

Raymond Murray Patterson (1898-1984)

R.M. Patterson is recognized by many as one of the finest writers on the Canadian wilderness. While his writing skills earned him a wide and appreciative audience, he was more than a skilled wordsmith. He was also a careful and sympathetic observer, an intrepid explorer and a meticulous historian. Orville Prescott, in the *New York Times*, described his "*Dangerous River* as a modest book which betrays no indication that Mr. Patterson realizes what a remarkable man he is."

It is through his autobiographical writings, a blended mix of history, adventure and vivid description, that we can appreciate this remarkable individual. He published five books over a span of 14 years: *Dangerous River* (1954), *Buffalo Head* (1961), *Far Pastures* (1963), *Trail to the Interior* (1966) and *Finlay's River* (1968).

The first book, *Dangerous River*, was written in 1953, when Patterson was 55 years old. That was 26 years after his initial visit to the wilderness of the Nahanni country. His "dangerous river" is the South Nahanni River, located in the southwest corner of the Northwest Territories. Its headwaters begin in the mountains at the Yukon border and it flows into the Liard. In the 1920s very few knew of this river's existence; fewer still had ever ventured into its forbidding canyons.

Why did Patterson go? Why did he return the following year? What led him to winter in Deadmen's Valley? He answers: "I was born with the disease of itching foot." It seems this was a recurring "disease" throughout his life. It was a similar "itching foot" that earlier had led him to emigrate to Canada after the First World War, to break with tradition and to leave a comfortable and secure position with the Bank of England.

Raymond Murray Patterson was born on 13 May 1898 in Darlington, County Durham, England. His father left for the Boer War and South Africa when he was very young and only returned for a visit some 23 years later. Young Raymond attended Rossall School, by the Irish Sea, where he was "taught and drilled and toughened."

In April 1917, straight from Rossall, he went into the wartime army and the artillery cadet school. Very shortly after seeing military action, on 21 March 1918, at the start of the German spring offensive, he was captured. For the next eight months he was a POW, until the armistice of 11 November 1918.

Upon his return to England, at the insistence of his uncle and guardian he entered St. John's College at Oxford, choosing modern history as a major. By his own admission, the Oxford years provided a relaxing, enjoyable interlude. It reminded him of a "country house and club." There was ample time for the Cheltenham races, the Cotswold hunt cup, residence in France and visits to the Swiss Alps. He passed his final exams with a heroic last-minute effort and the aid of an exceptional short-term memory. Then followed a probationary appointment in the Bank of England.

During this period his father reappeared from Africa for a brief visit. This seems to have been a major influence at a critical juncture in his life. Later, when Raymond heard of his father's death in Africa, it crystallized his mind and



Patterson at Faille's Cache, near the Twisted Mountain, September 1927. Courtesy of *The Beaver*.

reinforced his resolve. He writes: "With the going of that man I came up to the surface again and took a look at the workaday world of London. And by God, my father was right! It was grey and it was a desert of stone! . . . [London] was a swarming city like a nightmare by H.G. Wells. It was a vast human ant heap through which the inmates scurried with set, expressionless faces, tied to some fixed routine" (*Buffalo Head*, p. 54).

He was not content to simply let inertia take its course and decide his fate. And the remote, empty quarters of North America held a fascination that inspired him to action. Thus, at age 26, he went to western Canada, where he stayed for the rest of his life. After an initial stint on a dairy farm in the lower Fraser valley of British Columbia, he longed to "get out of settled country — to the outskirts, and then beyond the outskirts to some place where boundaries were still unknown and where the horizon was the limit" (*Buffalo Head*, p. 57). To do so he moved farther north, to the Vermilion area on the Peace River, to the edge of settlement.

But after two years of establishing a 320-acre homestead, he yearned to go even farther north. While on a visit to England, he had read Michael Mason's *The Arctic Forests* and was taken by the wilderness sirens of the Mackenzie Mountains and the Liard and the South Nahanni rivers. He had always been an avid reader and from an early age he had liked books about adventure and exploration by Kipling, Ballantyne, Butler and many others.

In June 1927 he set out on the long trip to Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie, then up the Liard River and his first solo canoe venture into the South Nahanni country. He eventually reached Virginia Falls and brought back the first known photograph of them. He returned south by tracking up the Liard for 250 miles to Fort Nelson. It is noteworthy that he was probably already contemplating a longer return visit, because the following year he came back to the Nahanni with Gordon Matthews and a complete outfit for wintering the 1928-29 season. These experiences form the basis of *Dangerous River*.

Virginia Falls, on the South Nahanni, are among the most spectacular falls in the world. They were named by Fenley Hunter, an American outdoorsman and adventurer from Long Island, New York, after his daughter. On his second trip to the Nahanni, Raymond Patterson met Fenley, who was travelling downstream with an outfitter named George Ball and a native guide named Albert Dease, a descendent of Chief Factor Peter Warren Dease.

Dangerous River was written somewhat by chance. Some London publishers happened to read an article Patterson had written for *Blackwood's* magazine and suggested he expand it into a book. He later confessed that "the book was written quickly and in a wild fit of enthusiasm." It met with outstanding reviews. Bruce Hutchinson wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune*: "His book is an emotion of the North . . . recorded, it is not too much to say, in a mixture of Thoreau and Jack London." P.G. Downes also praised it in the *Beaver*.

With a fortunate stroke of good luck, when Patterson returned from the Nahanni wilds in the spring of 1929, he found that his stock investments had tripled in value and he sold immediately. At the same time his furs from the Nahanni season also fetched a very good price. On the winnings, in the summer of 1929 he and Marigold Portman were married. She too was an author.

After a brief try at sheep farming in the Bow Valley, he and Marigold acquired the Buffalo Head Ranch in the valley



Patterson in his later years. Courtesy of Janet Blanchet.

of the Highwood River, in the foothills and mountains of southwestern Alberta. Patterson's second book, *Buffalo Head*, describes these years after giving a brief review of his early life. The ranch was sold in 1946 and the family moved to North Saanich, on Vancouver Island, and in 1962 to Victoria.

Beginning in 1947, Patterson had published a number of articles in the *Beaver* and *Blackwood's* magazines. His third book, *Far Pastures*, is an edited collection of these anecdotes spanning experiences from 1924 to 1955.

In 1948, at age 50, frustrated with tending a garden and orchard on Vancouver Island, Patterson again turned to the North and sojourned from Wrangell, Alaska, up the Stikine River by riverboat to Telegraph Creek, by truck along the portage road to Dease Lake and from there on a 200-mile solo canoe trip in his 14-foot canoe to the Liard. His fourth book, *Trail to the Interior*, weaves this fascinating web of adventure and history set in the spectacular landscape of the Cassiar.

Black's Rocky Mountain Journal of 1824, volume 17 of the Hudson's Bay Record Society, was published in 1955. The volume has an extraordinary 88-page introduction by R.M. Patterson. This must, I believe, represent his finest historical work. He unravels the complex maze of early travel



Patterson's photo of the Virginia Falls, taken in August 1927. Courtesy of *The Beaver*.

on the Finlay and in that general area in a style that is clear, thorough, academic and fascinating — attributes that are often mutually exclusive!

In 1949 Patterson had explored the waterways, mountains and trails of the Parsnip, Finlay and Peace River area. His last published book, *Finlay's River*, describes these adventures and those of his predecessors. It's a fine historical *cum* adventure narrative, one of his best. Shortly after this book went to press, the WAC Bennett Dam on the Peace River flooded the Rocky Mountain Trench, thereby drowning most of the Finlay River and transforming it into Williston Lake. It is not surprising that one senses some bittersweet melancholia in his later writings, for the seemingly endless and pristine Canadian wilderness, which had always meant so much to him, was being destroyed on all fronts.

His later years were spent quietly in Victoria in the company of good books and visitors who came to share with him a mutual love of the wilderness. Patterson died on 20 October 1984 at 87. He is survived by his wife, daughter, Janet Blanchet, and sons, Alan and Robin.

In conclusion, I leave you with a small measure of his gentle eloquence, from the final paragraph of his first publication in the June 1947 issue of the *Beaver*:

All good things come to an end, and there came a day when we turned our canoes down the Liard and saw Nahanni Butte sink below the horizon — perhaps for the last time? Then it was that I realized we had been allowed to live for a little time in a world apart — a lonely world, of surpassing beauty, that had given us all things from the sombre magnificence of the canyons to the gay sunshine of those windswept uplands; from the utter silence of the dry side canyons to the uproar of the broken waters — a land that men pass, and the silence falls back into place behind them — The Land of Shadows.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am sincerely grateful to a number of people who were helpful in providing information for this article. Mrs. Janet Blanchet,

Raymond Patterson's daughter, provided the most recent photograph of her father and filled in some of the gaps in my knowledge. Kim Whale, Robert Stamp and Bill Hoyt also provided assistance in my search for information on R.M. Patterson.

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