

Book Review

The Old Way North, by David F. Pelly, Published by Borealis Books, an imprint of the Minnesota Historical Society Press. 2008. 187 pages plus bibliography. — **Reviewed by Gerry Curtis**

How much do we residents of the continental United States really know about our northern neighbor, Canada? Do we know anything at all about Canada's apparently newest province, Nunavut? Have we even heard of it, much less know where it is or what its geography is?

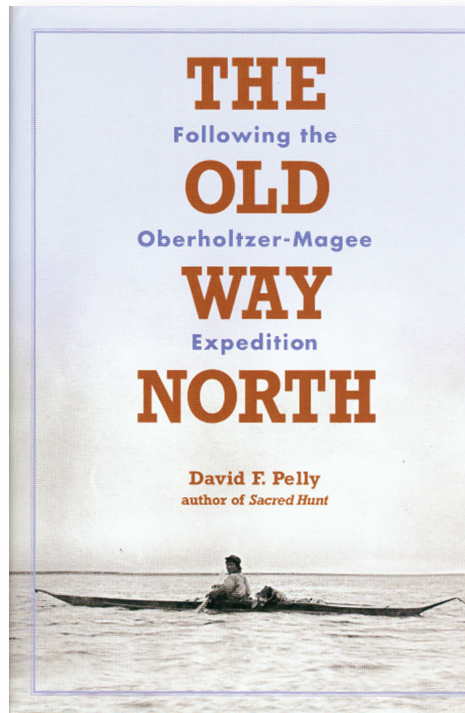
As I quickly learned from *The Old Way North*, my knowledge of the Nunavut region was mostly an impression left over from elementary school geography. Author Pelly has used the very readable method of utilizing first-person journal entries to capture the adventurous journey of the explorers in whose footsteps *The Old Way North* follows.

Nunavut is in the eastern part of the Northwest Territories most of my generation learned about from the old Sgt. Preston of the Northwest Mounted Police radio show (the Sgt. Preston stories were actually set in the Yukon Territory, but if the country had to be traversed by dog sled, it was all the same place in my mind).

The Northwest Territories formerly contained all of Canada north of the more familiarly named provinces—from British Columbia through Quebec and Newfoundland, north of Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait, and east of Yukon. Their population is made up of mostly native peoples—Eskimo, Inuit, Dene, and others.

The reliance by the travellers on the extensive herds of caribou for food, clothing, and shelter reminds us of the reliance by native Americans in the Western States on the American bison (buffalo) for those same needs. Pelly describes the use of the caribou by different groups of people, presenting a "then and now" perspective.

The account in *The Old Way North* is based on the travels, initially in 1912, of Ernest Oberholtzer, a young white man from Minnesota, who convinced



a native (called by traders Billy Magee, for convenience) to travel by canoe and portages through strings of lakes from Lake Winnipeg north to, and through part of, the "Barrenlands" north of Manitoba.

Oberholtzer had read reports of the 1890's travels of a geologist, J. B. Tyrrell, which excited him enough to set off on this journey. However, Oberholtzer never got around to publishing his accounts, so Pelly's use makes those nearly 100-year old journal entries very fresh to read.

The adventure begins with Oberholtzer leaving his home in Davenport, Iowa, traveling through International Falls, Minnesota, and across the border to Fort Frances, Ontario, where he meets with Magee. They commence their journey by train, picking up supplies as they go, until they arrive in The Pas (Le Pas), Manitoba, then the end of railroad trackage. They planned to hire an experienced guide to go North "the

old way," but that didn't work out, so the two, who had no particular experience in long distance travel by canoe, carried their craft from the railroad to the water's edge and set off at 3 p.m. on June 26, 1912, on a river, going upstream.

Mr. Pelly's narrative follows Oberholtzer's route with quotes from the explorer's journal interwoven with historical background on given locations and his own retracement, some by plane, of the 1912 journey in 2005. The historical information, particularly the establishment dates of Hudson Bay Company trading posts in the different areas, is then juxtaposed with a modern viewpoint about the route, such that at the end of the story, one acutely perceives the stresses of the 1912 journey,

as well as the changes the area, the settlements, and the lives of people along the route have undergone over the years.

Oberholtzer and Magee were directed along the way by the native people, Catholic and Anglican clergymen, and Hudson Bay Company agents. On most of the waterways, they visited with trappers, fur traders, supplies conveyors, and caribou hunters. Their roughly circular, clockwise route eventually takes them to Hudson Bay, to travel along its western shore on their return journey. Summer is very short at the latitudes in which they travelled, so the timing of their return was critical, and of course, they missed their goal. A chilling entry in Oberholtzer's journal gives us a telling picture of how important timing was those days for journeys through uncharted territories. "Friday, August 30. After a high southeast wind all night, the real rain set in at daylight... I was

very tired of my narrow bed and poor covers. . . The day was desolate and chilling. Still in the fine driving rain, we put up the sail as a partial shelter; and presently, Billy went back to bed while I hugged the fire for a little warmth, drying one side while the other got wet." I can't help shivering any time I read those lines.

Along the way, the travelers encountered the land of "little sticks," so-named by the natives because of its stunted shrub-like vegetation, and then the "Barrenlands," the local name for the "tundra" of modern taxonomy.

Oberholtzer records on September 5, 1912, how precarious their situation had become: "*I read again Mr. Tyrell's report and realized how serious our position was beginning to look. Bad weather was undoubtedly near and we had no notion how far we were from Churchill. Probably the worst of the Barren Lands was to come and we were traveling hardly more than five miles a day and both of us rheumatic.*" More shivers from me!

The eventual chance meeting with a young Eskimo family on September 12 may well have saved Oberholtzer and Magee, because of the family's experience and friendship. The northbound family agreed to turn back south to lead them to Churchill, their immediate goal. The difference between this family and Pelly's adventurous travellers could not be bigger: the family had the foresight and cultural "knowhow" to equip themselves with a traveling shelter—and a stove no less!—to wait out the next storm in relative comfort.

When Oberholtzer and Magee eventually got close enough to Churchill to find civilization, they ended up at the home of a Mounted Police major. From there the officer's wife sent them to the barracks where a constable got out of bed to make them supper. The monthly report of the MP major sums up the whole adventure succinctly "*on September 17th, Mr. E. C. Oberholtzer, a journalist from Davenport, Iowa, U.S.A., arrived at Churchill; he came via Le Pas, Reindeer Lake, Cochrane River and the Thlewiaza River, to Hudson Bay. He had only one Indian with him, and traveled the whole distance in a canoe.*" A short account indeed of a major adventure!

Pelly adds to the colorful history of the report by relating the results of his own interviews of many area elders, who knew of the Oberholtzer–Magee trip from their parents, and includes pictures of them at the time of his interviews. These stories add to the richness of the original pithy journal entries.

I found myself reading this book as eagerly as I would have an exciting novel, and living the times with each of the writers whose original words are quoted in this book. The text includes a few of Oberholtzer's photographs from 1912 and a couple of maps. I had trouble following the trip on the modern maps also furnished, but that didn't detract at all from the pleasure I experienced reading the book.

