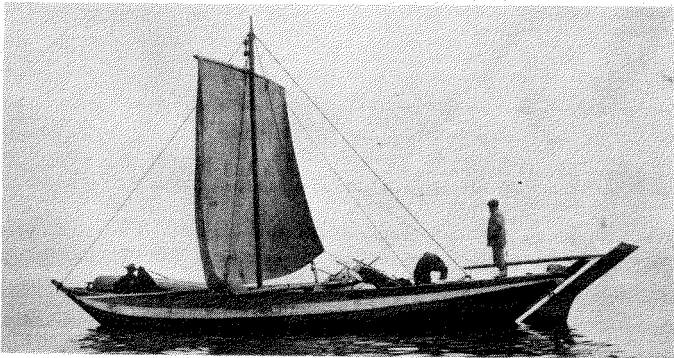


George Mellis Douglas (1875-1963)

George M. Douglas was one of the most efficient and well-informed explorers of the Mackenzie District, particularly the northerly reaches of Great Bear Lake and the Coppermine River as far as the arctic coast, during the early years of the twentieth century. A lean, muscular six-footer, he was a pioneer who opened up new vistas for mineral investigation and development. Yet he is chiefly known for his only book, *Lands Forlorn*, which, published in 1914, is noteworthy for its accuracy, attention to detail, and superb photographs. It stands as one of the classics of northern literature.

Douglas was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1875, the son of a distinguished Canadian medical doctor. He was educated at the Grove School, Lakefield, Ontario; Trinity College School, Port Hope, Ontario; the University of Toronto; and Rutherford College, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and was apprenticed as an engineer with the Armstrong and Leslie Works from 1894 to 1897. He went to sea as a marine engineer between 1897 and 1900 and then began a career in Mexico and Arizona as an engineer, later as a consulting engineer, until 1940.

His work in the Southwest was interrupted by the first of his northern explorations. This was for a 1911-1912 expedition to Great Bear Lake, the Dismal Lakes, and the lower Coppermine River to search for copper deposits. It was sponsored and financed by Dr. James Douglas, a wealthy cousin after whom the mining town of Douglas, Arizona, was named. The three-man party, headed by George Douglas, included his brother, Lionel, a master mariner, and Dr. August Sandburg, a geologist.



The Douglas expedition York boat *Jupiter* on Great Bear Lake, July 1911. (Photo by George M. Douglas)

They travelled with the Hudson's Bay Company transport as far as Fort Norman on the Mackenzie River. Among their companions to that point chanced to be Robert Service, the already renowned Yukon bard, on his way back to Dawson City alone in a canoe from Fort McPherson.

The Douglas party tracked up the swift-flowing Great Bear River with a York boat to Great Bear Lake, towing a canoe. They sailed across the lake to the northeasterly corner at the mouth of the Dease River, where Lionel Douglas built a substantial cabin for the winter. Meanwhile, George Douglas and

August Sandburg canoed up the Dease to the Dismal Lakes and thence to the Kendall River and the Coppermine. They explored the Coppermine Mountains during the first season before returning to the cabin.

Part of the time they were joined by John Hornby, a diminutive, eccentric Englishman who was as inefficient as the others were efficient. His mission, if any, was to hunt and trap and to trade with the Inuit of Coronation Gulf. Despite his untidiness and aimlessness, he was befriended by George Douglas through ensuing years until he starved to death with two other men on the fringe of the Barrens northeast of Great Slave Lake in 1927.

In the spring of 1912 the Douglas party returned to the Coppermine and found the extent of the mineralized area to be much greater than had been supposed, the width of the belt being about 25 kilometres. It was deemed significant enough to justify more extensive prospecting, but the effects of World War I and the copper industry discouraged it.

The party ranged as far as Coronation Gulf, meeting some of the Copper Inuit but missing Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who had visited the Dismal Lakes only a few months prior to their arrival. (George Douglas and Stefansson eventually became life-long friends.) The entire expedition was noteworthy for its meticulous planning and successful execution, with no serious mishaps.

In 1928 Douglas carried out a summer journey with two canoes along the southeastern shores of Great Slave Lake for the United Verde Copper Company. Four years later he investigated coal deposits on the western shore of Great Bear Lake, and in 1935 he conducted mineral exploration around Athabasca Lake and the country between it and Great Slave Lake, as well as on Great Bear Lake. He resumed his mineral exploration in 1938 along the Snare River and between Great Slave Lake and Talston Lake, including Nonacho Lake.

He wrote well and kept journals of all his journeys, profusely illustrated with his photographs of consistently professional quality, yet he published only one book and a couple of articles for technical magazines. There were conspicuous reasons for this. Finally retiring as an engineer and explorer, he became increasingly preoccupied with chores around his properties near Lakefield, Ontario, where he and his young wife, Kay, lived almost primitively. They moved from their main house, owned originally by his father, into one or another of several cabins and a houseboat, according to whim or season. In summer he did much canoeing and sailing on nearby lakes. He also spent a great deal of time corresponding with acquaintances in different parts of the world, and each of his letters was a gem of fact and philosophy.

He died in June 1963. Several years earlier he was repeatedly interviewed by George Whalley, professor of English at Queen's University, Kingston, who was compiling a definitive biography of John Hornby, about whom Douglas was the foremost living authority. Douglas felt that Hornby did not deserve

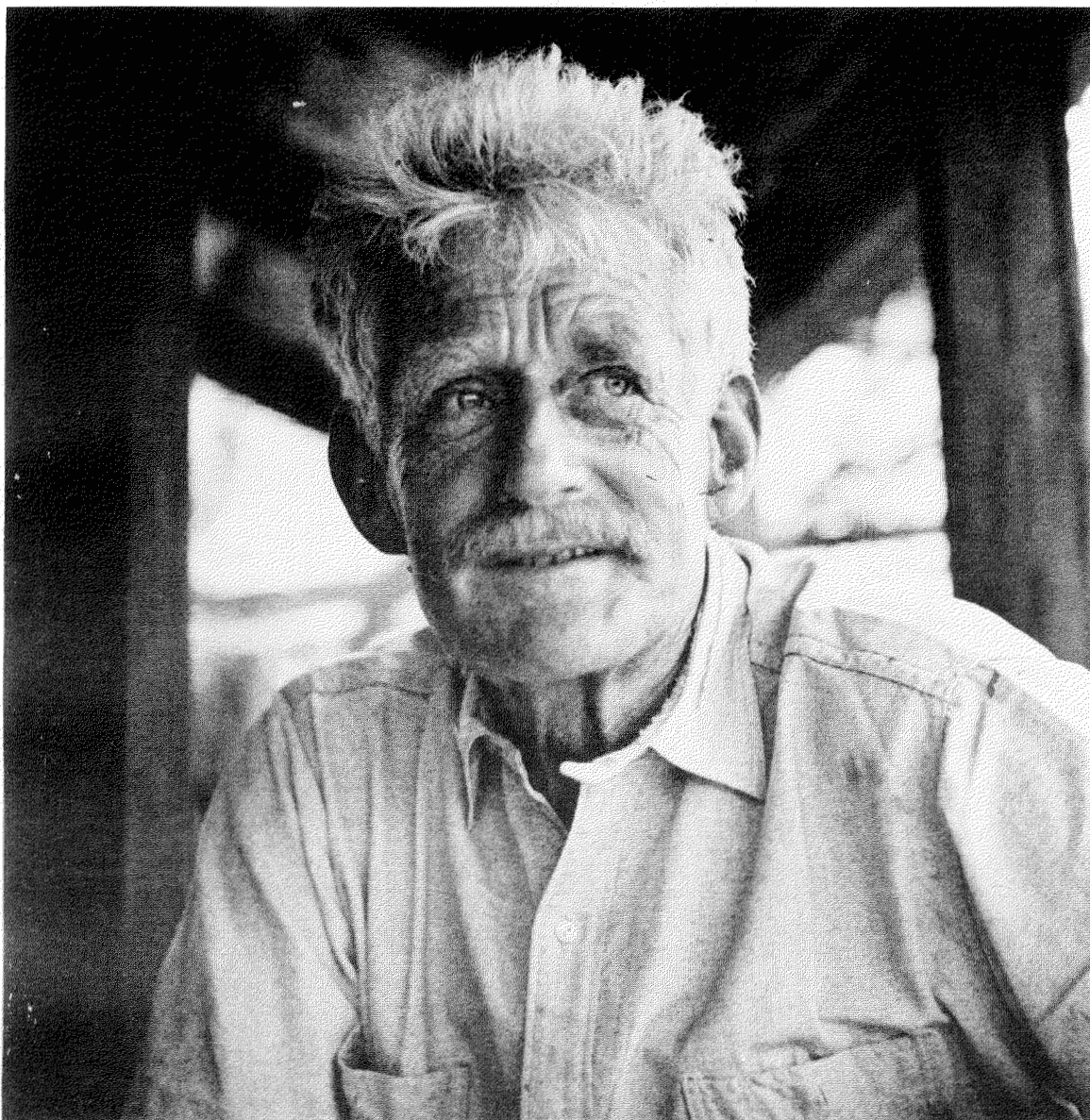


Photo by Richard Finnie.

another book, two having already been published, but he gave freely of his time and became Whalley's principal source of information.

Whalley seemingly failed fully to realize that the man he was interviewing and who would soon be gone had spent an infinitely more interesting and productive life than the ill-fated Hornby and that he — not Hornby — was a far better subject for a biography. Whalley published his Hornby book, a fascinating piece of research, but died before he could give Douglas his due, although there is much about him in the Hornby book.

Douglas was a life member of the Explorers Club, a fellow of the Arctic Institute of North America and the American Geographical Society, and a member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, the Canadian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, and the Toronto Arts and Letters Club.

After his death, Mrs. Douglas sold their properties and settled into a cottage near the Grove School in Lakefield, where she could enjoy the modern comforts and facilities to which he

had been indifferent. She sorted and distributed to appropriate archives his papers, photographs, large library, and many canoes.

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