

Forgotten Heroes of the North

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Bartlett: the Great Canadian Explorer, Harold Horwood. Doubleday, 1977. 194 pp. \$8.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-385-09984-3.

Angel of Hudson Bay: the True Story of Maud Watt, William Ashley Anderson. Clarke, Irwin, 1961. 177 pp. \$3.50 paper. ISBN 0-7720-0218-5.

In a world all too quickly losing its heroes, it is refreshing to discover three Canadians from our past who lived "large" adventures on a heroic scale. Authors Horwood and Anderson bring to life the stories of three remarkable people – Jim and Maud Watt and the Arctic explorer, Robert Bartlett. Forgotten by a century of Canadians who bemoan the lack of exciting historical figures, these exceptional people should stimulate the imaginations of all cynics and the many disenchanted Canadians who find history boring. In *Angel of Hudson Bay* and *Bartlett*, human drama abounds. That the stories of these lives have remained neglected for so long in this country is a matter of some surprise. Both Bartlett and the Watts survived the dangers and challenges of northern frontier life – the hazards of a frozen land; these stories are a testament to their courage and persistence.

Although Anderson's book loses impact through his failure to date events or to include vital maps, his enthusiastic style carries the reader along in total absorption. Nonetheless, an atlas at one's side is almost a necessity for tracking Jim and Maud's journeys. Horwood, however, offers excellent maps which add immeasurably to our understanding of his rousing tale. The inclusion of Bartlett's own historic photographs adds significantly to the importance of this book and gives the reader some idea of the splendour of his voyages. *Angel* would have benefitted from photographs of the Watts themselves and

their famous Rupert Longhouse, as visual imprints leave lasting impressions.

Horwood's writing repertoire includes fiction, travel and poetry. Former works include *The Foxes of Beachy Cove*, *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, *White Eskimo*, *Newfoundland*, *Beyond The Road*, plus a volume of poems, *Voices Underground*. A collaboration with Cassie Brown led to *Death on The Ice*, an account of the Newfoundland sealing disaster in 1914.

To Harold Horwood, who still believes in greatness, and to William Anderson, a personal friend of Maud Watt, we are grateful for these stories. William Anderson is an American advertising executive, the author of several books and short stories. His obvious love of the subject matter in *Angel* creates a heartwarming story. The battle of one courageous man and one spirited woman against the barren outpost life of the Hudson Bay Company in the early 20th century is vividly reported. We learn that Jim and Maud Watt brought an uncommon humanity and sensibility to a monopolistic and paternalistic "Company" policy. This was not an easy task for Jim, as he was a "true Company man". The conflict between devotion to duty and a deep concern for Indian friends is a delicate subject, but one which Anderson handles with wit and tact.

Jim's unique idea of conserving beaver to save the Indians, then dependent on Company outposts, met with initial ridicule. The Watts' disputes with the Hudson Bay Company over self-determination for the Indians forcefully illustrate a forgotten time when imperial determinism clashed with compassion and common sense in a rapidly changing world. This penetrating insight into Canada's historical development will be new to most young Canadians.

In *Bartlett*, the author brings leaping to life a hero of dramatic proportions, a man of courage and contradictions. A love of the Arctic and sailing were Bartlett's ruling passions. His life-long fondness for poetry and music and his old-world gentility seem incongruent with his lack of candour, occasional ruthlessness and coarse language. We will have to let the psychologists analyze this amazing person; it is enough for the reader that he accomplished incredible deeds during an amazing life.

As Horwood states:

I have not tried to hide Bartlett's faults . . . neither have I tried to "cut him down to size" . . . he was indeed a great man, with extraordinary courage . . . tenacity wedded to exceptional gentleness and generosity . . . He went through life with an heroic self-image, doing what he could to live up to it. Many readers today . . . refuse to believe in greatness. That is their misfortune.

The son of a Newfoundland minister, Bartlett fought a repressive father and went to sea. He left his sea-port home of Brigus to join fisherman, sealers, whalers and mariners, and to eventually become a captain at the age of twenty-two! Phenomenal physical stamina, absolute dedication to Arctic exploration, an intimate knowledge of ice and ships, together with an almost uncanny sailing ability, created

this century's greatest Master Mariner. Foreign tributes to him were not uncommon. The famous Arctic explorer and ethnologist, Knud Rasmussen, telegraphed the American Geographic Society on January 19, 1931, with the following:

WITH CONGRATULATION ROBERT BARTLETT'S
SPLENDID BRILLIANTLY ACCOMPLISHED EXPEDITION
EAST GREENLAND SEIZE OPPORTUNITY BEHALF
DANISH POLAR EXPLORERS SEND CENTURY'S
GREATEST, BOLDEST, MOST EXPERIENCED ARCTIC
SKIPPER OUR GREETING AND ENTHUSIASTIC
HOMAGE.

Canada never acknowledged these exploits. Bartlett's important voyages through uncharted northern waters and his major scientific discoveries are not even included in Canadian historical atlases! Yet here was a man whose pioneer expeditions included twenty-two journeys into the unknown Canadian Arctic, plus six to Greenland and other ice-bound ports.

Here also was a self-made man, who despite struggles with treachery, alcohol and loneliness, believed in great deeds. His ardent affair with the north ultimately led him to great men - explorers, millionaires, hunters, and international statesmen - men whose stature often blinded him to their human frailties. This embroiled him in the sordid controversy between the famous explorers, Robert E. Peary and Dr. Frederick Cook - the "who-was . . . first-to-the-North-Pole" debacle. It is now clear this wretched episode sullied all involved, destroyed a good man's career and over-shadowed the heroism of all those involved.

Horwood's meticulous research of the 1908 controversy presents us with an admirably unbiased account. It is fact that Bartlett almost single-handedly, by sheer force of his willpower, got a crippled Peary to within 150 miles of the North Pole only to be turned back by Peary's egotism. This fabulous tale and Horwood's treatment of its complexities thoroughly vindicate Dr. Cook.

As Horwood truthfully states: "If Bartlett was a hero in nineteenth-century mold, consciously patterned on Dr. Livingstone, he was a hero with certain flaws . . . an inability to accept blame even when he was wrong." This flaw was to complicate the even more renowned and infamous polar expedition aboard the "Karluk". Incompetence, courage, and human folly blend in this remarkable story, where again we find Bartlett - the Master Mariner - at the whim of explorers. Despite all, Bartlett survived this abortive voyage to walk hundreds of miles over treacherous arctic ice to Siberia. This feat he accomplished

in the middle of a northern winter, in an effort to save his fellow shipmates. “. . . Half a century after the event . . . the Canadian marine historian, Thomas Appleton, . . . summed up Bartlett’s achievement as ‘the finest example of leadership in the maritime history of Canada’.” Eventually, Bartlett was lionized in Europe and America. It was the Americans who bought his last ship – the incomparable “Effie M. Morrissy” – to be exhibited during the American Bicentennial. First a British citizen, then an American, Bartlett finally came to rest at his home in Newfoundland. To his memory, Canada owes a debt of recognition.

Although both *Angel* and *Bartlett* are fascinating stories, their differing styles will attract different audiences. The story of Bartlett is aimed primarily at adults and younger but serious students of Canadian maritime history. Those from the age of twelve onwards, however, are sure to be enthralled by Anderson’s fresh and exuberant treatment of a story of quiet courage and happy frontier family life. But all those young and older adults interested in the north, in exploration, and in the lives of great men and women, will find both irresistible. Both authors vividly recreate the wild north of the past, unsuited to all except the Inuit. Horwood especially treats the reader to glimpses of Inuit lifestyles and their clashes with the White exploiters and explorers. Both Anderson and Horwood treat these native people with understanding and respect: attitudes which permeate their stories of the Watts and Bartlett. As Anderson so aptly says:

in a world that too often recoils from reality and torments itself with fears, frustrations and vain ambition, I cannot help feeling . . . what a rich and wonderful life . . . led beyond the fringes of civilization. What a man he was! What a woman is Maud!

So as well, must we emphatically react to Robert Bartlett – Canada’s Master Mariner of the Arctic.

These two tales should provide hours of exciting reading for people everywhere interested in the human struggle. Both dramatize important portions of Canadian history in a most interesting way for the young reader – one that this reviewer in her often tedious high-school geography and history lessons never encountered. I sincerely hope to see more of this type of investigative and imaginative storytelling, for these forgotten northern heroes form a large part of our national legacy and our children should not forget them.

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