

Prentice G. Downes (1909-1959)



Prentice Downes with deer meat on Sandy Hill at Kasmere Lake

Prentice G. Downes was one of the most singular men to travel in the North in the last years before the 1939-45 War. An able man in the wilderness and a gifted cartographer, ethnologist, and naturalist, he is best remembered as the author of *Sleeping Island: The Story of One Man's Travels in the Great Barren Lands of the Canadian North*, a classic of northern canoe travel.

"Spike" Downes, as he was known to friends, was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1909. He attended the Kent School, and then Harvard, where he majored in psychology and indulged an appetite for amateur boxing. In 1933 he began a fruitful career at Belmont Hill School near Boston, where he taught Latin and geomorphology, coached football and hockey, and became head of the history department: he was a talented, idiosyncratic, and much-beloved teacher. Short, powerfully built, and spectacled, he combined a passion for physical action with an uncommon intellectual curiosity, traits that were to invigorate his Canadian explorations.

In a letter to George Douglas in 1943, Downes remarked that his having read Napoleon Comeau's *Life and Sport on the North Shore of the St. Lawrence* "had a great deal to do with my ever going north, as I was so interested that I set off for the North Shore to find the old gentleman." Comeau had died, but thus in 1935 Downes commenced his northern travels. In 1936 he took passage aboard R.M.S. *Nascopie* from Montreal to Churchill, during which trip he made copious notes on climate, geography, wildlife, Ungava

Eskimo vocabulary, and northern society. From Churchill he flew to Pelican Narrows and with an Indian companion canoed to Reindeer Lake and back again. In 1937 the New England Museum of Natural History sponsored a solo trip by Downes to study the Eskimos of the Boothia Peninsula, before which he made his way to Brochet at the north end of Reindeer Lake and investigated the histories, languages, and ways of the Crees and the Chipewyans. This fascination with northern Indians, and above all with the significance of dreams in their cultures, was central to Downes's travels. The Crees named him "The-man-who-talks-about-dreams." Two of Downes's unpublished writings are a Cree-Chipewyan dictionary and a volume titled "The Spirit World of the Northern Cree: Contributions to Cree Ethnology."

The first of Downes's major canoe trips came in 1938, when he paddled alone from Waterways to Fitzgerald, after which he moved on to Great Slave, the Mackenzie, and Great Bear. It was on this journey that he met Douglas, who introduced him to Charles Camsell with these words: "Dr. Camsell, I wish to introduce Mr. Downes; he knows more of the history of this north country than J.B. himself" — meaning J.B. Tyrrell. The *Sleeping Island* trip of 1939 — from Brochet to Nueltin Lake — was followed by another, less triumphant, venture into that region in 1940. Despondent as he was at his failure to reach Kasba Lake by way of the Little Partridge River, Downes could still confide in his journal: "Three important routes and one

previously unknown river have been worked out. Kasmere Lake is now plotted, both north and east arm. Actually, far more was accomplished than a successful trip through to Kasba would have afforded." Much of the North was as yet imperfectly mapped then, of course, and one of Downes's primary achievements was his meticulous mapping of every obscure route he followed. It was on this trip that he met Charles Planinshek, "Eskimo Charlie", who won northern immortality by canoeing, with his Cree wife and children, from Windy Lake to the Gulf of Mexico and on to New York and Montreal. Among his friends Downes counted Douglas Leechman, Del Simons, Paddy Gibson, Richard Finnie, George Douglas, and numerous HBC men, Indians, white trappers, Mounted Policemen, and missionaries; by 1940 his name was a familiar one from the Eastern Arctic to Great Slave. His was a winning, unforgettable personality.

During the war Downes had a marriage that failed, and worked for the U.S. Army map service in Washington, D.C. At war's end he lived for six months on a Vermont mountainside where he dined on porcupines and "became a medical curiosity, a modern day scurvy case." He then worked at Harvard for the great cartographer Dr. Erwin Raisz before resuming his teaching position at Belmont Hill in 1947. That summer he made his last canoe trip, "a sort of dream trip, alone, just visiting Indians", from Amisk to Lac la Ronge. 1948 found him in the Aleutian Islands with the U.S. Geological Survey. He married Edna Grace Faithorn in 1949. In the years that followed he added to his stature as a teacher, wrote articles and sto-

ries, and researched the life of the white Indian John Tanner. Prentice Downes died, much too soon, in 1959: he is survived by his wife and their two children.

Early in that final year of his life, he was asked to contribute autobiographical notes for a school reunion, and wrote of his travels into the far North:

I liked that life and I liked the people there. I saw a lot of it just as the old north was vanishing; the north of no time, of game, of Indians, Eskimos, of unlimited space and freedom . . . I remember one time after a dreadful trip, camping on the edge of the tree line, again it was one of those indescribable smoky, bright-hazy days one sometimes gets in the high latitudes. I had hit the caribou migration and there was lots of meat; it was a curious spot, for all the horizon seemed to fall away from where I squatted, and I said to myself: Well, I suppose I shall never be so happy again.

FURTHER READINGS

- DOWNES, PRENTICE G. 1943. *Sleeping Island*. London: Jenkins.
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