

Warburton Pike (1861-1915)



Photo: Provincial Archives of British Columbia No. 4510.

British Columbia has lost her foremost sportsman, and the Dominion is the poorer by an author who had achieved considerable note, by the death of Mr. Warburton Pike. News of the demise of the well-known hunter was received in a cable from London, but the manner of his death is unknown. (Daily Colonist, 30 October 1915)

Warburton Pike was born into an old Westcountry family near Wareham, Dorset, in 1861. He was educated at Rugby School in an atmosphere of muscular Christianity, the physical emphasis of which was not lost on him. From Rugby he went up to Brasenose College, Oxford, where he became a close friend of Earl Haig, the future field marshal. Like many another young Englishman of his time and class, Pike was attracted to outdoor life and distant lands. In 1884, drawn by the raw emptiness of British Columbia, he purchased ground on Saturna Island, where he thereafter resided periodically, between bouts of wanderlust. For the next several years he toughened himself and honed his skills as a wilderness trav-

eller on hunting trips to the B.C. interior and other parts of the North.

August 1889 found Pike embarking by canoe from Fort Resolution on what he called "an ordinary shooting expedition" north of Great Slave Lake, where he hoped to "penetrate this unknown land, to see the musk-ox, and find out as much as I could about their habits, and the habits of the Indians who go in pursuit of them every year." Thus commenced the 14 months of hard travel, privation, and adventure described so vividly in Pike's classic book *The Barren Ground of Northern Canada*.

For five months he explored and hunted with the Beaulieu clan — "the biggest scoundrels I ever had to travel with" — and Yellowknives as far as the Coppermine country north of Lac de Gras. The trip was replete with austere satisfactions of the sort valued by this hardbitten Englishman: brutal weather, near starvation, and the company of half-breeds and Indians whose improvidence and untrustworthiness he despised but

whose skills and powers of endurance moved him to admiration; he also relished competing with these men. On this, as on every trip he took, he travelled light and lived off the land, for he held well-provided expeditions in contempt.

Pike wintered — not at all passively — at Resolution; then, on 7 May, bound for Back's Great Fish River, he started north again. Only Back himself (1833-1835) and Anderson and Stewart (1855) had been there before him. He was accompanied on this stiff canoe journey by James Mackinlay, the HBC factor at Fort Resolution, Murdo Mackay, a Company servant, and a mixed crew of natives. Mackinlay seems to have hoped to find a site for a trading outpost in Eskimo territory, but nothing came of this possibility. After reaching Aylmer Lake, they descended the Back River as far as Beechey Lake; finding no Eskimos there, and given Pike's plans to head "outside" to British Columbia, they turned south on 25 July, returning by way of the Lockhart River and Pike's Portage. They took out at Resolution on 24 August. Two impatient days later, Pike departed for Quesnel, B.C., some 2700 km away. Mackay went with him. Having ascended the Peace and crossed the Rocky Mountain Portage to Twelve-Foot Davis's trading post, they were waylaid by snow and advised to wait for freeze-up before going farther. A few days passed, and a warm Chinook came through. Then, as R.M. Patterson has remarked, Pike's "demon took possession of him." Ignoring warnings, he set off upriver on the Parsnip in a dugout canoe, bound for Fort McLeod. With him were Mackay, two guides, and an old-country deadbeat, the latter three of whom claimed to know the route. But winter arrived with a vengeance, they got lost below McLeod Lake, and the useless canoe was abandoned. Fiercely driven by Pike, retreating desperately, frostbitten, starving, feeding on their moccasins, they struggled back down the Parsnip. On 27 December, near death, they "crawled up the steep bank" to Davis's cabin and salvation.

The Barren Ground of Northern Canada, substantial, candid, compelling, was popular for many years among men who themselves lived and travelled north of 55°. Two such men, however, George M. Douglas, the author of *Lands Forlorn*, and Guy Blanchet, the peerless T.S.C. explorer and surveyor, believed that Pike plagiarised from Mackinlay's journal when writing the book. But scrutiny of the two works proves this charge to be groundless.

Pike's next major outing, which he recounted in *Through the Subarctic Forest*, began in July 1892. With a Canadian and an Englishman, in an 18' spruce canoe painted light blue, Pike farewelled Fort Wrangel, Alaska, pushed up the Stikine River to Dease Lake in the Cassiar Mountains, ran down the Dease River to the Liard, and spent the winter near Lower Post. There he build a cabin, indulged his liking for cold-weather tripping, and was bitten by the gold bug. In the spring of '93, having hauled his outfit some 320 km to Frances Lake, Y.T., he and the men he had now enticed into joining him, three HBC half-breeds from Manitoba, explored a new route across the height of land to a tributary of the Pelly. Paddling through unexplored country until they linked with G.M. Dawson's route of 1887, they then followed the Pelly to the Yukon and ran down it to Russian Mission. From there they portaged to

the Kuskovim, which took them to the Bering Sea. "In rags and poverty," Pike and his crew then navigated 480 km of hazardous, weather-swept coastline to Nushagak, where they took out on 18 September. The canoe had been holed once on this journey of some 5600 km.

In the years remaining to him, Pike continued to wander restlessly, often alone or with Indians, testing himself to his limits. He became obsessed with prospecting and engaged in mining ventures in the Dease Lake region, but none of them flourished. Throughout this period he was renowned as much for his generosity to the down-and-out as for his feats of travel and endurance. When in civilisation, he dressed meticulously for dinner in the English tradition and was sought after socially. One year, he served as British Columbia's commissioner at an International Game Exhibition in Vienna. But like others of his ilk who ventured to the wildest ends of the earth, he welcomed the shedding of formal conventions, and it was for the best of reasons that those who knew him in the bush and the mountains nicknamed him "Dirty Pike" or "One-Shirt Pike." High in the Cassiars, a pair of reeking Indians at his side, gnawing caribou meat in the firelit snow, he must, one imagines, have sometimes remembered *fondues* at Brasenose and the serene watermeadows of the Frome near Wareham.

The type of man Pike was now seems as extinct as the British Empire itself, with its host of far-eyed, oft-times eccentric, travellers and explorers. His unquestioning self-confidence, his paternalistic fondness for native peoples, his passion for white blanks on maps, his code of self-effacing, stoical masculinity, and his inviolable principles of perseverance, *noblesse oblige*, and duty bespeak an ethos which, though susceptible to derision now, was honoured in its time.

In 1915 Pike sailed for England, anxious to serve his King and the Empire. On October 20, in Bournemouth, a few miles from his birthplace, he was turned down. He was 54. He walked out of the recruiting office and down to the shore; then, striding into the sea until he was nearly submerged, he stopped, opened his clasp-knife, felt for the spot he wanted, and drove the blade up into his heart.

FURTHER READINGS

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R.H. Cockburn
 Department of English
 The University of New Brunswick
 Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada
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