

# EASTERN PASSAGE

Farley Mowat



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# FARLEY MOWAT



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**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Mowat, Farley, 1921–

Eastern passage / Farley Mowat.

Issued also in electronic format.

eISBN: 978-0-7710-6493-7

1. Mowat, Farley, 1921-. 2. Mowat, Farley, 1921- – Travel – Saint Lawrence River. 3. Atomic bomb – Accidents – Saint Lawrence River – History.
4. Nuclear accidents – Environmental aspects – Saint Lawrence River – History.
5. Environmental disasters – Saint Lawrence River – History. 6. Authors, Canadian (English) – 20th century – Biography. I. Title.

PS8526.O89Z463 2010 C818'.5409 C2010-902284-X

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program and that of the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Media Development Corporation's Ontario Book Initiative. We further acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for our publishing program.

McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

75 Sherbourne Street

Toronto, Ontario

M5A 2P9

[www.mcclelland.com](http://www.mcclelland.com)

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# THANKSGIVING

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With more than forty books behind me, the time is ripe for paying homage to those at the heart of my life and labours.

Helen and Angus Mowat, my parents, who lit the fire and kept it stoked as long as they lived.

Peter Davison, poet of note, my editorial mentor and shepherd through almost four decades.

Jack McClelland, publisher par excellence, who would – and did – do anything to keep the writer's boat afloat.

Claire Mowat, my wife and partner, who has propped me up, goaded me on, and borne with me for half a century.

Mary Talbot, unsung amanuensis who saw to it that I stayed on track and who was instrumental in delivering the goods.

Susan Renouf, infallible literary midwife and editorial helmsman, who has kept me on course these past two decades.

Albert, Victoria, Lily, Edward, Tom, Millie, and Chester, and all my friends, human and otherwise, whose existence has made mine possible ... and wonderful.

*Farley Mowat  
Cape Breton Island  
November 2010*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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*Eastern Passage* is the second half of a memoir about my life from early 1937 to mid-1954, but excluding the Second World War. *Otherwise*, published in 2008, covers the first part of the story.

Together these two books give an account of voyages of discovery that go to the heart of who and what I was during my apprentice years as a writer. Although they revisit some events and circumstances already described in earlier books of mine, I make no apology for the reappearance (if in a new guise) of material that is essential to my tale.

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## PREFACE

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I returned to civilian life in 1946 having served almost five years in the Canadian Army, most of that time in the infantry. Driven by a desperate need to escape the black devils of that ordeal, I fled to the Saskatchewan prairies of my childhood, but the solace and the healing I sought were not to be found in my own past. That winter, however, I chanced upon some dusty government publications that gave me hope. They recounted how, early in the summer of 1893, a young Toronto geologist, Joseph Tyrrell, and his brother James set off to fill some of the yawning gaps in the existing maps of Canada's northern regions.

Paddled by native voyageurs, the Tyrrell brothers travelled into a world virtually unknown to white men. Ominously called the Barren Lands, it embraced an enormous expanse of tundra sprawling north of present-day Saskatchewan and Manitoba all the way to the shore of the Arctic Ocean.

In the course of three epochal journeys into it, the Tyrrells encountered such multitudes of the arctic reindeer called caribou as to make a mockery of the name Barren Lands. James wrote, "The deer could only be reckoned in acres and square miles. Joseph estimated that just *one* of the innumerable herds they saw contained as many as two hundred thousand individuals."

Equally remarkable was their discovery that the supposedly barren lands were home to as many as two thousand Inuit.

These were a people out of time. Most had never before even seen a white man, and they knew next to nothing of the sea-mammal and saltwater world that sustains most Inuit cultures. The inland people took *their* sustenance from the caribou, around which their lives revolved.

Engrossed in studying and mapping the land's geological features, Joseph Tyrrell had little time to spare for the people he met, but James, the more perceptive of the two, wrote that he wished he could have lived "with the Caribou Esquimaux" long enough to have learned how they managed to be "so happily content with their simple lives."

James Tyrrell's "wish" was reborn in me – tenfold. I was fired by a consuming desire to meet these extraordinary beings and through them perhaps find a way into an earlier and better world than the hellish one from which I had just emerged.

In January of 1947, I heard about an American zoologist who wished to spend a summer in the Barren Lands and was looking for a Canadian associate. I got in touch with him and before long had committed myself to becoming half of the "Keewatin Zoological Expedition" – the other half being Dr. Francis Harper.

The doctor wanted to spend the coming summer collecting (which is to say, killing) and non-human living things that could be converted into scientific specimens, whereas I wanted to find and follow the great deer herds into the country of the Caribou Esquimaux.

In mid-May Harper and I boarded a train, which ran erratically and very, very slowly north from Winnipeg to the west coast of Hudson Bay. The Muskeg Special, as the train was called

deposited us and our gear at Churchill, where I located a bush pilot willing to fly us into the Barrens.

He landed us near a trapper's cabin at remote Nueltin Lake belonging to a trio of Metis brothers who, although struck almost dumb by our surprise arrival, made us welcome.

A few weeks later, twenty-three-year-old Charlie Schweder, eldest of the Metis brothers and I embarked on an epic canoe journey of more than a thousand miles through taiga and tundra during which I met the remnants of the Tyrrells' Esquimaux – the *Ihalmiut* – *Peop from Beyond* – as they called themselves.

Fewer than fifty of them still existed.

That summer was a healing time for me and one that made me hunger for more experience of Arctic lands.

At the end of that summer, I returned to Toronto, where I persuaded Andy Lawrie, a friend from pre-war days, to join me in spending a year studying the ways of the caribou and of the people of the caribou. We set about obtaining the mandatory official permission for an expedition into the Northwest Territories. This went well, and by October prospects looked very rosy. They looked even rosier to me after I met Frances Thornhill, a blond, blue-eyed veteran of the Women's Naval Service, three years younger than I.

One bright autumnal day, I took her birdwatching, and we ended up making love in a windrow of fallen leaves. A month later she confronted me, white-faced and tense, with the demand that we get married, and at once. In the language of the day, this meant she was pregnant.

The effect on my plans was not as disruptive as it might have been. Once my panic had simmered down I concluded that, although marriage might complicate things for the moment, it would bring an end to aloneness.

The pregnancy turned out to be a false alarm but we got married anyway, though we knew it would entail a separation of three or four months before Andy and I established a firm base where Fran could join us.

We were married just before Christmas of 1947. A few weeks later, Andy and I were summoned to Ottawa by the deputy commissioner of the Northwest Territories who was, for all intents and purposes, the reigning monarch of Canada's northern wilderness. Assuming we were to receive the official approval for our expedition, we hurried to the capital city and were escorted into the presence of Deputy Commissioner R.A. Gibson, a man who seemed to possess the combined persona of Captain Bligh and Colonel Blimp.

He did all the talking.

Having informed us that the Department of Mines and Resources (of which he was also the deputy minister) had decided to undertake its own study of *Rangifer arcticus* (the Barren Land Caribou) and of "the native tribes associated with this animal," he delivered the *coup de grâce*.

"You will of course understand that *your* proposal cannot now be endorsed, and the requisite Explorers and Scientists Licence to undertake fieldwork in the Northwest Territories will not be granted."



He paused to let this sink in.

“Nevertheless, my assistant tells me there may be some employment available for you. Good day, gentlemen.”

His assistant “gave us the form” in proper military style.

“There are openings for two student assistants. The salary is minimal, as befits your qualifications. However, you will have the opportunity to associate with and learn from experts in the field, which I am sure you will appreciate.... We must have your decision today.”

Andy and I spent several hours in a beer parlour glumly pondering other possibilities, but when we did return to Toronto it was as government servants. But the situation was not as bad as it seemed. Although the Department of Mines and Resources had pre-empted our original plans, we would at least be able to implement some of them – or so we hoped.

In mid-May, we travelled to Churchill, where Gunnar Ingebritson, the young owner-pilot of a beat-up Norseman bush plane, was waiting to fly us to the cabin at Nueltin Lake.

When we arrived at Windy Cabin, we found the place abandoned and the Schweders gone from the country. However, almost as soon as we moved in we were inundated by the Ihalmiut, who were in desperate straits after a starvation winter. We gave them all the food and ammunition we could spare and then began our work. Andy’s designated task was to study the northbound caribou migration, while mine was to observe wolf–caribou interactions.

Learning from the Ihalmiut that, in late summer, hordes of caribou congregated around Angikuni Lake in the central Barrens, we decided to join the animals there. When Gunnar returned, bringing us a canoe and the rest of our supplies, we arranged for him to ferry us to Angikuni in mid-July.

Gunnar brought mail. My share included two letters from my wife that I immediately tore open – and wished I hadn’t.

Although she had not objected to my going north and had sent me off cheerfully enough, she now saw things differently. Her letters suggested I had deliberately chosen to negate our marriage and had no intention of ever returning to it, or her. There was very little time for me to decide what to do. Bad weather was brewing and Gunnar had to return immediately to his base. I gave him a hurriedly scrawled letter for Fran in which I assured her we *would* be together in three or four months and watched him fly away.

Gunnar returned on July 10, his Norseman so laden with drums of avgas for the long flight to Angikuni that there was barely room aboard for Andy and me; for an Inuk named Ohoto who wanted to revisit his birthplace near Angikuni; and for Tegpa, a bouncy husky pup given me by the Ihalmiut.

During the next month and a half, we four lived and travelled amongst caribou and wolves in a part of the country that, in the Tyrrells’ time, had been home to at least a thousand inland Inuit. The deer were still present, though in much reduced numbers, but almost the only signs of human presence were mossed-in stone tent circles and seemingly numberless graves.

None of us was sorry (and Ohoto was ecstatic) the day a tiny flicker of metallic dust in the

high sky resolved itself into Gunnar's Norseman come to carry us back to Windy Cabin. Fran had again brought letters from my wife. This time I opened them with dread. They were distillations of misery and despair whose overall burden was that our marriage had been a dreadful mistake and was now effectively over.

As we flew back to Windy Cabin, Andy urged me to continue on to Churchill with Gunnar then make my way to Toronto. He assured me he would keep things going in my absence and have everything ready for Fran if I could persuade her to return with me. For his part Gunnar assured me he had friends at the Fort Churchill airbase who might get me on a military flight to Ontario.

That evening I was in Churchill and next morning on my way east to rejoin my wife. Her reception of me was equivocal. Although she embraced me passionately, she did not repudiate her earlier conclusion that marriage to me had been a mistake. I do not know what brought about her change of mind, but before the week was out we were on a train together bound for Winnipeg, and two days later the Muskeg Special delivered us to Churchill.

On September 9 Gunnar flew us to Windy Cabin.

Flights to Nueltin tended to be hairy. This one was especially so. We had barely taken off when a whiteout almost obscured the world from view, forcing Gunnar to fly within a few yards of the rock-strewn tundra, and causing Fran to lacerate her palms from clenching her fists in fear of certain death.

After three hours of this, we splashed down on Windy Bay. Fran never did tell me what her feelings were as she peered through the cracked Plexiglas windscreen into a rain- and snow-swept vista of black water and treeless tundra. If the environs of her new home were hardly prepossessing, the log shanty awaiting her must have been appalling. Andy was never much of a housekeeper and during my absence had been almost continuously hosting Ihalmiut men desperate for ammunition with which to start the caribou hunt, for without a successful hunt the coming winter would be bleak.

The cabin's dark interior must have looked and smelled to Fran more like a bear's den than a human habitation. During the days that followed, Andy and I were preoccupied keeping tabs on the caribou herds and their ever-attendant wolves as these flowed past Windy Bay on their long trek south to spend the winter inside the taiga forests. Fran was equally busy coping with the problems of setting up a household under conditions that might have daunted a lumberjack; in looking after a further succession of Ihalmiut visitors; and in tentatively exploring the alien world around her. In this, she was aided by Tegpa, who had claimed her as his own and would hardly leave her side.

The primitive shortwave radio issued to us had failed, leaving us with no connection to the outside world, so we had no way of finding out when Gunnar would be coming back for us nor could we tell him of a change in *our* plans. We had all originally intended to spend the winter studying the wolves and caribou at Brochet, a village farther south in Northern Manitoba, but Andy had since decided to return to university and now planned to fly out to Churchill with Gunnar after he had delivered Fran and me to Brochet.

## IN FROM THE COLD

We had been waiting almost a month for Gunnar's plane when, on the first day of October, stepped out of the cabin to find the nearby gravel ridges alive with dense flocks of ptarmigan making their way south ahead of winter. When I paddled off to haul the net upon which we were now largely dependent for food, I had to break through a scum of ice that had formed overnight. There could be no doubt about it – if we were not picked up within the next few days, we would be marooned for another six or seven weeks until, and if, a ski-equipped plane could land on the frozen bay.

We woke on October 9 to a falling thermometer, a plunging barometer, and a sky darkening with snow clouds. A storm was brewing, and even the usually irrepressible Tegpa was reluctant to go outside until, just before noon, he flung himself at the cabin door in a paroxysm of barking.

Seconds later the Norseman roared low over the crest of the Ghost Hills and slammed down on Windy Bay, its floats shattering the skim ice like a hardball smashing a plate-glass window. Gunnar had finally arrived. Although more than a month late, he offered no explanation or apology. When I pressed for one, he replied casually:

“Pranged a drifting oil barrel on take-off a while back. Buggered a float and this old bitch pretty near sank. Took a while to patch her up. But what the hell, let's get the show on the fuckin' road!”

Time was always of the essence with Gunnar. I heaved our gear (it didn't amount to much) on board, while Fran and Tegpa squeezed into the cramped little cabin even as Gunnar began opening the throttle and Andy shouted his goodbyes.

“Gonna be tight gettin' to Brochet before dark,” Gunnar yelled to Fran and me. “Might have to spend the night on some godforsaken moose pond the middle of nowhere. But what the hell, there's a bottle of rum in the back pocket of my seat. Have yourselves a snort ... just don't be givin' that damn dog none! Don't want no drunken dog aboard!”

Fran and I got a close-up of the world below us that day because there was a head wind to deal with, and in order to conserve gas Gunnar kept the Norseman, as he said later, “close enough to the goddamn trees if they'd been cherry trees we coulda' picked a goddamn basketful.”

We flew on, fighting the wind while a shaggy carpet of spruce and Jack pine dotted with lakes and fragmented by streams and rivers slid by close beneath. Then abruptly we were

over open water and Gunnar was shouting that this was Reindeer Lake.

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A hundred and fifty miles long and fifty wide, contained by several thousand miles of convoluted shoreline, Reindeer Lake was the centre of the ancestral wintering ground for what in 1948 may have been as many as a quarter of a million Barren Ground caribou. The area was also home to about three hundred humans – Woodland Crees, Chipewyans (Dene), Metis, and a scattering of white trappers. There were only two settlements – a small one at the appropriately named South End, and Brochet, only slightly larger and at the north end.

Brochet was not much to look at as Gunnar slammed the plane down on the bay in front of the settlement. Two dozen log shanties squatted haphazardly along half a mile of sandy foreshore and three sketchily fenced compounds enclosed a handful of frame structures. Two of the compounds were owned by competing trading firms; the third belonged to the Roman Catholic mission and boasted a grand new church, the glitter of whose sixty-foot steeply pitched roof encased in sheet metal could be seen miles away.

Having visited Brochet on two previous occasions, I was not dismayed. Frances may have been, but was so relieved to have escaped from the Barren Lands and at finding herself comfortably surrounded by trees again that not even the coolness of our reception daunted her.

We clambered ashore under the glacial gaze of foxy-faced and soutane-clad Fr. André Darveaux, second-in-command of the Roman Catholic mission; aging Jim Cummins, a former trapper who was now the game warden for a region encompassing about fifty thousand square miles; and willowy Jim Johnson, clerk of a trading post belonging to an entrepreneur named Isaac Schieff, who lived several hundred miles farther south. Neither of Brochet's most prominent residents – Bill Garbut, the long-time manager of the Hudson's Bay Company's sprawling, white-painted, red-roofed trading post, and white-haired Fr. Joseph Egenolf, head of the mission and the uncrowned king of the Reindeer Lake country – was in evidence.

Nominally, Brochet's population included about 250 aboriginals and people of mixed blood, but most of these spent the better part of the year widely dispersed at fishing stations and winter camps. The day we arrived, fewer than two dozen were at the settlement and none showed any desire to be friendly with Fran or me, though they did seem much taken by Tegpa, whose impressive appearance and assured behaviour was in marked contrast to that of their own dogs.

Brochet possessed two of the three elements that made up the ruling triumvirate of most northern Canadian communities in those days. The missionaries and traders were well established, but the usually ubiquitous detachment of Royal Canadian Mounted Police was absent. There were, however, two soldiers of the Royal Canadian Corps of Signals operating a weather station as part of an extensive surveillance system being constructed across the top of the continent to contain the godless communists of the Soviet Union. As a recent survivor of the Second World War bitterly averse to being sucked into another world holocaust, I would have kept my distance from the "weather station" had not my employer decreed otherwise.

A letter from the federal Department of Mines and Resources had been awaiting my arrival at Brochet. From it I learned that Andy and I (no mention made of my wife) were to winter with the soldiers in a small barracks attached to the station. However, when I approached the

corporal in charge about this he told me *he* was under strict orders to deny civilian access to his high-security installation. The most he was prepared to do was let me send a radiogram to my department, apprising my employer of the situation and asking for instructions.

These came four days later, brusquely ordering me to make my own arrangements. Fran was indignant – though I was not.

“Typical SNAFU,” I told her. “Situation Normal All Fucked Up. Fact is, we’re probably *lucky* to be left to our own devices.”

She was not easily reassured, or perhaps she glimpsed an opportunity.

“They don’t seem to care what happens to us. Mightn’t it be best if you resigned the job and we just went on home?”

“I’m not going to do that, Fran. The cement heads have screwed up as usual, but we’ll get by. I’ll have a gab with the old game warden. Seems like a decent kind. Might help us out.”

Jim Cummins wasn’t much help on that front, but I did find out why our reception had been so reserved.

“Brochet heard you was coming, couple of months ago. Schieff’s manager spread the word you’d been up to some shady business – you and Charlie Schweder, when you canoed through here last summer. Said the Mounties was looking into it. You really pissed Isaac off when you bought your supplies for the rest of your trip from the Bay instead of from him. I’d like to help you and your pretty missus, but I got to stay neutral here ... you understand?”

I thought to see what could be done for us by the Hudson’s Bay Company but the manager was away on a journey to South End.

Winter was almost upon us, and we were without shelter and had no stocks of food or fuel. Moreover we felt more and more like interlopers in a tightly knit and unwelcoming community. Our prospects did not seem bright as we sought temporary shelter in a shack that was already occupied by a horde of red-backed mice. They, at least, welcomed us, acting as if we and our sleeping bags (especially our sleeping bags) were a gift from the gods.

We were rescued by Father Egenolf, big-nosed, white-haired, lean as a whippet, with a bony handshake that could have crushed a baseball. He came striding through our doorway one morning, his rust-coloured soutane hanging about his ankles, to tell us he had just returned from a distant fish camp where he had been netting a winter’s supply of whitefish and lake trout for the three human and fifteen canine residents of his mission.

The Egg (as he was familiarly called, though never to his face) and I had met briefly during the summer of 1947. Now he gave me a tepid smile but lit up like a lantern as he grasped Fran’s hand and kissed it with Gallic fervour.

“*Hélas!* Here is a *demoiselle* in distress, non? I shall rescue her!”

Soutane swirling, he led us to a log cabin belonging to a Cree family currently wintering at South End.

Eighteen feet square and one storey high, the cabin had one room and a tiny, windowless attic. The logs had been plastered with a yellowish mixture of mud and dry grass but most of this had fallen off, exposing numerous cracks and gaps. The tarpaper on the steeply pitched roof was in tatters and the panes in the three small windows cracked and grimy. The only

furniture was a battered cast-iron cookstove at the far end of a room floored with rough-hewn planks and ankle-deep in debris.

Father Egenolf arranged for us to rent this, the only unoccupied house in Brochet, for five dollars a month. The price was certainly right.

Having found a home for us, the Egg also provided a rusty, metal-framed bed, a lumpy mattress, and a splintered table. Then he gave us a month's supply of firewood. Despite being surrounded by the world's largest forest, firewood was precious stuff because most suitable trees within ten miles of Brochet had long since been consumed.

We still had to acquire a supply of basic food stuffs (flour, sugar, baking powder, oatmeal, bacon, and lard), together with everything else needed to keep us alive until spring. Neither of the trading posts had much to offer, most of their staples having already been purchased and carried off to camps and cabins on winter traplines. And Schieff's manager refused to let us have even a small portion of what remained in his store.

We had better luck at the Bay. Its manager – big, bluff British expatriate Bill Garbut – was initially wary of me but his elfin wife, Renée, immediately took to Fran. She loaned Fran priceless items of household equipment and winter clothing, while Bill gave me access to what remained of his post's stock and, at Renée's prodding, even provided scarce food supplies from their own private storeroom. Our acquisitions included fifty one-pound blocks of butter that had gone rancid and been "condemned" to be used as dog feed. I bought the lot, paying only a token sum, having discovered the rancidity was mainly restricted to the surface of the blocks, leaving the inner portion reasonably edible.

We spent the next few weeks furiously engaged in homemaking. Almost everything we needed was in short supply or non-existent, so we made do. Tools were few and primitive, yet we eventually put together a home that was not only comfortable but even stylish – by Brochet standards.

The smoke-grimed ceiling and dingy walls became resplendent with canary-yellow enamel. I patched together cupboards, shelves, two chairs, and a kitchen counter from scraps of old packing cases, and Fran made curtains from the cheap but colourful cotton prints the Bay sold as women's dress goods. I sealed off the attic with layers of wrapping paper, converting it into a deep-freeze for caribou, fish, ptarmigan, rabbits, even a hind quarter of a moose kindly sent our way by the game warden. I rolled several new layers of tarpaper over the roof and nailed saplings on top as protection from blizzards and winter gales. I caulked the log walls inside and out with strips of waste sacking and finally piled sand high against the foundation logs to keep out the worst winter drafts and all but the most persistent voles and mice.

Water and sanitation presented special problems. In summer every household supplied itself with water scooped by the pailful from the lake, and in winter from holes chopped through the lake ice, which froze to a thickness of several feet.

Toilets were non-existent, except in the traders' homes, some of which boasted chemical lavatories. The rest of us made do with vestigial outhouses sited anywhere from a dozen feet to a dozen yards from the cabins they served. Ours was a doorless, roofless construct with three skeletal walls and a horizontal pole bridging a shallow hole. It wasn't even really our

Rather, it was a communal facility used by anybody and everybody living nearby. It was also a favourite hangout for some of Brochet's many stray and hungry dogs.

The prospect of my wife having to wait in line during a howling blizzard with the temperature at forty degrees below zero weighed heavily upon me. So I installed an empty ten-gallon lard pail in our attic that I made accessible by means of a trap door in the ceiling and a spruce-pole ladder. With the temperature well below zero, the attic was no place to linger: the cold up there quickly froze everything solid. Once a week I wrestled the icy pail down from its eyrie, rolled it outside and away from the house, then thawed it for an hour or more over an open fire so I could empty it.

The thawing of the bucket always drew an audience. A circle of ravenous dogs would form around me, drawing closer and closer until I drove them back with threatening gestures and shouts. A few human youngsters might also be present, watchful but, like the dogs, silent. They bestowed a descriptive name upon me – one still remembered when, twenty-six years later, I revisited Brochet in the company of Manitoba's then-premier, Edward Schreyer.

On that occasion a grinning Cree man amongst those gathered at the float dock to greet the dignitaries was heard to say, "So ... Dog-soup Maker come back, eh? Wonder what he going to cook this time?"

Winter was in full swing before the first ski-equipped plane risked touching down on the ice at Brochet. It brought mail – including a stiff reprimand from my employer for having wasted my time and taxpayers' money the previous summer trying to ameliorate the desperate conditions of the Inuit I had encountered in southern Keewatin Territory. The letter concluded with these words:

"You are herewith instructed to refrain from meddling in matters outside your jurisdiction and to leave all such matters to competent authority."

To say I was upset by this would be to put it far too mildly. I railed against the ignorance and stupidity of the Ottawa mandarins, until Frances pulled me up.

"They probably *will* fire you if you carry on like this, though I don't suppose *that* will stop you.... Maybe you ought to quit this job now, then we could go back home where you could tell the papers what you've found out."

I had only recently been told by Father Egenolf's assistant of a mass grave for about forty Chipewyan men, women, and children who had perished in or near the settlement the previous spring of some unidentified disease. One that never *was* identified because the government doctor for the district was not able to find time to visit Brochet until a month after the lethal epidemic had run its course.

"We lose half our Idthen Eldeli [People of the Caribou] here and out at the camps," the young priest told me, smiling sadly. "Eh *bien*. They live like dogs, *les pauvres*. *Peut-être* it's better if the Lord takes them to His House for then they will be saved."

With these words sticking in my craw, I thought long and hard about what Fran had suggested. *Should* I tell my bosses in Ottawa to go to hell? And try writing something for the press about the abominable treatment of the native peoples I was seeing?

I had something else to think about as well. Having spent nearly five years as a sanctioned

killer of my own kind, I was becoming increasingly averse to killing *any* living thing except maintain the lives of me and mine. I was especially reluctant to slaughter caribou and wolves as was required of me “in the interest of amassing scientific knowledge.” But I was finding it hard to abandon the ambition I had nurtured since childhood of becoming a professional zoologist.

It was Hobson’s choice, and the days slipped by without me making a decision.

Clock time had very little significance to those wintering in a community like Brochet. Our day began at dawn when, roused by Tegpa’s cold nose thrust into my face, I would scramble out of bed, rush to the cookstove, light the kindling I had carefully arranged the night before, then scoot back to the comfort of the double sleeping bag I shared with Fran to wait until the frigid cabin had warmed up at least to the freezing point.

When we could no longer see the frosty vapour of our breath, we would get up and, having broken the ice in the bucket, have a brief wash. Thereafter Fran would cook breakfast, usually cornmeal or oatmeal porridge with a slice or two of cold deer meat on the side, and our own homemade bread washed down by tea thickened and sweetened with evaporated milk.

As breakfast cooked, I would trot down to the lake armed with a twenty-pound iron bar flattened at one end in the form of a chisel, with which I would bash through the six or seven inches of new ice that had sealed our “well” during the night. Then, while Tegpa did his rounds, asserting and advertising his mastery over the local canines, I would shuttle five-gallon buckets of water back to the cabin.

Breakfast over, Fran would tackle her household chores, cooking, cleaning, mending our clothing, and doing the washing, while keeping the stove parsimoniously stoked with precious firewood, which was always in short supply. In the afternoons, weather permitting, she might snowshoe the half mile to the Bay for something she needed, or just to visit Renée. Or she might visit one of our closer neighbours, there to drink endless mugs of tea with the women and children while wrestling with the difficulty of trying to converse in a mixture of English, Cree, and Dene.

If the weather was reasonable (not more than thirty below and no blizzard blowing), I would strap on snowshoes and, accompanied by Tegpa, set off to check my trapline, which, to the bewilderment of the locals, consisted of fifty ordinary household *mouse* traps set under logs, tree stumps, or at inscrutable little holes in the snow. I did this because I was under instructions from my employer to “collect representative small mammals for taxonomic purposes and population analysis.”

Tegpa and I regularly travelled ten or fifteen miles through frost-brittle Jack pine forests counting caribou and wolves (as much by their tracks as by their physical presence), and keeping a sharp lookout for ptarmigan or chicken (sharp-tailed grouse), which could be potted with a .22, *not* as specimens but to help fill our stomachs. Also I always carried a snow axe in case we might come upon a stand of birch or tamarack previous generations had somehow overlooked.

I loved these excursions, as did Tegpa, and though we may not have learned a great deal



about the specified “study species,” we made the acquaintance of whisky-jacks (Canada jays), boreal chickadees, occasional ladder-backed woodpeckers, a porcupine, a great grey owl, and on one truly momentous occasion, a wolverine, who looked us over challengingly from a few yards away until I unslung my .22, whereupon he pissed contemptuously in our direction before slogging off, belly deep in snow, with never a backward glance.

On occasion, I might join one of the local trappers in his carriole (a toboggan with built-up canvas sides, hauled by dogs) for a trip to a fish cache or trapping cabin as much as fifty miles away in the labyrinthine world of Reindeer Lake’s boreal forest. On such excursions, I saw herds of caribou numbering as many as two or three hundred spending the daylight hours far out on the lake ice, where they could see would-be hunters, human or lupine, long before these could approach close enough to be a threat.

I had been instructed to “collect” up to a hundred caribou of all ages, together with as many wolves as I could shoot, trap, or poison, and had been provided with rifles, steel-jaw traps, and cyanide bait for this purpose. I had been further instructed to dissect and minutely examine every specimen procured. External and internal parasites were to be identified, counted, and preserved in alcohol. The condition and state of development of sexual organs was to be ascertained, and a full range of fetuses preserved for future study. Stomach and bowel contents were to be analyzed – and so it went, ad nauseam.

I failed to comply.

Perhaps I refrained because of the growing conviction that studying animals alive in their own undisturbed habitat might reveal more truths about them than could be uncovered by gun and scalpel. I killed only one caribou during my time at Brochet, and it died not for Science but to provide food for the three of us. Moreover, I killed *no* wolves, nor did I make any attempt to do so.

During the long winter evenings Fran and I were often visited by neighbours, both white and native, or went visiting them. Few owned radios so conversation was the entertainment. They were exceptional storytellers, and even most of the youngsters had good tales to tell. After these visits, I would sometimes stay up past midnight, scribbling notes about travellers, hunters, missionaries, trappers, lovers, and losers; about Cree, Idthen Eldeli, Metis and whites, and the lives they led.

A bent toward writing was increasingly preoccupying me, and Fran’s suggestion that I might have it in me to become a full-time writer seemed almost credible. I began spending a lot more time at my portable typewriter than in filling notebooks with scientific data as a dedicated biologist would have done. Of particular moment, I started expanding an account I had sketched earlier about the terrible events the year before that had decimated the Barren Land Inuit – especially the Ihalmiut of the Kazan River country.

By mid-November I had what I thought *might* be a publishable account of this disaster story with Fran’s encouragement and acting on the assumption that I might as well start at the top. I titled it *Eskimo Spring*, addressed it to the editor of the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in Boston, USA, and sent it off with the next mail plane.

Then, feeling cocky at having perhaps loosened the fetters binding me to Ottawa, I decided to take a week off and travel by dog team to South End, a hundred and fifty miles away to

see how the caribou, wolves, and people to the south were making out.

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I borrowed a dog team and carriole from Shorty Laird, a white trapper temporarily laid up with a bad leg, and made ready to depart one crystalline morning with the mercury registering thirty below and just a breath of wind.

Shorty's eight dogs had been tied up for three weeks and were wild to run. It took me and two teenaged helpers half an hour to manhandle them into the harness, attaching them to the fifteen-foot-long carriole, which held my grub box, fifty pounds of frozen fish for dog feed, my sleeping bag and rifle, and a small packsack of odds and ends. I had tied the carriole to a stump while we harnessed the dogs, but somebody prematurely slipped the securing knot, and, before I could jump aboard, the dogs were off like cannonballs. A fifty-foot brake rope was always towed behind the carriole in case of such emergencies, and I just managed to grab the free end as it whipped by and wrap it around one wrist, after which I was dragged through the settlement on my back at about thirty miles an hour.

Somehow I managed to swing myself around so I could use my feet as a brake. This got me nowhere and, once the dogs had dragged me onto the slick lake ice, there remained no further possibility of stopping or even slowing them. Nevertheless, I hung on for perhaps a quarter of a mile, while my arms felt as if they were being wrenched from their sockets; then I let go.

I got shakily to my feet as carriole and dogs grew small in the distance. Looking back, I could see a small troop of neighbours ranged along the shore, motionless as gargoyles but undoubtedly enjoying to the full the spectacular discomfiture of the tenderfoot.

As I limped grimly back to make arrangements for a search team to pursue the runaways, I knew I had secured a permanent place in Brochet's panoply of stories.

The cold intensified as December settled in, and the mud chinking of our cabin could not keep it out. Although the indoor temperature at waist level remained tolerable, water spilled on the floor froze almost immediately.

Slipping on a patch of this instant ice brought me inspiration. I began saving our wash water, which I then heated in galvanized pails on the back of the stove. When I had a couple of full pails ready, I would carry them outside, add as much snow as possible, then slather this slush on the outer walls of the house, where it froze instantly. When our cabin was ice sheathed up to the level of the ceiling, it became much more liveable. Soon almost every cabin in Brochet acquired similar igloo-like armour and my stock went up a little.

In mid-December a small bush plane belonging to one of Isaac Schieff's many interlocking little companies slithered to a halt on the ice of Brochet Bay to unload freight for his trading post, together with some mail.

There were letters for both Fran and me – not all bearing good news. A stiffly worded epistle from the University of Toronto informed me that my college had decided not to let me complete my current year extramurally – an arrangement that had been agreed upon before I went north in the spring of 1947. I was on notice that if I wanted a degree I would have to resume classes in Toronto by mid-January of the coming year.

Fran was outraged by what we both felt was a low blow, but I had mixed feelings. I had

always known that a career in science would require me to obtain a bachelor's degree, then a master's, and finally a doctorate, but this academic climb to success had never had an attraction for me. Now I was tempted to use this setback as an excuse for abandoning academe altogether and becoming an unfettered "naturalist" able – perhaps – to make a living studying the wild ones alive and *in* the wild. I might have done it then and there had not Frances been dubious.

Schieff's plane's principal cargo was liquor, and most of the customers celebrated fiercely over the next several days and nights, turning Brochet into Bedlam. Guns blasted salutes at all hours – and not all were aimed at nothing. To Father Egenolf's helpless fury, several bullet holes appeared in the steeple of his new church.

Fights erupted between employees and adherents of the Bay and of Schieff's company. Combatants included white and Metis trappers, together with drifters from a commercial fishing venture Schieff had started. The hullabaloo was enough to put the caribou and wolf populations to flight and even to persuade many of the resident ravens to seek safety in the woods.

One night, when the temperature had sunk to forty-five below zero, two Metis men failed to find their way home after a bash at Schieff's and froze to death. I thought it a wonder more did not meet a similar fate. Indeed, Fran and I thawed out and resuscitated one unfortunate who, wearing little more than a flannel shirt and torn trousers, passed out in a snowdrift near our cabin. Had Tegpa not drawn our attention to him, he might never have awakened.

Our concern about what was going on was not shared by others. When I spoke about it to Jim Cummins, the game warden, who was also the magistrate, he offered this nonchalant advice.

"Don't let it bother you. If people gets enough liquor into them they'll stay warm even when hell freezes over. Anyhow, this lot of booze'll run out soon enough, then they'll quiet down."

Binge drinking and wild parties were not the worst of it. Fran was unnerved and I was infuriated by the hostility unleashed by some "under-the-influence" white residents. One evening Schieff's manager (whom I will call Belson) barged into our home to announce belligerently that he had come for Tegpa, whom he fancied as a new leader of his dog team and had already several times tried to buy. I had always refused, so now he tried a different tack.

"Your goddamn husky's been into my fish shed stuffing his gut. Either you pay me twenty-five bucks for the fish he stole *and* turn him over to me for my team ... or I'll shoot the fucker dead first chance I get."

He then stamped out of the cabin, sweeping Fran's china teapot (a precious loan from Renée Garbut) off the kitchen counter, shattering it into tiny fragments. When I told the usually affable Bill Garbut about this incident, his benevolent expression hardened into a scowl.

"That son of a bitch would shoot his own mother for the fun of it. The way he screws the natives – and it's more ways than one – makes me puke.... Let me tell you a little story about him."

“There used to be a Chip kid here with a wizened-up arm from polio he got when he was a baby. He had epilepsy too – took fits. He wasn’t too smart but he always tried to do his best. His family was part of the Hatchet Lake band but Nazee – that was his name – couldn’t make it out on the land with the rest of them so the mission was supposed to be looking after him.

“He got by, running errands and doing odd jobs nobody else would do. A lot of them for Belson, who paid the kid with spoiled stuff from his store nobody would buy.

“Winter evenings, Belson and his cronies – white trappers and the like – would amuse themselves giving Nazee lemon extract and when he was tipsy – the stuff’s three-quarter alcohol – make him strip to the buff and dance round a red-hot pot-belly stove. Crippled like he was, he would sometimes fall against the stove.

“Then they’d give him some more extract, and get out the marking hammer.

“You know what that is, don’t you? Hammer with sharp little nails set into its head, used to bash a fox skin or any fur to make a pattern into it. Kind of a trademark that shows the skin belongs to your outfit.

“Those bastards would pay Nazee with shots of extract, or sometimes a nickel or even a dime, to let them bash *him* with Schieff’s hammer. Mostly they’d do it on his backside, but sometimes on his crippled arm or his legs, under his clothes where it wouldn’t show.

“When I got wind of that, I sent for the boy and when Renée and I saw the brand hammered into that wizened arm I sent a message down to Belson offering to shoot *him* if he done it again. When I told Egenolf about it, he just shrugged and said it was in God’s hands. The sanctimonious old bugger! I sure and hell knew whose hands that kid was in, and it wasn’t God’s!

“Renée wanted us to keep the kid around but I couldn’t do that because Company policies don’t run to charity. Anyhow, the kid went someplace else. Don’t know where. But the bastard Belson’s still around! I keep hoping somebody’ll fill him full of lead.”

During this drunken period, the native people kept a low profile and some withdrew to the bush camps. They even stayed clear of Fran and me. I wondered why, but concluded they probably thought we whites were all alike. Perhaps we gave them occasion to think so. After the Garbuts threw a party to celebrate the first anniversary of our marriage, I wrote in my journal:

*The main refreshment was punch made of about a quart of grain alcohol from my scientific supplies, a couple of bottles of Vat 69 out of Bill’s private stock, a lot of Renée’s homemade beer, some cans of grapefruit segments, a bottle of maple syrup, some mouldy lemons, and a good big dollop of cayenne pepper. After a few mugs of this Bill was reborn as an Apache and danced wildly about to music he made himself – the mating call of a bull moose.*

*Some Crees just in from South End with fur to trade found the post door locked and our lot whooping it up inside. They stood outside the frosted windows peering in at the antics of the “master race.” Wonder what they thought of it all. Don’t think I’ll ask.*

Jim Cummins had been right about one thing: when the planeload of liquor was gone Brochet quieted down. Hardly a soul was to be seen outdoors during the brief daylight hours and at night even the occupied cabins seemed to belong to an abandoned settlement. Almost

the only sign of life was underfed dogs drifting about like disembodied spirits.

The next plane to arrive was a Norseman chartered by the federal Department of Indian Affairs. It brought in a Dr. Robert Yule on the last of four visits scheduled for 1948 to provide for the medical requirements of the natives who lived at or traded to Brochet. Amiable middle-aged Dr. Yule might have chosen a better time to perform his duties. On the day he arrived, there were fewer than twenty natives in the settlement – the rest being far away in winter camps or on their traplines. Had the good doctor chosen to delay his visit until the Christmas season, the entire population of the region would have been gathered here. He and his plane stayed with us exactly twenty-five minutes – Bill Garbut timed it – while the doctor saw (but did not treat) a Dene youth with a broken leg that had already begun to swell crookedly, and several elderly people to whom he handed out large white pills he carried loose in his pocket. They looked like afterdinner mints but Bill claimed they were laxatives. Then he gave us all a smiling farewell and flew back to his home in The Pas.

His departure left me seething, for he had been responsible for the health of the natives of the region during the fearful epidemic in the spring of 1947 when at least two hundred men, women, and children – an accurate count was never made – perished of a disease that was never diagnosed because no doctor visited any of the afflicted camps. But *I* had visited several of them while making the canoe journey between Reindeer and Nueltin Lakes for months after the dying and had seen many of the hurriedly made graves which now housed the inhabitants of those otherwise-deserted sites.

The memory of those graves and the mass grave Father Darveaux had told me about impelled me to write a report about the abominable way the natives of this region were being treated. I detailed the government's failure to provide medical aid or help of *any* sort during the 1947 epidemic and concluded my tirade with a bald account of the treatment the crippled boy, Nazee, had received.

Before sending my outburst to my superiors in Ottawa, I showed it to Bill Garbut. He said little, other than to ask my permission to make a copy of the Nazee story. I was not surprised when, a few days later, he told me he had arranged to have the copy mailed anonymously from Winnipeg to Isaac Schieff.

“That money-grubbing old bugger hired Belson after the Bay fired him for frigging with the mail. Schieff knew he was no damn good. Maybe this'll give him some second thoughts. He's scared shitless of the press.”

Within a week, the moccasin telegraph was spreading the news that Belson was being replaced by Schieff's son as manager at Brochet.

By mid-December, with Christmas fast approaching, Brochet was filling up.

*One by one the empty cabins are sprouting smoke from their tin chimneys as the human and dog population swells. It's a rather mysterious phenomenon because they all seem to arrive in the middle of the night. You wake up in the morning and there they are! Tents are going up too, which means the Barren Land Chips have begun to arrive all the way from Nueltin Lake. The traders are busier than beavers. Lots of activity and lots of chicanery as furs are swapped for gewgaws, gadgets, and sometimes even useful stuff like food and ammunition.*

## A week later I wrote:

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*The settlement is overflowing with a couple of hundred adults and at least sixty children. The trading posts are jam-packed from morning until night. Brochet Bay looks like a dog rodeo, with teams racing over it every direction and sled tracks as thick as threads in a white handkerchief. The mission is doing a roaring business too, collecting furs for tithes, hearing confessions, selling pardons, and, I wouldn't doubt, indulgences.*

*Although it's running mostly on tea now instead of booze, which has pretty well run out, the social life never seems to stop. Candles and oil lanterns burn all night in every cabin and the natives, most of whom haven't seen each other for a couple of months, just never seem to get enough visiting. Dog teams are as thick as taxis in New York and cries of "Hew" and "Haw" (left and right) sound like a hassle of mad ravens. The teams compete for right of way and there are glorious free-for-all dogfights with lots of cursing in Cree, Chip, English, and canine. When we go walkabout we carry good thick sticks to keep the dog mob at bay. At night there is a deafening cacophony from two or three hundred hungry dogs each wanting another chunk of whitefish or caribou. Little mountains of crushed bones, fish scales, deer hair, and dog shit grow like mushrooms around every dog tethering post. Things were actually quieter around here when the booze was on the go.*

*Christmas is the main celebration of the year because winter dog travel makes it possible for almost everyone – men, women, youngsters, and old folks – to come to Brochet even from the most distant camps. But though most of the natives are nominally Christians – Catholics – neither religion nor trade is the principal draw. The big attraction is human companionship: the need and opportunity to renew the sense of belonging to a family, clan, or tribe.*

*Christmas becomes the time, and Brochet the place for far-flung and wandering people to see and touch one another; a time for young guys and gals to make out, with marriage often the outcome; a time and place for old folk to circulate and pass on the knowledge they've acquired; a time for storytelling, dances, "socials." A time and place for the renewal and repair of the human fabric.*

*There is something else as well.*

*This annual get-together is almost certainly fuelled by an ancient, maybe instinctive, need to renew the allegiance that not only binds human beings to one another, but cements all living things into the single, super-entity that constitutes life on earth.*

*These people are doing what their pagan ancestors (and ours too) used to do every year at the time of the winter solstice: they are refurbishing and strengthening their essential connections to the mother-with-a-thousand-names who is the mother of us all.*

*For nearly two thousand years Christianity has been trying to make over this celebration, and refashion it into a weapon we can use in our ongoing war to subjugate all the world and (madmen's dream!) even the universe, to serve our boundless ambitions and insatiable desires.*

*This isn't the kind of dream my native neighbours seem to have. I believe they'd be content with what they had, with their old ways and old beliefs – if only we'd let them.*

Nineteen forty-nine was almost upon us, but Frances and I had not yet decided what course to steer.

One morning while I was out on the bay chipping at nearly a foot of new ice that had formed in our well overnight, I saw the corporal from the weather station knocking on the door of our cabin. He had brought us a radiogram. By the time I got back with the water, he was gone but Fran wordlessly handed me the flimsy. Unlike most government communications, this one was concise and to the point.

R A GIBSON

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NORTHWEST TERRITORIES OF CANADA AND DEPUTY MINISTER DEPARTMENT OF MINES AND RESOURCES CANADA

“Looks like they got my report,” I said a little ruefully.

Fran was half smiling, half crying. “Well, what now?”

“As if you didn’t know,” I said and kissed her. “Goodbye, Brushy ... Hello Toronto. Hope Tegpa can handle it!”

Our removal was neither quickly nor easily arranged. Pulling up the rootlets we had established and packing our few belongings did not take long, but finding a plane to take us out was more demanding. The Schieff Norseman seemed the obvious answer, but the post office new manager equivocated until it was obvious we were never going to be flown out by his company’s plane. Eventually I arranged for a charter from Flin Flon, but a week of fierce storms intervened before a plane could pick us up.

*January 5th. Lovely day, clear, bright, and, thank God, no wind. We’re bunking in with the Garbuts while we wait, but this morning we walked back to the cabin to say goodbye. Bit of a heart-breaker, those tacky chintz curtains, the egg-yellow walls with the bare spots where we had pinned up pictures cut from old magazines, all the stuff we made and did to help the old place turn itself into a home. Now all of a sudden it’s empty as a biscuit tin. I hope the Moiestie family comes back and lives in it again. It won’t last long without people.\**

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*\*When I revisited Brochet in 1974, the house was still standing. It was the last log building still in use, all the others having been replaced with prefabricated plywood boxes. A young Cree couple was camping in it until they, too, could acquire a modern box.*

## FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

An old Fairchild bush plane with cracked skis and fabric-patched wings finally carried us south from Brochet. Fran rode up front with a sleepy young pilot while Tegpa and I crunched into a narrow space atop our belongings in the freezing kennel of a cabin. The old plane shook like a jelly and its unmuffled engine roared and brayed as if in agony. But all went well, and a few hours later we landed at Flin Flon, where we boarded a train for Winnipeg. From Winnipeg the trans-Canada express took us to Toronto's Union Station to be welcomed by Reuben Thornhill, Frances's father. He drove us to the Thornhill home, where we were to stay until we got settled.

Rube was a hardware salesman who had weathered the Depression while still managing to buy the cramped, semi-detached house in which he and his wife, Florence, had raised their daughter. Frances, Tegpa, and I were given the third floor – two tiny attic rooms in one of which was a sink and a hot plate. We were delighted to share the family bathroom on the second floor, which was equipped with a toilet that did not need to be emptied outside every week. *And* there was a bathtub in which we could luxuriate as long as we pleased.

Fran and I were comfortable, but Tegpa, who had lived most of his young life in a world without constraints, probably found it the equivalent of a maximum-security prison. After three days of train travel chained to the wall of a baggage car, he had arrived in Toronto to find himself confined to a small box within a box and not even permitted to range around the bleak little backyard except while tethered to a clothesline. This was necessary to keep him from being run over, for he had no experience with motor vehicles.

Life grew even harder for him. His thick, heavy coat was too warm in these urban southern conditions and in consequence he developed a raging rash that spread across his body like fire. When I took him to the Secord Clinic, reputedly the best animal hospital in Toronto, I was given a tube of ointment, and the veterinarian admonished me for having exposed my dog to unhygienic conditions during the rail journey south.

Tegpa was in such discomfort, bordering I think on agony, that he could not sleep in the heat of the house, so we made a bed for him in the unheated porch, where I spread my sleeping bag on an old mattress to keep him company.

It was not enough.

One morning near the end of January, I woke from fitful sleep, reached over to touch his muzzle and so reassure both him and me – and got no response.

Tegpa was gone.

And so one of the few living threads in the fragile tie with which I had been trying



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