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The Dangerous River, RM Patterson, 1954

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Description :

RM Patterson homesteaded in Alberta Canada in the early 1900's. His adventurous spirit was not satisfied with this. So alone in 1928, and with a partner in 1929, he explored, prospected, and lived in the South Nahanni River Valley located in the Northwest Territories of Canada. This book is his telling of these 2 seasons in this wilderness.

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First a bit of geographical information is required to set the stage for this story. In the late 1920's this area of Canada near the Yukon was known to a few local prospectors, trappers, traders and First Peoples. While not well known, the South Nahanni River had a mysterious quality with both rumors of gold and tragic endings to those who attempted to find this treasure. This river, and area west of Fort Simpson, is the setting for Patterson's *Dangerous River*. The river itself presented many obstacles to early travelers, with high canyons, difficult water, and large falls. This was before the era of easy access to inaccessible places by float plane, so the only way into this land was by boat (canoe and scow) or by foot. Patterson utilizes canoes, foot and dog-sled as his tools of travel.

In the forward to the First Canadian Edition (1966), Patterson explains the book this way:

The Dangerous River tells of trips made in the North just before the aeroplane made all places accessible to any kind of man, however soft he might be and however useless in the bush. Those of us who had the good fortune to be on the South Nahanni in those last days of the old North may, in times of hunger or hardship, have cursed the day we ever heard the name of that fabled river. Yet a treasure was ours in the end: memories of a carefree time and an utter and absolute freedom which the years cannot dim nor the present age provide.

As Stevens truly said on that hilarious evening in Deadman's Valley in the spring of 1929, we were kings, lords of all we surveyed.

The Dangerous River is the story of our kingdom.

In the forward to the 1953 edition Patterson makes a wonderful and, at least in my opinion, highly inaccurate statement. He states that his trip and this book need not portray the actors in a heroic light, as the country was well stocked with game and was a happy place. He states he was glad they did not add much to the "*world's biggest curse—its stock of scientific knowledge*". But then confesses to falling from grace and taking a compass bearing and distance assessments which he used to produce a map. Then in what I believe to be a highly inaccurate assessment of this book he states:

Having, then, made it quite clear to the prospective reader that his mind is in no danger of improvement at my hands.....

This book has a wealth of information told in a very readable travelogue format that cannot fail to improve the mind of even the most casual reader. Patterson starts at the beginning and tells us of his time spent, not a day-by-day travelogue but an encompassing linear tale of his time. We have snippets of daily operations and skills that are both clear and entertaining. We have geographical descriptions that paint grand images of the river, the canyon, and the falls. We have plant and animal descriptions that tell of the diversity and abundance of this region. Each page contains information presented in such a readable way that it clearly defies Patterson's attempts to not improve the readers mind.

This book can be evaluated in three parts, the 1926-27 preplanning, done on a trip back to England, the 1928 season which brings Patterson alone by canoe into the South Nahanni for a spring to fall exploration of the river and surrounding streams, and the 1929 return in the spring and over wintering with his partner Gordon Matthews. The preplanning chapter (Part 1) introduces the South Nahanni and its strange and mysterious gold rumors and fatal consequences of its exploration. The 1928 season (Part 2 and 3) introduces some of the local characters like the red breached Faille who joins Patterson in the trip up the Nahanni to Flat River. These chapters also cover Patterson's

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initial exploration of the Nahanni area, and return via the Liard river home to Alberta. The heart of the book consists of the final 4 chapters. These cover the year long season of 1929-30 (Parts 4-7) with Matthews. Patterson also introduces other travelers who are starting to explore the area, probably based on gold rumors that were generated by Patterson's return. Here we have entry once again via canoe in the spring, exploration, building a cabin for the winter trapping, and trips via foot and dog-sled to and from Fort Simpson in the middle of winter.

In Part 1, *The Legend* Patterson outlines the McLeod brothers supposed gold find and their fatal and mysterious end. *Deadman's Valley*, *Headless Valley*, *The Valley of Vanishing Men* all names applied to the Nahanni valley due to the McLeod's apparent murder and loss of heads. Other mysterious disappearances, natural and unnatural are also noted by Patterson in this opening chapter, including many after his time spent there. Patterson quoting Flynn Harris "*The Nahanni is a nasty piece of water, and an arduous and dangerous waterway for the best of navigators*". So this is where Patterson chose to go after reading a book in England that seemed to connect a pathway via canoe. He outlines his decision to go and his unique qualifications this way:

Then at Fort Simpson, one would turn up there northwest into the lonely mountain country of the Yukon divide, the land of the wild white sheep. Sometime soon I would do that, I decided—and strangely enough never doubted that I could, though exactly what I proposed to use in place of experience has since often puzzled me.

Patterson obviously gains the necessary experience to both explore the Nahanni valley and return. Part 2, *The South Nahanni River*, has Patterson arriving on the river on Sunday July 24, 1927 after a trip up the Liard. Just before reaching the Nahanni he encounters Albert Faille who is going up the Nahanni to Flat River. He is going to build a cabin and trap over the winter. Faille has a freighter canoe with small outboard and offers a tow to Patterson. Here is how he describes Faille, the man who always wears red pants:

Behind, however, though still out of sight and earshot, came the man whose name, above all others, was to be associated with the Nahanni for the next forty years—Albert Faille. The Nahanni has probably never seen a finer canoeman, and to watch Faille search out the weak spot in a riffle and plant his canoe's nose exactly there, and neither to the right nor to the left by even a hand's breath, is like watching a fine swordsman seeking for an opening, feeling out his adversary. He was of Swiss descent, born in Minnesota, that land of lakes and clear streams: mountains were in his blood as well as rivers and he, too, was heading for the Nahanni Butte on that July afternoon, sitting in the tail end of his canoe listening to the song of his little outboard as it churned up the Liard.

The trip up the Nahanni is a leap frog of these two, with Patterson learning from Faille and them enjoying the time together. Later in the summer Patterson is camping alone on the Nahanni. In this selection from a great passage we have a description of a moose calf and his camp:

The next day was one of blazing sunshine and joyous venture on the river, winding up with an unseemly fracas in camp at suppertime...

I threw my bedroll down by a big spruce at the foot of the cliff, took off a soaking wet shirt and hung it on a tree to dry, and went to bail the canoe which had shipped water on the last crossing of the river....

As I bailed I heard a grunting noise from upstream: a cow moose and her calf were swimming the river; the calf was having a tough time of it in the fast water and the cow was talking to it and encouraging it.....it splashed ashore about fifteen yards below camp....

I was in the classic situation—in between mother and child; and mother weighed about eight hundred pounds, and a decidedly querulous note was creeping into her grunts....

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I waded into the river to see if I could get around the calf and chase it back upstream to its mother: out of the corner of one eye I could see that the soup was boiling over; the tea pail also had a fine head of steam up, and no doubt the rice was burning—and I silently cursed the whole tribe of moose right back to its remote beginnings....

I came dripping out of the river below him and walked up the bank....I came right up behind him, flapped the red scarf suddenly and let out one devil of a yell....he was going faster than mortal moose calf had ever gone before. And how perfectly it was working out!

But how completely the picture changed, all in a fraction of a second! Just as the calf drew level with it a little breeze from the west flapped the shirt that was drying on the tree: he gave a blat of terror and shied sideways, stumbling over the long logs of the fire. Over went everything, but particularly the mulligan pot which he sent flying ahead with his front feet. He then bucked over the fire and landed with one hind foot through the stout bail of the mulligan pot, which somehow stayed with him for about three jumps and then, sailed into the river, from which I rescued it.

Supper was a wreck, the partridge mulligan had gone down the river, and the calf had pretty nearly squared the pot for me; I spent half the night hammering it round again with the back of the axe.

This writing style is typical of the book, excellent stories told in an entertaining and complete way. Some of the passages are funny, some instructive of his wilderness operations and observation skill, some illustrating the significant dangers one could encounter alone in such a wilderness.

Part 3 tells of his trip out of the Nahanni in the fall of 1928, back on the Liard River to Fort Nelson where he attempts an overland trip back to the outside. This plan of course goes awry when the trail is indistinct but Patterson hitches up with another group going out to the Peace River. Patterson heads south by horse and boat on down to Dunvegan Alberta and finally home at the nearly the end of October.

The remainder of the book consists of Parts 4-7, an afterword, appendix, and glossary. This is the 1929 return trip by canoes (3) to the Nahanni and the winter spent in Deadman's Valley with Gordon Matthews. This part of the tale is especially good reading and consists of many well written stories of exploration, hunting, trapping, canoeing, and sledding. This time they have a few dogs and they build a cabin and cache to sustain their trapping enterprise over the winter. I will only quote a smaller passage here to give some flavor to this section. Here Patterson is on a walk out to Fort Simpson to locate Gordon just after Christmas. He took minimal kit as he was backpacking it on snowshoes. Descriptions of his camp and evening are particularly instructive of living in a very cold environment utilizing mostly skills and minimum equipment, unfortunately it is too long to quote for this review and too good to excerpt or shorten. However on the walk out Patterson needs to cross the Nahanni and it has not completely frozen over. He discovers a snow bridge and crosses it:

It was a poor looking affair whichever way you look at it....This odd looking bridge was about sixty feet long at the most and ten or twelve feet wide at its narrowest....It was not all solid ice: a good deal of its thickness was water-soaked snow that had frozen into a white, crystalline mass. There it was and you could take your choice—go back to a toilsome trail through deep snow and unknown hills with insufficient grub—or have a go at it.

I would try it—but not with this pack on my back; it might prove to be the last straw. I took my pack off and got out the eighty-foot trackline. I made one end of this fast to the pack and coiled the rest so that it would pay out easily. I whirled the axe around and sent it flying over: It landed with its shaft sticking up out of the snow and I wished to God I was over there with it. Then, with the pole in my left hand and the coiled line in my right, I ran lightly out as I went. Something cracked in the middle and made my heart miss a beat, and on the way up the opposite slope, one

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snowshoe slipped on the ice and.....

While we know Patterson lived to write the tale, I will leave this cliffhanger, so to speak, for you to discover.

Patterson in the forward to the Canadian Edition explains that he had "*no technical knowledge of writing, no training, and, I now think, some weird ideas on punctuation.*" But I think you will agree from the quotes above, that his lack of writing training had little effect on the enjoyable reading it provides. It is a well constructed story from the first to the last page, and I highly recommend it. This 1966 First Canadian Edition is a good volume as it includes this updated forward which is humorous and adds a tiny correction to the original edition.

The Dangerous River is relatively easily found on bookfinder and eBay for reasonable prices. It was originally printed in England and the US, reprinted several times and then reissued in Canada in 1966 and 1969. My 1966 edition has several good B&W photos taken by the author. Patterson has also written several other books that I have not yet read including *The Buffalo Head*, *Far Pastures*, *Finlay's River*, and *Trail to the Interior*.

Post-scriptum :Version 1.5 4/1/2004 Version 1.6 4/5/2004 Liard River correctly spelled, Thanks Jimbo.