

## R. M. Ballantyne (1825-1894)

During my school days in the early years of the present century, the fur trade stories of R. M. Ballantyne, an ex-HBC clerk, were at the height of their popularity....Certainly I read them avidly, for who could fail to be thrilled with the romance of the fur trade? I was thus in a receptive mood to the merest suggestion that I should become a fur trader.

J. W. Anderson, *Fur Trader's Story* (1961)

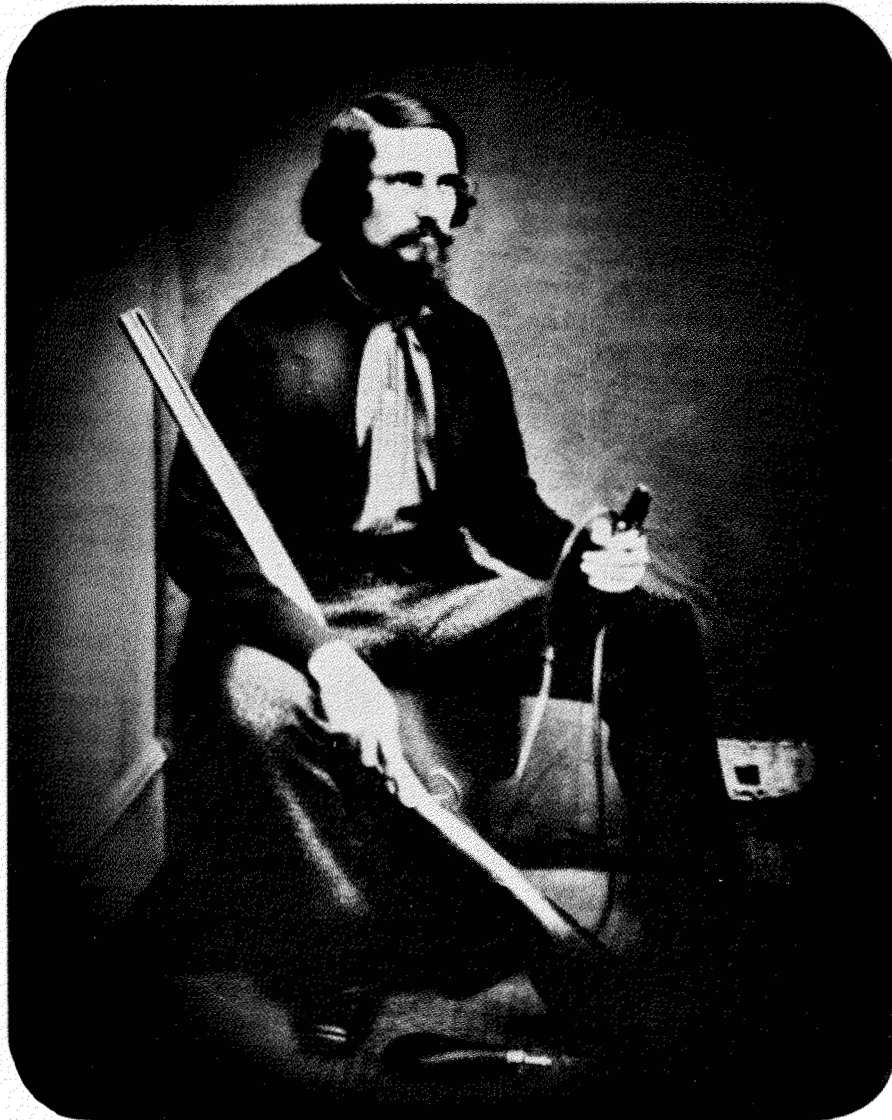
More than a few northern men of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — particularly those raised in Scotland and England — have attested in their memoirs to the seductive tug they felt as boys when reading Ballantyne's books about the Canadian North. It is something of a happy irony, given his own uneasy and brief period of service with the Hudson's Bay Company, that Ballantyne's boys' novels *The Young Fur Traders* (1855) and *Ungava* (1857) and, more especially, his personal account of that service, *Hudson's Bay; or Every-Day Life in the Wilds of North America* (1848), recruited so many able young men for both the HBC and Revillon Frères. As Ballantyne's six years in Rupert's Land and the King's Posts, and his narrative of that experience, are the cynosure of this profile, the balance of his life must be dealt with summarily.

A nonentity when he returned home from Canada in 1847, Ballantyne was famous a decade later, for he made his name as a story teller with the two northern novels and *Coral Island* (1857). He went on to publish another hundred or so boys' books on such varied subjects as the lighthouse and lifeboat services, gorilla hunting, the London Fire Brigade, Algerian pirates, and the like. The latter half of the Victorian century, the high noon of Empire, was, concomitantly, the heyday of the boys' adventure story, and Ballantyne's popularity was as strong as that enjoyed by Charles Kingsley, G. A. Henty, Rider Haggard, and Robert Louis Stevenson. His exciting tales were characterised by unchaperoned boy heroes (an innovation), factual accuracy, and pietistic moralising and conveyed the sensibility of their time. When he met his death in February 1894, thousands of schoolboys raised money to commemorate him.

Robert Michael Ballantyne was born in Edinburgh in 1825 into a publishing family damaged by Sir Walter Scott's financial ruin. His formal education consisted of two years at Edinburgh Academy. In May 1841, spurred by his father's romantic notions of arctic exploration, he apprenticed himself to the Hudson's Bay Company, and sailed in the sixth *Prince Rupert* to a way of life that, incongruously enough, was to determine his eventual career. He spent his first winter at Fort Garry, being "broken in to the desk," as he put it, and was present when the corpse of the great Thomas Simpson — murdered? a suicide? — was brought in to Red River. That spring he went to Norway House, where he stayed for a year. Here he was a spectator of the swirling drama of the outbound spring brigades from the northwest with their crews of "wild and un-

couth" *voyageurs*. In June 1843 he was posted to York Factory — "a monstrous blot on a swampy spot, with a partial view of the frozen sea." But he himself was by now regarded as a blot of sorts by his superiors, for his clerkly application was less than outstanding: it would have been a better idea, wrote William Mactavish to James Hargrave, to have sent him a pair of trousers stuffed with straw rather than Ballantyne. We, however, have reason to be grateful for his sojourn on the Bay, for he recalled it vividly in his descriptions of Bachelors' Hall and HBC Christmas celebrations. In 1845, under orders for Lachine and Tadoussac, Ballantyne travelled to Norway House and then on by express canoe to Fort William. On this leg of his journey he met the brilliant Dr. John Rae, bound for Repulse. Ballantyne astutely noted and approved what Stefansson would one day call the Rae Method — Rae's determination, thought bizarre then, to travel light and to live off the land. From Fort William Ballantyne voyaged in a *canot de maitre* to Lachine, where, under the god-like eye of Sir George Simpson, he worked (no doubt more conscientiously) until January 1846. Then, by sleigh and on snowshoes, he made his way to the King's Posts of Tadoussac and Isle Jeremie before taking charge at Seven Islands that April. It was there, in that desolate and static post, that he began to compose the story of his service in the Company. He wrote simply for want of anything better to do. "I had no books, no game to shoot, no boat...and no prospect of seeing anyone to speak to for weeks, if not months, to come. But I had pen and ink, and, by great fortune, was in possession of a blank paper book, fully an inch thick. These, then, were the circumstances in which I began my first book." In May 1847, fed up and homesick, and his term of apprenticeship having expired, he returned to Scotland.

It is for *Hudson's Bay* that we still remember Ballantyne. Detailed and valuably informative, the account is enlivened by youthful intensity. As well as describing fur trade operations, it contains powerful evocations of terrain, waterways, and weather, and shrewd sketches of an assortment of personalities. Furthermore, the accompanying illustrations (which suffered at the hands of the wood engraver) are Ballantyne's own: although he lacked the facility of Paul Kane or Alexander Hunter Murray, his pictorial talent was considerable. What most enhances the book, however, is its personal flavour. Unlike earlier (and too many later) accounts of far northern life and exploration, which were written in a detached, laconic manner, *Hudson's Bay* projects the personality of its author, conveys his spirits, alert curiosity, and mental growth. Still, few books on the North win favourable reactions from old northern hands, and there were those in the Company who snorted disdainfully at *Hudson's Bay*, among them Chief Factor Donald Ross, who in 1850 wrote to a colleague: "I have just finished Ballantyne's book. It is the work, apparently, of an amiable young man with a strong perception of the ridiculous...but void of originality and vigour in a rather re-



*R. M. Ballantyne.*

Photograph from Eric Quayle's *Ballantyne the Brave*.

markable degree. His everyday life in Hudson Bay was easy enough. I wish he had seen some of my everyday life for many years." But such opinions were in a minority. Let the last judgment rest with another prominent HBC man of that long-lost world: "Of the many books of adventure by different writers on life in the wilds, those of R. M. Ballantyne can be placed in the front rank for faithfulness of detail and correctness of observation. His descriptions of conditions are nearly perfect."

#### FURTHER READINGS

- BALLANTYNE, ROBERT M. 1972. *Hudson's Bay; or Every-Day Life in the Wilds of North America*. Reprinted Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers (Originally pub. 1848).  
 PARNELL, C. 1941. *Ballantyne the Brave*. *The Beaver* 272 (December): 4-6.  
 QUAYLE, ERIC. 1967. *Ballantyne the Brave: A Victorian Writer and His Family*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis.

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