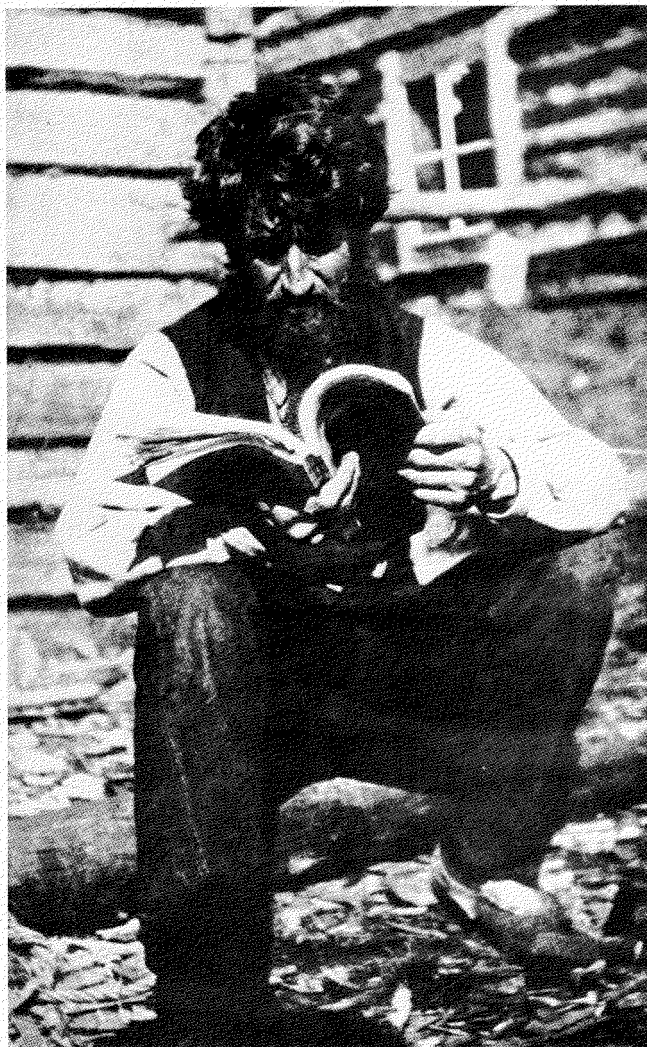


## John Hornby (1880-1927)



John Hornby at Fort Norman, summer 1919. Reprinted from George Whalley's *The Legend of John Hornby*. London: John Murray, 1962.

At first glance John Hornby's life would not appear to have the ingredients of a legend. Unlike most important northern travellers, Hornby did not distinguish himself in the realm of exploration, in a natural science, or in any other discipline. His only accounts of two decades of subarctic travel were his "Caribou Notes", a few incomplete diaries, and notes for a projected book, *The Land of Feast and Famine*. Nor would Hornby's personality seem likely to make his name endure. A very enigmatic and eccentric person, he was evasive and misleading even to good friends, and frequently inconsistent and irresponsible as a leader of men. Yet, he had an endearing nature and was hard to dislike intensely. Peers and travelling companions frequently spoke of him with respect and affec-

tion. Ultimately, it is this curious personality rather than accomplishment on which Hornby's fame rests.

By birth the member of an affluent textile family, the son of an outstanding cricketer and rugby player, and by education an Harrovian, John Hornby was 23 years old when he came to Canada from England in 1904. From then until his death 22 years later, he pursued a lifestyle uncomplicated by long-range goals and plans. After spending four years just north of Edmonton homesteading, trapping, hunting, and packing, Hornby went north to the Great Bear Lake region with Cosmo Melville on a trading expedition in 1908. Fascination for the country was immediate, intense, and so strong that except for occasional trips to Edmonton, England, and service in the First

Great War, he was to spend the rest of his life in the Barren Ground and the adjacent "land of the little sticks".

Travelling sometimes with Indians, sometimes with whites, and frequently alone, Hornby's practice of living off the land with an absolute minimum of food staples and equipment was irrevocably confirmed over the next few years. The season of 1911-1912 was spent in the company of the George Douglas expedition, which was undertaking a mineralogical survey in the Coppermine River area. In retrospect, this season can be seen as a critical time in Hornby's life. Douglas became a life-long friend and possibly Hornby's only true confidant. But the peace and contentment of these first years in the North were not to last. Never again did Douglas and Hornby travel together, although Hornby wrote Douglas many times broaching the possibility expectantly. Never again were the relations with neighbouring trappers and Indians as good, and never again was the game quite as plentiful. Two unhappy years later, Hornby departed for the war in Europe, and although he won a commission and a Military Cross, he was profoundly disturbed by what the civilized world had come to, and he returned North in 1916.

For the next decade Hornby wandered at the edge of the Barren Ground, shifting to the area east of Great Slave Lake in 1919. His reluctance to plan ahead and his improvident ways led to some very difficult times. Having left Edmonton too late in the season, he was obliged to pass the winter of 1918-19 in an enlarged wolf den near Fort Chipewyan. During the next two winters at the east end of Great Slave Lake, starvation was exceedingly close.

By the early 1920s, one suspects, Hornby felt vaguely compelled to legitimize his years of travelling and wandering. He mentioned his proposed book, *The Land of Feast and Famine*, more frequently. Such compulsion also may have been the motivation for his unsuccessful attempt to secure federal government funding for his second-last trip in 1924. This was an expedition with James Critchell-Bullock, whose purpose was to travel to the Barren Ground to film caribou and musk-oxen. However, because Hornby's temperament inclined him toward the unstructured and fortuitous life of a trapper and hunter, it was difficult for him to consistently direct his energies to the specific objective of the expedition. Hornby was sometimes with Bullock and sometimes not, giving advice and help at one time and obstructing progress at another. Although there was not any loss of life, the venture was a semi-disaster. A miserable winter was passed in a hastily constructed cave in an esker near Artillery Lake, little film was shot, and their \$14,000 worth of white fox fur was rotten by the time they reached "the Outside", after an arduous trip down the Thelon River to Chesterfield Inlet.

On the fatal foray onto the Barren Ground in 1926 with two inexperienced companions — his 18-year-old cousin Edgar Christian and Harold Adlard — Hornby's ability to survive with a rifle, a bare minimum of food, and some good luck was not sufficient. In distinctively Hornby style, the party dallied

high up on the Thelon for no explicable reason in the late summer, and missed the caribou migration southward. Consequently, they wintered without adequate food, and in the spring of 1927, all three succumbed to starvation in their cabin midway down the Thelon.

Most likely, had the manner of Hornby's passing and the final depletion of strength and energy not been so dramatically and poignantly chronicled in Edgar Christian's diary, Hornby would only be a minor footnote in the history of subarctic travel. Yet, today, his status must surely approach that of a folk hero. He has been the subject of a number of books and articles, dramatic productions, and radio programs, and countless pilgrimages have been made to the site of his last cabin.

Hornby did not find new fur country or mineral deposits or otherwise enhance the riches of the civilized world. He was fascinated by the Barren Ground and saw the life of the wilds as morally superior to that of civilized society. In this sense he was typical of many who travel the North half a century later. The land is attractive for the moral alternative it offers, and that alone is sufficient justification to travel it. John Hornby is a popular legend because his story sparks the imagination of wilderness travellers of the late twentieth century. With him they have a natural empathy and affinity.

#### FURTHER READINGS

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Hugh Stewart  
P.O. Box 288  
Temagami, Ontario, Canada  
POH 2H0