

3. Camping has come a long way from the original idea of "getting away from it all" with a tent and a campfire. Write an essay showing the extent to which modern camping equipment and supplies have taken the "roughing it" element out of camping.
4. Write a humorous account of a camping or holiday experience.

The Nature of the North

by *Farley Mowat*

1
Somewhere far to the north of Newfoundland, the St. Lawrence Sea-
way, Place Ville Marie, the Macdonald-Cartier Freeway, the bald-headed
prairie and Stanley Park lies an unreal world conceived in the mind's
eye, born out of fantasy and cauled in myth. It is a weird and terrible
land where nothing is as it may seem. Home of the ice worm and the
igloo, of mad trappers and mushing Mounties, of pingos and polar bears,
of the legions of the damned that were conjured into being by Robert
Service, its voice is the baleful whisper of the aurora borealis, the eerie
howl of Jack London's malemutes and the whining dirge of C.B.C. wind
machines. It is a "white hell", "the ultimate desolation", a "howling
wasteland", "the Land that God Forgot" and "the Land God Gave to
Cain." It is a region almost wholly of our contriving, and we have made
of it so inimical a world that the truly alien moon, even as seen on tel-
evision screens and in picture magazines, seems to have more reality.

2
This North, this Arctic of the mind, this frigid concept of a flat and
formless void of ice and snow congealed beneath the impenetrable black-
ness of the polar night, is pure illusion. Behind it lies a lost world ob-
scured in drifts of literary drivel, obliterated by blizzards of bravado
and buried under an icy weight of obsessive misconceptions. The mag-
nificent reality behind the myth has been consistently rejected by Ca-
nadians since the day of our national birth and is rejected still. Through
almost a century the Far North has meant to Canadians either a night-
marish limbo or an oppressive polar presence looming darkly over south-
ern Canada and breathing icily down our necks. During most of that
century the handful of people who called themselves Canadians were

engrossed in the occupation of the apparently limitless spaces on the southern fringes of the country. When that space was finally circumscribed and its limits reached, Canadians did not look northward to the challenge of the unknown half of their share of the continent. The northern myth seemed more than they could face, even as it had in the past. They shunned it then — they shun it still. With the exception of a very few outstanding individuals, most of them employed by the Geological Survey of Canada, the exploration of the High North was accomplished, not by Canadians, but by British, French, Scandinavian, German, American and even Portuguese adventurers — men who mastered the myth, faced the reality, and took their knowledge home with them to their native lands. Those who followed in the paths of the explorers and made use of their discoveries, the traders and merchant exploiters, were English, Scotch, French and American, and the companies that employed them (such as the Hudson's Bay Company, Revillon Frères, Canalaska Trading Company) operated out of London, Paris, New York and Seattle. Even the missionaries, coming in time-honoured manner in the wake of trade, were aliens. Moravians from Germany, and Grenfell from England, worked the Labrador coast; throughout the rest of the North, Oblate priests from Belgium and France competed for souls with Anglican priests straight out from England. Meanwhile the seas of the Canadian North were being exploited by Scotch and American whalers. In the Yukon the placer gold fields were overrun by men of half a hundred lands — and there were precious few Canadians among them. White trappers, moving in on the Eskimos and Indians, were almost exclusively northern Europeans. Even Canada's standard-bearers of a token sovereignty in the Arctic, the North West (later the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, got most of their first recruits from England, Scotland, Newfoundland and even farther afield.

3 The pattern is old and well established. A century after the nation's birth, about three-quarters of the exploration and exploitation of the Canadian North is being carried out by consortiums controlled by American, European and Japanese companies. Military occupation of the North, while nominally a joint undertaking, remains effectively American. Until the middle of the twentieth century almost the only Canadians in the Arctic were Indians and Eskimos; but they were people born to the reality and in any case were, and are, "Canadians" only by courtesy.

4 Only since the early 1950's have southern Canadians begun to glance over their shoulders northward. As yet only a handful have made the

effort to penetrate to the reality behind the myth and to actually go north, not to make a quick buck and then flee south as if the very hounds of hell were on their heels, but to attempt to make themselves integral parts of a gigantic and exciting world spurned by the nation that pretends to own it.

They are very few indeed. Apart from government employees and similar transients employed by mines and military installations, there are not more than a few thousand Canadians of other than Eskimo or Indian ancestry living in a land that is larger than the ten provinces. And most of these few are concentrated in southern Yukon Territory and around Great Slave lake. In the central and eastern reaches, themselves ten times as vast as Texas, only a few hundred southern Canadians make the North their abiding home.

These are the true pioneers in a nation that is fond of boasting about her pioneering spirits. Men like Bob Williamson at Rankin Inlet, Terry Ryan at Cape Dorset, Ross Peyton at Pangnirtung, Ernie Lyall at Spence Bay, Fred Ross at Cambridge Bay, Tom Butters at Inuvik, Allan Innis-Taylor at Dawson, Bob Engles at Yellowknife, Don Stuart at Hay River — these are of the few, the dedicated ones, who have committed their lives to a land the rest of us reject. They are trying desperately to neutralize the apathy and ignorance of southern Canada, to destroy the suffocating myth so that we others may come to know the North for what it really is. So that we may come to recognize it as a part of our nation.

Men like these believe that *la dolce vita* is the way of death for any country. They would have us face resolutely north to a world that offers us — if we are men and women enough to recognize and grasp the opportunity — not only the material wealth we crave, but a fighting chance of finding the greatness of spirit that Canada so signally lacks.

* * *

The first difficulty that must be mastered in coming to grips with the Far North is to decide just where "north" begins and to ascertain its boundaries. Modern man has tried to evade the issue by separating the northern regions into sections, like a layer cake, so that he can deal with each part as a separate entity. Ask a scientist for a definition of "north" and you are instantly ears deep in boreal, subarctic and arctic zones, in isotherms, degree-days and permafrost limits. The truth is that the region has no arbitrary southern boundary except insofar as one exists in us as a state of mind. The situation is akin to that of an astronaut shot up in a rocket. At what point does he enter space? At no point, but only when he has become aware that he has entered an alien environment.

9 Since Canadians generally regard the Far North as an alien environment, they enter it when they leave their familiar world of the South behind them. The entry takes place in the upper reaches of the broad band of sombre coniferous forest that stretches across the entire breadth of Canada. Beginning near the Yukon-British Columbia border, this transition region slopes southeastward to Hudson Bay near Churchill where it swings sharply south, paralleling the coast around James Bay. It then angles northeastward across Ungava to reach the Atlantic in the general vicinity of Nain on the Labrador coast. At its southernmost point (the top of James Bay) there are polar bears, seals, tundra, and caribou. The North embraces the arctic zone but it is not limited to that region, nor to the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. It includes a sliver of northern Alberta, rather more of northern Saskatchewan, a goodly bite of northern Manitoba, a nibble of Ontario, a large part of Quebec, and the upper portion of Labrador.

10 It comprises a huge section of the earth's surface. Measuring from the north tip of Ellesmere Island (less than five hundred miles from the North Pole), the northern land mass strikes southward nearly two thousand miles to Cape Henrietta Maria on Hudson Bay — roughly the distance between Montreal and Calgary! And from the Alaska-Yukon border to Cape Dyer on the coast of Baffin Bay it stretches about the same distance east and west. It encompasses about one million, seven hundred thousand square miles — nearly half the total area of Canada.

11 The Canadian North reaches from Atlantic to Pacific but, more important, it extends almost to the heart of the Arctic Ocean. Canada fronts on this third ocean, which is a true mediterranean sea, in exactly the same way that North Africa fronts on the European Mediterranean. This is a startling idea but one we would be well advised to get used to since Asia, Europe and North America all face each other across the almost land-locked polar sea and it is here that the three continents lie closest together. The orientation we get from looking at standard maps that show the North Pole at the top of beyond is arbitrary and wrong. This is not the way the world really is. The polar region is actually the centre of the northern hemisphere, and the geographic centre of Canada is in the Keewatin tundra 250 miles north-northwest of Churchill. Consequently when we turn our back on the North in the belief that there isn't much of interest in that direction, we are turning our backs on Europe and Asia, as well as on a great part of our own country. So far only the military men, preoccupied with death and destruction, have grasped this vital fact. When and if Canadians have the sense to appreciate its peaceful

significance we may become a nation at the centre, instead of remaining a sycophantic satellite at the back door of the United States.

12 One of the particularly cockeyed misconceptions we have about our North is that it is all of a piece — or, at the most, of two pieces: a bleak expanse of frozen sea and a dreary wilderness of frozen plain. The truth is that the Arctic displays as much variety as any other great natural realm on earth. Stretching from central Labrador to Baffin Island, the up-tilted eastern edge of the Canadian Shield forms a shaggy range of glacier-encrusted mountains that are as formidable, as massively overwhelming in appearance, as anything in the Rockies. There is nothing to match them in eastern North America; yet they are almost unknown to us. They form the eastern wall of the North. Far to the westward, beyond the Mackenzie River, rise range after range of mountains that culminate in the St. Elias Range whose glacier-shrouded peaks soar to nearly twenty thousand feet in Canada and twenty-four thousand in Alaska. This is the western wall. Between these walls sprawls the worn and pitted face of the Canadian Shield composed of some of the oldest rocks on earth and so eroded by the work of the eons that only the time-smoothed stubs of its once-mighty mountains remain as undulating hills, giving relief to the naked, ancient rock. Here, in the shield country, lies the greatest assemblage of lakes upon our planet. Between the western edge of the Shield and the risers of the Yukon Cordillera lies a broad tongue of lowlands that extends north from the Great Central Plains of North America, and down it one of the world's greatest rivers, the Mackenzie, carries the waters of the Peace, the Liard, and many lesser rivers to the Arctic Ocean.

13 North of the mainland lies the Arctic Archipelago, some nine hundred thousand square miles of lands constituting the largest island group in the world. These islands, too, have their variety. Some are mountainous, others are low and grassy plains, still others are bald stone and gravel deserts. Surrounding them lies a complex of sounds and channels as intricate as the most sophisticated maze.

14 Contained within the arctic lands of Canada is the vast inland sea of Hudson Bay, in which the British Isles could be sunk without a trace. East of the main northern land mass a tremendous river carried on the Labrador Current flows down through Baffin Bay and Davis Strait, stretching an arctic tentacle as far south as Nova Scotia. The polar ocean is itself a species of "land", for it is perpetually ice covered and, though the ice moves, men can and do travel over it, and four-engine aircraft can land upon it.

- 15 Although the bone structure of most of the North, the Canadian Shield, is perhaps five million years old, much of the land looks raw and new. This is because a mere ten thousand years ago the entire region, except for the northwestern corner, lay buried beneath a gigantic ice sheet. The dome of the Keewatin District ice sheet was two miles thick. Its own titanic weight made the ice sheet plastic and it flowed implacably in all directions outwards from several high-domed centers. It scoured and gouged the ancient rocks, shearing off the surface soil layers and leaving behind an incredibly intricate pattern of water-filled valleys, basins, and deep coastal fiords. When the ice eventually melted it left the land littered with debris that ranged from barn-sized boulders to vast fields of shattered rock, and it embossed the naked bones of the country with a complex design of morainic ridges, drumlins, and long sinuous eskers of sand and gravel.
- 16 The ice had another, unseen effect. It deep-froze the rock beneath it, producing what we call permafrost. In the extreme northern islands permafrost penetrates fifteen hundred feet into the primeval rock. Even as far south as northern Manitoba the ancient frost remains, unyielding, only a few feet below the shallow surface layers that thaw in summer.
- 17 Remnants of the ice sheet itself also survive. In the wall of the eastern mountains some sixty thousand square miles of ice crown the heights and fill great valleys. Other remnants of ice persist in the mountains of the west.
- 18 Another generally held misconception about the North is that its climate is so hostile that only polar bears and Eskimos can endure it. Yet winter blizzards on the western prairies can match, in ferocity if not in intensity, the worst weather the North produces. Northern residents who have subsequently endured a winter at Saskatoon or Winnipeg have been heard to refer with nostalgia to the North as "the banana belt". Surprisingly, it is a dry world with very little rain or snowfall. Winter snows often lie deeper in Toronto or Montreal than in most parts of the North. Although not even the Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce would call northern winters balmy, summers can be lovely. There are only two true seasons: winter and summer, the transitions between them being so brief as to be negligible. Near and north of the Arctic Circle the midsummer sun never sets and temperatures sometimes persist in the comfortable sixties and higher for days on end. In winter above the Arctic Circle the sun vanishes for weeks or months, but this "long night" is seldom really dark. The Northern Lights often give a pervading luminosity and the glitter of the stars in a lucid atmosphere combined with bright moonlight provides

enough light for almost normal activity, including hunting.

The concept of the Far North as a lifeless land is another of our more grotesque illusions. Its southern fringes include the upper reaches of the taiga forests — mainly black and white spruce, larch, birch and poplar. The northward-marching trees of the taiga grow sparser and more stunted until they fade out in the vast open plains called tundra. There is no absolute line of demarcation between taiga and tundra — no real "timberline". The two regions interpenetrate like the clasped fingers of gigantic hands. There are pockets of tundra deep inside the forest, and oases of trees far out on the sweep of the tundra. Nor is the tundra all of a kind. There is alpine tundra high on mountain slopes, shrub tundra close to the taiga region, sedge tundra to the north, moss-and-lichen tundra still farther north and, on the extreme northern islands, fell-field tundra where vegetation finally gives up its stubborn attempt to occupy the remote lands that lie surrounded by unyielding polar ice. But in summertime most tundra regions boast an array of flowering plants of infinite number and delight. Although they are small, they mass in such profusion that they suffuse hundreds of square miles with shifting colour. They form a Lilliputian jungle where hunting spiders, bumblebees, small and delicate moths and butterflies abound. Black flies and mosquitoes abound too, alas, and there is no evading the fact that they are the bane of summer in the North.

Birds breed almost everywhere. Mammals of many species, ranging from squat, rotund lemmings to massive muskox occupy the lands. The seas are home to whales, seals, obese walrus and sinuous white bears. The seas are also rich in fishes as are the numberless inland lakes. For those with eyes to see, the North is vitally and vividly alive. Long, long ago, men of other races out of another time recognized this truth and learned to call the northern regions "home".

(1967)

The Writer's Subject

1. What does Mowat mean by his assertion that the North is "a region almost wholly of our contriving"? (para. 1)
2. Why, in Mowat's view, have Canadians consistently rejected "the magnificent reality behind the myth" of the North? (para. 2)
3. Mowat outlines the pattern of early exploration and development of the Canadian North, pointing out how little was the contribution made by Canadians themselves. What, in his view, is the current situation?

4. What contrast does Mowat draw in paragraphs 4–7 between southern Canadians and those who live and work in the North? Why does he believe that southern Canadians must “face resolutely north”?
5. What analogy does Mowat use in paragraph 8 to show the difficulty of establishing where the North begins?
6. What is the “vital fact” about the Canadian North that is so far understood only by the military?
7. What are the principal misconceptions about the North that Mowat addresses from paragraph 12 onwards? What evidence does he produce to dispose of these misconceptions?

The Writer’s Style and Strategy

1. Why does Mowat begin the essay with a list of the various images associated with the North?
2. What effect is he seeking by using such phrases as “mad trappers and mushing Mounties” or “the whining dirge of C.B.C. wind machines”? What is the point Mowat is making with the five phrases in quotation marks? (para. 1)
3. What is the tone of the first two sentences of paragraph 2? What figure of speech does Mowat use in the second sentence of paragraph 2? What response does Mowat hope to arouse in the reader by this strategy?
4. What words or phrases convey most clearly Mowat’s critical attitudes to southern Canadians?
5. What audience has Mowat in mind for this essay? Provide specific evidence for your point of view.
6. Much of this essay is devoted to a description of the North. How does the descriptive element of this essay serve Mowat’s argumentative purpose?
7. Discuss the means by which Mowat establishes the size and magnificence of the Arctic landscape in paragraphs 12–15. Comment on his use of adjectives, particularly superlatives.
8. How does Mowat convey the rich variety of plant life on the tundra in paragraph 19? Identify instances of personification, simile, and metaphor in this paragraph, and comment on the description of the flowering plants as “a Lilliputian jungle.”

Suggested Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. Find a recent newspaper or magazine article about Canada’s North and discuss how it confirms or contradicts Mowat’s thesis that Southern Canadians have constructed a false myth about the North.
2. Mowat says somewhat bitterly that Canada lacks greatness of spirit. Do you agree?
3. Choose a nation, national group or geographic region (e.g., China, the Russians, the Sahara) and discuss the stereotypical images and myths associated with it. Can you, as Mowat has done, account for the formation of such myths and offer an opposing view?
4. In paragraph 4, Mowat says that it is only since the 1950s that southern Canadians have “begun to glance over their shoulders northward”; he implies that Canadians habitually face south. Indeed, he goes on to condemn Canada as a “sycophantic satellite” of the United States. Has the situation changed since Mowat wrote this essay in 1967? Does the North figure more prominently in our national consciousness, or is our orientation still primarily to the south?