

Why do we go north, or why do we want to go north, or why are we interested in the north?

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Introductory remarks to the Wilderness and Canoeing Symposium of 1993

(This is a lightly edited version of my spoken words in the introduction to the eight annual wilderness canoeing symposium in 1993 held at Monarch Park Collegiate in Toronto before some 750 attendees.)

In organizing these mid-winter events and in trying to put together the program every year, I am very conscious of the many diverse topics and the variety of perspectives that are possible. My own bias is, of course, reflected in my final choices for the program. Thus a word about this bias may be in order. To illustrate: the act of canoeing has never been an end in itself for me, but rather a means, a means by which to experience a landscape rich in natural beauty and a means to a richer appreciation of its history. The ensemble of nineteen speakers in the program attempts to replicate this, to create some sense of the rich tapestry that is our northern heritage as well as to share the personal narratives and perspectives of those who have experienced them firsthand.

I believe there are three main threads to this tapestry. The landscape – which includes its fauna and flora – is one. The visceral experiences of the visitor, cum tourist, like me from the south, are another. And the native peoples of the North, for whom this landscape has been home for a very long time, and the associated human history, from prehistoric times to the modern, are the third thread.

Each of the nineteen presentations attempts to share and focus on one or more of these threads.

When I was a youngster my family lived in northern Ontario for a few years but I have not lived there for over fifty years. And I am not much of an expert on northern fauna or northern flora or northern geography or anything else for that matter. My own experiences fall in the second category. I am really a visitor to the North, or more colloquially, a 'tourist'.

I use the word 'tourist' deliberately, so as not to assume some mantle or air of ownership or special identity that is not my due. I am a pilgrim, a visitor, a tourist. But there is a deeper and insightful view of being a 'tourist' that we should consider. Edward McCourt best expresses it in his book *The Yukon and Northwest Territories*:

'It is common charge that tourists do what they do, suffer what they suffer, because they are bored with things back home or are disturbed by a vague feeling that 'culture' is something one ought to pick up now that one has the time and money. Of some tourists this charge is no doubt true, but I do not for a moment believe that it holds for the majority.

The typical tourist today has in him a little of the spirit of Tennyson's Ulysses who to the end of life followed knowledge like a sinking star, whatever his natural gains, whatever his reputation in his own little bailiwick, he is a vaguely dissatisfied seeker after truth, searching in a fumbling disorganized way for a revelation that will illuminate the human condition and justify life's journeying. Yesterday he might have been content to live out his last years waiting more or less tranquilly for death, sustained by the assurance of a life to come in which he would know all the answers. But not today. For contemporary man the justification of life lies in the meaning it holds within its own bounds, in what the individual makes of it before sinking into that vast indifference of things. Today's tourist, I am convinced, is more often than not a pilgrim searching blindly for an experience that will justify the whole sad history of humanity, or for that moment of revelation which will help him make sense of all that he and his fellows have done or failed to do.'

My own being connects with these ennobling words. Although at other times I question whether this isn't simply a form of 'rationalizing' my own self-indulgent nature. Who is to say? I trust you agree that it can be difficult to 'know' the truth about oneself.

Let me now return to the central question of: *'Why do we go north, or why do we want to go north, or why are we interested in the north?'* I don't pretend to believe that there is one simple answer that would be true for all 750 people in the auditorium. I can only speak for myself. For me travelling by canoe or sled in the north seems to satisfy some longing I have within, a longing that McCourt touches on:

- I long to experience the solitude of the North. In that solitude I find communion with my environment, which I rarely if ever sense living in downtown Toronto.
- I long to see natural vistas free of human scars like highways or transmission lines or smoke stacks, to see and marvel at this wondrous natural beauty.
- I long to live simply with the elements - to feel the wind or rain or snow or sleet on my face - to live on this earth simply with the elements, as all our forbearers did.
- I long to experience the physical hard work and challenge of travelling in and over this landscape, in a land where natural forces are master, where there are no guarantees, and accountability is for real.
- It all gives me comfort and a sense of place.

This annual symposium is a mid-winter extension, a substitute or surrogate, of that search for knowledge and sense of place. And it is meant to educate and to remind us how sacred, yet how fragile and endangered are the remaining natural wilderness areas and wilderness experiences in our northern Canadian habitat.

Wilderness Canoeing Symposium
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