without his photographs.

Ernest Seton Thompson is remembered as the writer of nature stories — *Wild animals I have known, Animal heroes, The biography of a grizzly, Lives of the hunted* and many more. He wrote about animals from the animal's point of view, he wrote with sympathy and most of all with knowledge, he wrote clearly and simply, and he illustrated his stories with his own instantly recognizable drawings. From the 1890s on these books went into edition after edition, and some are still in print. They were written with children in mind, and they have been popular with children (perhaps as much as anything because Seton never wrote down to his audience, nor did he prettify animal life).

After about 1901, however, Seton abandoned the nature story, and turned his energies to his other great interest, the imitation of the life of the Indian. He re-imagined his childhood and youth — spent in the Don Valley and the prairie of Manitoba — through the mind of an Indian boy, and the autobiographical *Two little savages* (1903) was the result, a hymn to the outdoor life and the wisdom of the Indian. His *Birch-bark roll* further advanced the principles of woodcraft, and led to the formation of his band of Woodcraft Indians, a scouting organization for boys. For Seton, Woodcraft was "the first of all the sciences. It was Woodcraft that made man out of brutish material, and Woodcraft in its highest form that may save him from decay." (*The book of woodcraft,* 1912, p. v.) The living symbol of the healthy outdoors was the Indian, who lived in harmony with Nature, respecting and reverencing all wild creatures. Seton became a tireless advocate of living with Nature rather than exploiting Nature, of preserving the wilderness and its inhabitants, and of defending the Indian against all criticism. These were truths that had to be taught to children; the Woodcraft Indians, and later, the Boy Scouts, were the means for the new teaching.

In his promotion of his ideals through youth organizations Seton was not always successful, perhaps being too nice a man, not ruthless enough in his dealings with others. The lore, the rituals and the games of the Woodcraft Indians were cannibalized by Baden-Powell in *Scouting for boys* (1908), and Seton found himself fighting a rearguard action to save the integrity of his own principles. He agreed to serve as Chief Scout of the Boy Scouts of America, but again, he found his expertise used while his aims were ignored. He became alarmed by the increasing militarism of the Scouts; he was outmanoeuvred, and finally deposed from office on the grounds that he was not an American citizen. Seton's Indian as the model of American manhood lost out to Daniel Beard's idealization of the pioneer.

There is one other fact of Seton's life that bears on *The Arctic prairies.* Seton began his career as an artist, and his first successes as an illustrator of wildlife, together with his own interest in and knowledge of animals, led him to make claims as a naturalist. Here he overreached himself. His attempts at scientific studies were savaged and he was deeply wounded by the criticism. Subsequently, with painstaking industry, he tried to gain professional recognition, and with the publication of *Life-histories of northern animals. An account of the mammals of Manitoba* (2 vols., 1909), he largely succeeded. His expedition to the Barren Lands in 1907, at the age of forty-seven and in imperfect health, was surely spurred by his desire to be taken seriously as a scientist.

In *The Arctic prairies* these three dominant interests — wild life, the image of the Indian, and scientific observation — meet and sometimes conflict dramatically. The book is essentially a diary, telling in short chapters and straightforward narrative the incidents of the expedition, but we are always aware of Seton's own personality, and of the tensions when ideals meet reality. The Seton party set out from Athabaska Landing as soon as the river was clear of ice, and for the first stretch accompanied the scows taking supplies to the Hudson's Bay posts downstream. Here Seton experienced his first disappointment, finding the sixty Indians and Metis that made up the scows' crew a noisy, savage and ungrateful crowd, liable to loose off their rifles at anything that moved on the banks. Seton's only success was as Medicine Man, dispensing rhubarb pills for all complaints. In the country east of the Great Slave River he tried to find guides that would take him to the range of the wood buffalo;

the Indians were unhelpful and evasive. For the voyage across Great Slave Lake he had to hire a boat and a crew; his problems increased. He had trouble getting the Indians to rise in the morning, he found it impossible to satisfy their frequent complaints, he grew impatient and then desperate at their habit of stopping every two hours to eat — at his expense. As the voyage continued he lectured them on the sanctity of life but could do little to stop their wanton killing. When it came to the parting he was heartily glad to be rid of them. Taking with them only one docile old man, Seton and his companion Edward Preble — an American naturalist — and their servant Billy, journeyed on in their own canoe to the Barren Lands.

This then is the strongest undercurrent in the book: the degeneracy of man. Seton tried his hardest to set an example, for he carried no whiskey, he put out his camp-fires, and he taught reverence for all Nature. He tried to make every allowance for the Chipewyans, and he did find one or two to admire, but there is a poignancy in his evident disappointment with his model of manliness.

There were devils, too, among the wild-life. The paradise of the north country was close to being impenetrable, for the mosquitoes were "a terror to man and beast." Seton tried to preserve a scientific attitude, and devised a mosquito gauge to count them — his bare hand held up for 5 seconds one day and "125 long-billed mosquitoes boring away." He discovered that frogs were immune, and he tried rubbing frog slime over his skin as a repellent. Finally, the best he could do was confine the mosquitoes to one chapter of *The Arctic prairies,* and treat them afterwards as the great unmentionables.

On the whole, and in spite of the disappointments and the hardships, the note that Seton strikes most often is one of cheerful interest in everything, whether it is the tales of the Hudson Bay traders, the magnificent scenery, or the abundant wildlife. He did see the caribou that he travelled so far to meet, he saw buffalo herds, and muskox, he saw lynx, white wolf and silver fox, he saw pelicans, he ate the prized whitefish, he recorded and collected the plant life. (His lists of both fauna and flora are given in the appendices.) "Have I not found for myself a kingdom and become a part of it?" he asks in a last lyrical outburst.

This is not a book that was written for children, nor is it a book that makes much concession to the reader who is not already interested in nature and the north. The lists of the contents of lynxes' stomachs might seem tedious, and the discussion of the fluctuations of the northern rabbit population might seem dry. Yet Seton had a story to tell, and his own very real involvement with the things he observed — whether human, animal or vegetable — is good reading. Our present concern with ecology makes Seton's idealism fresh and modern.

This is a useful reprint to add to the literature of exploration and the north, and with some introduction — say, Mowat's *Lost in the barrens* — it could be recommended to an intelligent student who already had some interest in the subject. One word of caution: the maps, which are small and blurry, and were no better in the first edition, are worse than useless. Seton's photographs are a loss, but a small one, for he was operating in the days before the telephoto lens, and we have become habituated to seeing rather more dramatic shots.

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DEALING WITH DIABETES

Don't call me Sugar Baby!, Dorothy Joan Harris. Scholastic-TAB Publications Ltd., 1983. 152 pp. $2.25 paper. ISBN 0-590-71173-3.

Dorothy Joan Harris is the author of three books for younger children, ***The house mouse, The school mouse,*** and ***The school mouse and the hamster. Don't call me Sugar Baby!*** is Ms. Harris's first novel for pre-teen and early teenage readers: children between the ages of ten and fourteen.

This novel gives an account of a few months in the life of a Canadian twelve-year-old who is diagnosed as a diabetic. Alison Cooper, the twelve-year-old in question, finds it difficult to accept the failure of her parents' marriage and their separation. Like many adolescent girls she is preoccupied with her physical appearance, make-up, clothes, and with the awkwardness of understanding boys or establishing friendships with them. These problems are increased by the physical discomfort and general irritability which Alison experiences with the onset of the as-yet — undiagnosed diabetes. Alison's reactions to the news that she has diabetes range from an initial hostile rejection of the facts, through anger, to self-pity and apathy about her life. She becomes aware of her own mortality. As she remarks, "And if some grown-ups want to argue that nobody's childhood comes to an end when they're only twelve, well all I can say is, sometimes it does."

During the course of the novel the reader, through Alison, her family and her friends, learns a lot about diabetes. As Alison learns that she will have to test her urine four times a day, inject herself with insulin every day for the rest of her life, and pay close attention to her diet which is, of course, to exclude such favourite treats as cola, the reader finds it easy to sympathize with her anger and self-pity.

The reactions of Alison's family and friends are varied: her grandmother treats her as though she is made of glass; her father is afraid of illness and hospitals and feels incompetent to deal with a child he sees as an invalid; some of her classmates believe that diabetes is contagious and avoid contact with her, while a few are understanding, supportive and helpful. Gradually Alison comes to accept her condition and in spite of a few set-backs, decides that she "always would be diabetic. I had to accept that; it would never change. But