

Ernest Thompson Seton (1860-1946)

The decades immediately previous to World War I witnessed a marked shift in popular attitudes toward the Canadian North. The imperialistic ethos that had driven such conquests as Caspar Whitney's assault on the Barren Lands in 1894-1895 or Leonidas Hubbard's expedition into Labrador in 1903-1904 gave way to a new impulse, one shaped by a desire to celebrate and to conserve the beauty of a bountiful natural environment that was seen as a significant alternative to the artifice of civilization. Vilhjalmur Stefansson loudly voiced his notion of "the friendly Arctic"; Ernest Thompson Seton played what was perhaps an even more fundamental role in bringing about this widespread change of attitude.

Born Ernest Evan Thompson in 1860 at South Shields, a village in northern England, Seton was one of eleven children — ten boys and one girl — in a large Victorian family. When he was five years old, his family emigrated to a farm in Ontario, where his father, Joseph Thompson, hoped to mend the meagre family fortune. Those years spent at the edge of the wilderness were formative; Seton would bear their mark throughout his life, even though his family soon moved to Toronto. Short and skinny as an adolescent, Seton proved a bright student but an uncooperative and selfish individual. After demonstrating considerable skill at painting while in Toronto, the youth embarked for England to continue his studies in art, although his true ambition was to become a naturalist. But soon after being admitted to the prestigious Painting School of the Royal Academy, Seton abandoned formal training in art and returned to Canada, where he would be closer to the natural world that fascinated him. His strong interest in natural history drew him to Manitoba, where two of his brothers were homesteading; his brother Albert complained that Seton spent all his time collecting and identifying specimens of wildlife instead of pulling his weight on the farm.

In the fall of 1883, he travelled to New York to work as an illustrator, and it was in the city that Seton's reputation for his pictures of wildlife began to grow. As well, he wrote "Benny and the Fox" that winter, the first of the many realistic animal stories that would bring him fame as an author, but that would virtually destroy any chance he had to be recognized as a credible naturalist. The next spring saw Seton's return to the Manitoba homestead, establishing a pattern of oscillation between bush and urban centre that characterized much of his life. The natural world of forest and prairie vitalized him, but only the city could give him the recognition he craved. Such oscillation between extremes of residence is perhaps paralleled by the numerous names Seton used before he legally changed his name in 1901. The many and extreme changes of residence and the evident dissatisfaction with the name given him at birth point to a man with a troubled sense of identity.

His 1907 canoe trip to the northeast of Great Slave Lake sharply focusses the impact Seton had on how we view the northern wilderness. Along with two guides and Edward Preble of the United States Biological Survey, Seton carried over Pike's Portage and canoed the lengths of Artillery, Clinton-

Colden, and Aylmer lakes in search of *la foule*, the nearly legendary herds of migrating caribou. Seton was struck not only by the bounty of thousands of caribou, but also by the unlimited range of colour in the late summer vegetation and by the lushness of the ground cover stretching as far as the eye could see. Yet ironically this region was called the Barren Lands; previous travellers — among them John Franklin, J.W. Tyrrell, and Warburton Pike — had branded the land as empty, sterile, and forbidding. Seton, however, dubbed them "the arctic prairies," a name he considered apt for a locale in which, he observed, the herbage vastly surpassed many agricultural regions of Texas and Wyoming. The Barren Lands, Seton asserted, was a thoroughly libelous name, and he popularized this new vision by publishing *The Arctic Prairies*, Seton's account of that journey.

Yet Seton's influence on the new response to the North was far more deep-seated than this single trip. He was in the advance guard of a new era of wildlife conservation, having sensed that a way of life fundamental to all mankind was rapidly growing extinct in the face of modern technology and communications. Unlike many outdoorsmen of his time and certainly unlike those of past generations, Seton saw the wilderness as a place that needed to be preserved, rather than conquered. He published over 40 books on the natural world. He undertook extensive lecture tours. He began "The League of the Woodcraft Indians," a youth organization that encouraged conservation and understanding of the natural world. When Robert Baden-Powell added a strong militaristic dimension to Seton's organization, the Boy Scouts came into being, and Seton, wholly dissatisfied, withdrew.

When he died at famous Seton Village in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Seton was 86 years old. His life had stretched from the very heart of the Victorian era into the middle of this century. He was, in many respects, only a product of these remarkably changed times, but in the philosophy he developed toward untamed nature, he blazed a path leading directly to the conservationist attitudes of today.

FURTHER READINGS

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Richard C. Davis
Department of English
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
T2N 1N4



Self-portrait of Seton in 1879.