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True North, Elliott Merrick, 1933

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Description :

True North is an excellent story of a pair of city folk, Elliott and Kay Merrick, who give up the urban life, move to Labrador and learn from both their neighbors and the environment. The book covers a season up the Grand River. In by canoe, and out by hand pulled toboggan, learning from John Michelin and other trappers the necessary skills to live in such an environment.

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Elliott Merrick, 1905-1997, wrote the forward to Alexandra and Garrett Conover's *Winter Wilderness Companion*. Their praise of him in their opening chapter encouraged me to find and read *True North*. The opening chapter of *True North* dovetailed into my recent study of Calvin Rutstrum's books and his philosophy on work-life balance. These following lines, expressed in 1933 remind me of Calvin Rutstrum's similar, but less dramatic mantra expressed throughout his life works. One wonders if in the vast Rutstrum library there was not a well-thumbed copy of *True North*.

Opening lines from Part 1, *Awakening*:

Each June from the educational grist mills come thousands of sad young men who do not take to the great American religion of business, who dislike being sandwich men with signs on their backs that read, "My life is for sale to the highest bidder."

I happen to have been one of them, and after two years of outwardly conforming, possessed of a good job and excellent prospects, the internal struggle still raged....

Why should it be considered lazy-man's dilettantism to work in the sunshine all day long, digging, building a house, fishing, or sailing a boat? And to labor in the frenzied city of stupid ants at a task patently not worth the doing---oh, that was praiseworthy and natural. Who turned the world upside down anyway? Who like an evil fairy in a book, switched all the values, calling the true values shams and the shams truth?

Each man has only one lifetime, and in that space he gets what he wants most; not what he thinks he wants or would like to want, but what he really wants.

One muggy night just before a thunderstorm, I sat up in bed and hammered my fist on the wall and screamed in my mind, "I'm getting out." And I got out.

My wife and I live in Labrador.

Elliott Merrick moves to Labrador, finds his wife, Kay, and they start a life together, working for the Grenfell Mission on Goose Bay off Lake Melville. He earns a living teaching, hauling wood and crewing on fishing boats; Kay by nursing. Just north of this arm of Lake Melville lies Grand Lake, Susan's Brook and the Nascauppee River the location of the ill-fated Hubbard canoe trip of 1903. (I feel another review coming) One of the residents of this community played a role in that saga.

As for happiness, it is not often one meets a person who has a good life and knows it, but I have met one here. It is Bert Blake, a thick-set pronouncedly Eskimo trapper with a jolly grin and a weathered face. He knows more of the country way back in than any other hunter. When he was sixteen he ran away from home to go with Mrs. Hubbard by canoe and portage to Michikamau and clear down the George River to Ungava Bay.

Living in this community they come to know many of the residents and wish to learn more about their winter trapping spent scattered over the surrounding countryside. Most of the men in the community have winter trapping territories

up the Grand River (aka Hamilton River and now Churchill River) and Elliot and his wife, decide to spend the trapping season with John Michelin in his winter tilt, 350 miles up the River. Getting there is the first challenge for the pair. So equipped with supplies and canoes they set forth on the upriver trip with a group of trappers in mid September of 1930. Learning the ways of the experienced begins right away.

September 13, 1930. We all went ashore on a sandbar about eleven, made a fire and had bread and tea standing up in a cold, raw wind. I don't even know how to drink tea. I'm always putting my spoon down on a log or a stone and losing it. Every one else leaves his in his cup and holds it there with his thumb when he drinks, thus not losing any time hunting around for it.

September 25 1930. We gallop along so fast there is scarcely time for anything. The canoe is leaking from scrapes and cuts on rocks. Occasionally there is time to dry the canvas around the cut by taking a brand and blowing its heat on the bad spot. If it is dried this way, resin will stick on. But generally we slap on some butter or lard, which does well enough until it gets rubbed off. We put sticks in the bottom to lift the flour bags a few inches up out of the water, but even so everything is wet. The guns are getting rusty, and long ago everything small was lost and everything breakable broken.

Whenever I am tired or discouraged late in the afternoon I think of the subway rush that is on now; Times Square and the people jammed against the platform bars, the clank of the chains as the guards unhook them and the wild mob fights into a car. Then I look around and feel better. No matter what any one says, men in cities spend their lives and win their bread fighting other men. In primitive places they fight nature and are drawn to other men by the common battle. The difference in character and viewpoint between a hunter and a salesman is as fundamental and irreconcilable as though they lived on different planets.

On October 6, they arrive at John's winter home, a small trapper's tilt. They begin to learn the life of the trapper; the food, the walks, the fur, the bugs, the heat, the cold, the ax, the pack, the sled.

I can easily see why 70 years later, Alexandra and Garrett Conover praise Elliott Merrick for his skills.

October 23. Found a broken Indian flat sled in the bushes to use as a pattern, and I am going to make one. We've got to have a sled for tripping around as soon as freeze-up comes. On it Kay and I will lash our tent and stove, sleeping bags, grub, kettle, axe and gun, then ho for Unknown Lake.

The toboggan sled is a bit of pure art very much like a canoe, useful, strong, graceful. Indians invented both, and white man has never discovered anything to equal either for traveling overland in this country.

October 30. The axe is a most indispensable tool, serving as a saw, hammer, plane, wedge, anvil, blazer of trails, brush cutter, ice tester and a thousand other things. But it is also a dangerous friend where there is wood to be cut for the night and it's dark and the fingers that grip the helve are stiff in a pair of icy mitts. There is not a man in North West River who hasn't a scar on foot or leg where the bright-bladed friend bit him.

Merrick observed and learned the necessary skills well, but it was not always easy. Over course of the winter he shoots himself through-and-through in the leg, and then nearly chops off a toe with his "bright-bladed friend". But reading the passages of the trap line walk to Unknown Lake with John; hauling the sled, setting up of the tent, lighting the stove, cooking the food, reveling in the heat, all are nearly exactly duplicated 70+ years later by Alexandra and Garrett Conover in *The Winter Wilderness Companion*. The skills taught by this pair are nearly identical in both tools and techniques, and most importantly pleasure. It is easy to see why they are so strongly connected to Elliott Merrick.

Around Christmas the Merrick's, John and several of the other trappers start the walk back home. The cold, the snow and the long pull out makes for great reading. The skills learned trapping are refined on the way out. The stove is celebrated each night in the tent.

The cold sinks into us and becomes part of our minds and bodies, waking and sleeping. For we are more often cold than warm. It keeps us taught and alert. We wake at the touch of a finger and immediately know where we are. In the nights, dead with fatigue, wake up chattering with cold, to scratch a match, light the candle and kindle the fire, biting our lips and trembling in haste. I think we are as devoted fire worshippers as any since the world began. We glory before the yellow, red tongues that lick up through the curled shavings (which we draw every night before going to bed), and the crackle of the kindling, and the tin stove roaring, chortling and trembling on its legs with joy to be alive again.

A few days from home the Merrick's finish the walk out alone, the trappers rushing ahead to get to families. Here five months after leaving they have learned from the skilled trappers and recognize their skills:

January 9. I think that we are not the same people we were in the fall. We haven't the faintest resemblance to born hunters, but we have learned a number of things about taking care of ourselves since September. At least we have a good idea of what we are capable of and what is impossible for us. And from now on we will be able to improve and grow more independent of help.

This is a nicely crafted story that has wilderness operations lessons told in well done daily dialogs. We have great examples of the difficult times spent by the trappers to earn a winter living, the hardships faced by their families, the work ahead for spring and summer and the freedom and joy that go with self-sufficient living. This is a very readable and enjoyable book. I highly recommend it.

True North was originally published in 1933 by C. Scribner and Sons, New York. My 353 page copy is an archival quality paper, Bison Book, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln Nebraska soft cover released in 1989 and has several photographs and a nice 2 page map of the Labrador and Quebec area. *True North* is listed for remarkably high prices (over \$100!) as a "Softcover Print on Demand" edition and from \$50 for a used soft cover to the significantly higher priced original 1933 edition on bookfinder. I purchased my edition for \$2.50 on eBay. Merrick wrote several other books, including *The Long Crossing and other Labrador Stories*, *Ever the Wind Blows*, *Frost and Fire* and *Northern Nurse* (his wife's biography), unfortunately none of which I have yet read.

Post-scriptum :Version 1.0 4/8/2004