PART ONE
CHAPTER ONE

TO BROKEN SKULL

I am back in the mountains – back home. The kerosene lantern is alight in this mid-afternoon hour and I look through the black eyes of window and watch the white shoes of ice shuffle silently downriver. Black spruce spire the far shore. A cold breeze moves the tree tops and moans in the tin chimney. That first soft paw of winter is upon the land, upon me.

An Indian summer lingered golden into November but I have seen no game. I am without meat. With no kill there will be no pemmican for next summer's travel.

The routine of felling dead trees for the log pile, fishing, cooking and sun-bathing has been interrupted by some interesting visitors. At first it was the mice who fed on the crumbs placed out on the window-sill – allowing for macro photos through the pane of glass. Then as the rose-hips ripened on the briars a pair of chipmunks, who live in the cobble river bank, came to feed in acrobatic poses and positioned for perfect photographs. I am eager to work a painting from these. Yesterday three wolves trotted along the ice shore below the cabin.

I walk along the river for a mile or two to hunt the wide expanse of flats – dried water courses and willow thickets - but not a moose track is seen. Other tracks show that four Grizzlies have been digging for roots. Living in the presence of these animals, even if you never see them, lends a new dimension to existence. I walk not in fear but with all senses heightened. Awareness strives for totality yet an unconscious perception places 'self' in an unusually relaxed perspective. Life is quietly thrilling. Can you understand this?

I saw one of these Grizzlies this morning – albeit fleetingly. The out-house is a hundred yards behind the cabin and stands amongst tall, thinly-branched spruce that reach silently into the grey sky, I was inside, the door open, watching a few under-nourished snowflakes parachute a balletic descent through the undisturbed stillness of the forest when the meditation was shattered by some labouring express train. Louder and closer. The closest thing to a locomotive here has to be a bull moose – a bull moose in rut. I cowered back into the hewn planking. One second, two. The noise stopped behind me. Then the crashing went on. Quickly I looked out in

time to see a dark hind-quarter vanish between the trees. Back in the cabin I checked the Winchester 7 magnum and hurried back to the tracks, not ten feet from where I had been perched, impressed firmly in the light snow were the outsize tracks of no moose, but a Grizzly bear.

But a wildlife photographer has as many tales of the 'one that got away' as any fisherman and it would be fitting to first tell of my own escape. I was eleven, the Grammar school I had longed to attend had already lost its charm to the pressures of modern educational systems where learning is but the stick upon which hangs the carrot of success. Learning for the joy of learning had been a romantic illusion from my primary school and I was already cast as one of Service's 'men that don't fit in.'

On my way home from school I had a penchant for lingering within the marvellous Victorian edifice that enclosed my home-town public library and it was upon one such linger that I chanced upon a dusty, blue-bound volume containing black and white photographs of mysterious canyons and rivers, Indians and log cabins. I knew in my bones that I had found a gem. What I did not know was that 'The Dangerous River' (for that was the books title) authored by R.M.Patterson was on its way to becoming a classic of Canadian literature and that in due course it would lead me into the vastness of the Yukon-Mackenzie Divide, along Patterson's trail on the South Nahanni River and along less frequented paths of my own. Later it would be instrumental in my befriending the sole survivor of that Nahanni exploration of the 1920's, Jack Stevens, born in Knightsbridge retired in Yellowknife. In his company I could feel the tenuous thread to the reality of the early North, not only to Patterson but to the loners of the land, Faille, and Hornby, the English eccentric of Thelon fame.

But I jump ahead and stray, as is my want when it comes to do with the Mackenzie Mountains. It was in that same eleventh year that I happened to break my leg. The accident occurred at my English Grammar school and the whole silly episode only proved the ineptness of some doctors and my own inability to catch up with a curriculum four months in advance of my instruction. It was here that I made my break for freedom and cast aside all ambition for doctorates or degrees.

By the time I was fifteen I was suffering; only a trapped animal knows how. But my headmaster was a wise and kindly fellow for with his assistance I found escape and to legally avoid prosecution, for leaving school at too young an age, I embarked on the ferry for Southern Ireland, (where the school leaving age was 15) to go and work with race-horses on the Curragh of Kildare. Now fate is a strange thing and over the years I find it only adds to itself more strangeness. My family had no connections with the ancient isle, nor contacts in the Racing field, but I have a twinkling of a suspicion my maternal grandfather may have played some small part. Though he had died some eighteen years previously, as a boy of sixteen he had run

away from his Lincolnshire home to go and work with horses in Dublin. But in case you think I come from a long line of malcontents I should tell you that my grandfather went on to become the youngest police superintendent of his day. After all, a training with animals, but perhaps horses in particular, is the finest education any youth could receive.

In Ireland I found some of the happiest and most contented people I know. I there learnt how to drink, to swear and to work – and to control all three. It was a near perfect existence. Riding out at dawn through the frost-glistening gorse, galloping up the ploughed gallops of the Curragh in the wind and the rain or trotting down the endless hedgerowed lanes of summer as some ragged cavalry, but upon the finest mounts. Then back to rub down those beautiful, individualistic characters. Clean them, feed them, own them. We really did have the best part of it.

But happiness never yet settled a wondering star. By the time I was sixteen I had made my first attempt to get into Canada having landed a job for myself as a cowboy in Southern Alberta. Red tape over my age thwarted the attempt. At eighteen I returned to England to take up a medley of pursuits from litter-spiker at a holiday camp to selling colour TV's door to door in North London. Primarily though I followed a self-employed trail. A slightly bizarre enterprise was the selling of South American cowhides to Saville Row.

Slowly however I settled into a mixed economy of building and farm work, photography and painting. The Canada goal never quite receded far enough to be forgotten but it did to a sufficient extent to allow for a few years of dubious stability, until that is, I recognized myself in a rut and so leaving a cottage a friend was allowing me to refurbish as a studio I took off for London to put my emigration into motion. The process ended up taking five years and caused me to travel all over Western and North-western Canada in a hectic three month reconnaissance. But with fifteen thousand miles under my belt I gathered enough facts and friends that when all the stops had to be pulled years later, the Commissioner of the North West Territories kindly leant his personal approval to my undertaking. The Consular diplomats bemused by the bulldog tenacity finally unbarred the door and in the Fall of '79 I was free to enter 'The Great Lone Land' to pursue my career as self-employed artist and photographer.

If you have ever flown over an oil rig out in the North Sea you will have some idea of Yellowknife seen from the air. After an ocean of greys, greens and browns, muskeg, trees and water, serrated only by the vandalizing straight tracks of seismic explosions that run on into the endless horizon, Yellowknife appears below upon the confusing shoreline of the Great Slave Lake like some straggly web, as incongruous to the landscape as it really is – born of political will and nurtured by the tentative oil umbilical. But from dust-eating or puddle-splashing level the ten thousand or so inhabitants relax within a scale that remains manageable to most and the precarious nature of the toe-hold is all too easily and successfully forgotten.

I knew no one. I was impressed by the number of flags that fluttered and streamed from the multi-storied offices; they offered the only touch of colour amongst the concrete and festoons of electricity cables. The cars were amazing. Back home we would have considered them small lorries but here, people cruised around town in them to do their shopping. An oil shortage? I was quite taken with the local bird life; beady-eyed and bold, black ravens stalked the city streets, overturning dustbins. Oh yes, the language was supposed to be the same, but not quite, 'garbage cans' were being overturned.

Certainly I made little progress with the address system in use. I wandered the city streets and watched the throng go by: fashion conscious office girls, over-smart business men and the down-to-earth northerners contrasting with wizened old Indians with their wizened old wives in bright blue nylon anoraks and clean white ankle socks. I discovered the difference between a dime and a nickel, yet still sometimes forget. Eventually I found my way down to Old Town – a collection of rejected refrigerators and washing machines, little huts – some inhabited, and rickety houses, float plane docks too where aerial Beavers and Otters waited. Boats pulled up onto concrete wharfs and the Wildcat Café, a genuine log structure, closed for the winter. Old Town had an acquired character.

Back up 'downtown' I called in at the Office of Manpower and Immigration and found that like job-centres anywhere their usefulness was strictly limited. I would be better off finding my own work. Accommodation too was pressing. Both turned up but within the week the job had collapsed – I quit the same day as I was fired – a first in my experience, and so I was left to pay the rent with a quickly executed painting. So began my Canadian professional career. Yet funds would still have to be raised and a steady job seemed like the likeliest source. At a party one night I was introduced to Wolfgang. He was leaving town but told me that the bakery where he worked was requiring someone and urged me to apply the following morning.

Not overloaded with confidence I walked the mile and a half from the sprawling trailer park where I lived, into town and into the Territorial Bakery and therein became trainee chief doughnut fryer. After only a week's watching, trying and frying I was left to it and like the proverbial duck to water I took to the hot fat spitting and bubbling away at 360 F.

So from 10.30pm to 6am every night throughout that my first Canadian winter I produced the varying orders required for delivery and shipment the following morning. A thoroughly enjoyable job and warm too.

Now the North sees an influx of greenhorns every year but like the geese they fly in in the spring and by the time winter begins to show its intent the majority have all flown south. For those who stay the reasons can be many but 'adventure' in one form or another plays a not

insignificant role. Northerners therefore have heard it all before, it is a part of the local entertainment, (sometimes amusing, sometimes pitiful) listening to the latest ill-prepared exploit. Such talk is always the cheapest way to pass the time of day – or night. I certainly had a lot of things to learn and a lot of things to find out, but not to shoot my mouth off before the event, was not one of them. Generally my enquiries were tentative and cautious. My book learning stood me in good stead and my early friendship with Andy Russell, the Albertan author and cinematographer had provided me with invaluable assistance; but it was important now for me to find someone who had actually travelled and maybe even lived in the Mackenzie Mountains. It was a tall order but in the end all fingers were pointing toward one man.

Chris Lord walked into the trailer. Tall, lean, bearded and English. I cannot remember our introductions, perhaps there weren't any but he did call for a couple of glasses and poured from his own Johnny Walker Black. I felt that to use my usual ploy, mild English eccentricity, for extracting information without revealing the extravagant extent of my proposed travels, was hardly valid with this chap. But other tactics brought minimal success. Not that I had anything to hide as such, I was merely embarrassed by the boldness of what I proposed to do – given my inexperience. Chris would have none of it. With a wry wit he asked me to say what I wanted and to say it in a verbal nutshell.

I knew that I was going to be laughed at, but what the hell, maybe I could lay claim to legitimate eccentricity after this: What I want to do is work my way into the mountains by way of the rivers, tracking a canoe load of supplies, to enable me to be quite self-sufficient. I want to find the best area for building a cabin to use as a base for exploratory journeys on foot and by canoe. I reckon on spending three to four years travelling the country and collecting the photographs and material I require for my work as an artist. No, I have no bush experience; never been camping actually. No, haven't paddled a canoe in my life. Used a gun? Can't say I have.

With this continuing litany of negatives I don't suppose Chris knew whether to laugh or cry. Talk about a greenhorn. Thankfully he ended the questioning and laughed – heartily. But I think the fact that I didn't take umbrage and indeed could see the funny side for myself, and that I could very nearly match his own knowledge of all the different watersheds and mountain ranges, went on to answer the most important and unasked question and persuaded him that I was not the average lunatic. It was a long night but the Scotch was the first to leave. By the end of the session I had a better idea of which way the wind blew and how to lean into it.

Over that Winter I made many visits to Chris's fourth floor office where his door plate proclaimed, 'Government Geologist. Nahanni District' and there I added to my growing stock of inside knowledge – the sort that no map can give. As spring became a tangible prospect

logistics were slowly knitting together and the necessary permits and permissions were applied for and received. Chris was going to be away from early June but we arranged to meet within a two week period over at Flat Lake, eight miles out of the mining town of Tungsten on the Yukon-Mackenzie Divide, and if I were not there at the end of the month the chance of a shared charter flight over to my prospective base camp – a lake situated off the Broken Skull River – would fall through.

Norman Libby, the driver for the Bakery then offered to drive me the 1700 miles down to Alberta and back up through B.C. and the Yukon to Tungsten, which only has road access from the western side of the mountains. Everything at last was coming together. So on a hot, sunny Sunday morning with only the ravens walking the streets I said goodbye to Yellowknife and was on my way. Thirty-five hours and 1700 miles later I was at Flat Lake. Two tons of food and equipment was hauled from the van and tarped up on the side of the road where it ended at the small float plane dock. Steep mountainside rose up behind, water lay before, only one small patch of green offered itself for the tent, it was a depressing situation.

For ten days I waited, never straying far in case the plane should come and nervous of bears showing up. I could only ponder whether I had made the right decision in allowing myself to be persuaded to fly in. Back in Yellowknife Chris and others had been adamant, a lone person of no experience could never track up these rivers – especially with a load of supplies on board. With reluctance I gradually accepted their advice. Better not to push my luck. But then finding myself with surplus cash I made one last purchase, a canoe. It would be useful on the lake.

On the tenth day, cold and cloud-laden, the stillness of the land was broken by the monotonous drone of a plane coming in over the far hills. The Nahanni Air Pilatus Porter roared into the dock, Chris got out and I was introduced to Warren, the pilot. They took a quick look over my belongings and decided there was insufficient time to haul it all over to Broken Skull, they had to be back in Ross River to meet the sched', (the scheduled flight). I was told to grab my sleeping bag and we would have a last night on the town. We could fly back tomorrow.

The bar was warm and dark. Smoke hung as cobweb haze from the low ceiling. Old men, old women, etched faces watched us file between beer-ringed tables. A few beautiful Indian girls laughed within the eerie light cast up from a snooker table. Despite the whiskey my mind was elsewhere. I thought of the morrow and like the man who has got to the dentist's chair, I only wanted to be put under before the extraction. Somewhere over that vast purple land, those looming grey scree slopes, across those nameless steel-coloured rivers lay my future. It was a complete unknown. I was uneasy.

‘Which end of the lake do you want?’ Warren motioned as we came in over ‘my’ lake with the first load. I pointed to the north end where the terrain rose less steeply from a reed-thick shore. Whilst encamped at Flat Lake a young couple, Kathy and Tony Macox, had come down from Tungsten, they had lived in the town for nine years and hearing of my proposed journey they dropped by for a chat. A few evenings later Tony came down again and asked if I’d like to take a flight over to Broken Skull – just to see what it looked like?

The Ragged Range as seen from Tony Macox plane.

We took off about 8 pm. and the flight in took an hour but in that time I was awed and shaken. We flew up over the nine-thousand foot Ragged Range leaving its shining glaciers off to our right whilst out on our left in the North, the sun shone brilliantly through evil black-purple storm clouds and rain sheets blanketed distant ranges. Below, knife-back ridges, valleys disappearing up into glaciers, endless scree slopes and winding still, grey rivers. I felt like some spirit let loose between the confines of heaven and hell. The Broken Skull was in shadow as we banked steeply around and I viewed the world as a fish dangling bewildered on the end of a line. Tony skimmed the lake, the lower western ridge and over the river itself. Not accustomed

to bush flying my orientation was a bit off but vaguely I assessed the lie of the land. I felt sick and I felt weak at the prospect ahead. There was no obvious building site.

Now Warren taxied sideways into the reeds and brought the plane to rest. Two long planks were slid out from the pontoons and secured across to a dryer mound. With everything unloaded I busied myself carrying it all further inland and Warren flew back for Chris and the second load. Soon that too was packed off and tarped up. Goodbyes were brief, the plane doors slammed and the engine roared to life. Noisily the Porter swept up off the lake up into the blue sky and set its nose to the South.

I was alone.

The Pilatus Porter departing the lake at Broken Skull.

PART ONE
CHAPTER TWO

APPRENTICESHIP

There is no sound now, the rain has ceased. Ears strain at the silence. A plane? A mosquito? A mosquito. I relax. Leaves rustle gently in an eddy of a breeze. Night settles ever so slowly upon the countless spruce, the less common tamarack – the fair lady of the forest – delicate in her tracery of fine green, the lesser alders too down to the most lowly growths: the mosses, the lichens, the mushrooms, all the berries of the season, night closes. It is time for some to sleep for others to awake. A footfall heard somehow upon the bed of mosses? Perhaps. I close my eyes, it is time to sleep.

Cold early morning. The maniacal laughing of loons cleans my head of all slumber. The land wears a coat of frost for this August dawn with an unblemished mantle of blue overhead. As I stir about I disturb two caribou on the edge of the clearing and am in time to spy white rumps with erect tails vanish into the forest, the lovely sound of hooves hard on frozen ground trailing away. The eastern ridge across the lake hides as yet the sun, but just as steady as a steam locomotive coming into the station bearing friends long unseen, the sun arrives on time. The signals change, shadows dissected by radiance, you catch your breath in the clarity, the expectancy of the air and then the full energy, power and warmth of its almighty body bursts forth – welcome, welcome home.

I have cut a half mile of trail up through the rank growth of the hillside and all the boxes and sacks of equipment and food, along with two fifty-gallon drums to make my stove, have been back-packed onto this gentler rise of land between the river and the lake, and an orderly camp established. At first the immediate ground upon which I planned to build was cleared, stacking any useable timber in one pile, firewood in another and brush and branches were hauled to their own quickly growing mountain. Looking at the trees about me I had to decide to what type of construction they would best be suited, from the point of view of dimensions, number felled and economy of labour. I had been looking forward to the challenge of saddle notching logs laid one on top of another but I reluctantly had to accept the dictates of the forest. With these smaller trees I would have to build with upright logs. The consolation was that I had never seen work done in this manner and I'd be obliged to devise all my own solutions. The 30th June saw the first timber fall.

Setting the foundation logs for Broken Skull cabin.

On the front right corner as I look on at my building plot, one perfectly symmetrical spruce has been left standing. With all the sill logs axed flat on their upper sides, placed true and square and pegged firmly into the ground I ease the first twelve foot log, with its tapered end resting on the sill, up against the standing spruce. Previously augured holes align and quickly a wooden peg is hammered through. Tentatively it hangs there. How many holes will I have to auger? How many cross-braces should I use on the inside face? What will the load be by the time I turn the corner nineteen feet away? How do I work the doorway in and windows too? It all kaleidoscopes about inside my head and I wonder when the first snow will fall.

As work progresses amidst the daily thunderstorms and oppressive heat the home clearing becomes wider and more defined. Caribou trails are my highways, with each one leading to a definite section of the forest. The finest specimens of white or black spruce are always saved and cleared of undergrowth. The younger trees too are given special protection. The feeling of ‘home’ is quickly established. The distant southerly aspect of the Ragged Range grows familiar, whilst the carved flanks of the mountains across from the river come to be well known and almost friendly. The lake remains hidden from view but the great escarpment to the east is such a prominent feature of warm, coloured rock that I entitle it Spanish Ridge, and while I am not keen on this persistent habit of ours of putting a tag on every feature of the planet, ‘Spanish’

just seems to be a natural and has stuck. So, enclosed by forest my emerging abode has a wider aspect – of utmost importance for the short winter days.

Goshawks hunt overhead by day and I can hear the song of insects. The mountains sit in unperturbed silence until thunder challenges their right and lightning teases their crevices and streams. Rain scarves drift across the forest's face while ravens play to an aerial ballet and Golden eagles inspire lesser beings to awe. The whole world turns and lives and dies quite careless of my place, it is for me to earn my position, I own it by no right. The most careless observation tells me so. And now in this latter part of summer my sixteen hour work day is being slowly sapped of its light. I watch the sun burn into the hard core of keen black mountain. Later, beside the dying red embers of my campfire beneath brilliant stars in a velvet sky I hear for the first time in my life, out from the dark cold shadow of the valley, the deep resonant bark of a wolf.

The mornings are growing colder, keeping the mosquitoes quiet, though there are still bad days. One can only laugh – or break down and cry; struggling up the bank with a thirteen foot log on my shoulder, both arms taking some of the strain, and this miniscule being of God's creation lands on the end of my nose. What should I do? Throw the log down and swat him, probably miss and have the sweated task of re-hoisting the log, or let the little animal be and suffer later for my generosity? Well sometimes they won, but either way I usually lost. We kill them so easily but in fact they are truly quite beautiful; they are fearless, cunning and tenacious and for those qualities they have my reluctant respect.

Early morning, the lake at Broken Skull.

The epitome of Canadian wilderness for many is a breath-still lake at dawn, mountain ringed and spruce tree shored. This epitome is my reality on many mornings. Canoe cuts out into the glass-still deepness of the lake; paddle digs down pulling against the mass of water and draws back in line with the hull, turning outward, steering, retracting, and a small whirlpool, gurgling, sidles along the stern to tail off into a brief comma. On my knees I concentrate on perfecting this rhythmic flow of wood, muscle and water, so that our passage becomes a wordless, floating prayer. A prayer that carries us down the centre of this silent world, past a still unlit reed-lined backwater where a Red-necked grebe appears and disappears, phantom-like, beneath the dust laden thinness of the surface. Sunlight slowly pours a molten path, etching as it flows every sleeping, suspended particle afloat and igniting a new pink and blue and yellow conflagration before us. Canoe cleaves cleanly through the sparkling dust leaving in her wake a gently lapping, light catching trail rolling away to a barely perceptible curve. Then our passing vanishes forever absorbed into the stillness.

The resident pair of loons come to welcome me to their end of the lake, sending up their wild alpine song echoing and rebounding off the forested walls and high rock faces in a unique chaos of scale. A moose and her calf watch nervously from the shallows as I pass slowly by to begin my own fishing in deeper water. Two or three hours can often be spent in fishing for my food but today three grayling come up quickly from the dark black water, flashing their aquamarine iridescence and are quickly killed. Canoe is paddled back along the lake to her reed-bed mooring. Tying her rope I stop to listen to branches being broken in the forest above. The noise emanates from a single place and I guess it to be made by a bear. Completing the knot I place the small bucket of ice-cold spring water that contains the skinned fish, in the shade of a stunted spruce, then lifting the camera from Canoe, I wait. I have an uncanny feeling the bear will be coming this way.

A few minutes pass before the noises cease and a big square mass of black bear appears from between the trees and moves down toward me. Up and over the big tussock mounds and around the tough dwarf spruce he keeps a steady, fat-rolling gait. I shoot off a few photographs. He appears not to have seen me. I start talking. No response. He continues right on. Thirty yards. I shoot more pictures, continuing to talk. Still no reaction. Is he deaf? Blind? On he rolls at a determined pace straight for the opening where I am standing. Another photograph. His expression is a blank, he doesn't look or listen, if he has my scent it only attracts him. He is fifteen feet away. Involuntarily my knees begin to shake. I curse them. At six feet I think this has gone far enough.

'Stay' (Quietly, but with unquestionable intent.) He stops and looks quizingly into my eyes. Two scars mark his mask, his ear is torn. I can read no expression in those eyes, only a cool indifference. One more photograph. It is not a great shot, for that I should be down on one

elbow shooting up. He fills the frame, his nose a touch out of focus, short of the lens' range. He turns his head and walks off around me and into the lake. I watch him swim leisurely to the far shore.

The nose is out of focus because the lens was limited to six feet.

Climbing the steep trail I go on home to bring in more logs and to axe them of their bark. Stripping the bark is the most time consuming job but it lengthens the life of a building log. I have to bake bannock for lunch today. In fact I had better start a fire to build up a bed of coals. So with that looking after itself and a bannock mixed, (flour and water) I put my sleeping bag

out to air in the sun and get on with axing more eighteen inch pegs. These are used to hold all the upright wall logs together. Four pegs interconnecting each log with its neighbours, each log having four one inch holes augured through it to receive the pegs. One of the Goshawks alights nearby to spy on my activity. At these times the Canada Jays, the Whiskey Jacks, just melt away like ghosts. But as soon as the raptor goes their grey on grey forms reappear. They delight in my turning logs as with incredible eyesight they glide down so silently from tree- top perch to my side and there dispatch some grub or beetle that had, up to that time been leading a cosy, grubby existence in the hidden recesses of the rough and scaly bark.

The author axing bark from the cabin logs.

The bannock is now browned on both sides to a crisp gold and cut to cool. Lunch is eaten under the shelter of a tarpaulin erected in the centre of the clearing. Boxes are stacked here to form a

solid table and the plastic pails of honey form quite comfortable seats. It is good to be out of the sun. Though the sky in the west is growing terribly dark and a cold wind suddenly rushes through, heralding the storm front as clouds gather overhead and thunder cracks. Rain lashes down and lightning streams across the northern sky. I watch the show from my dining table till a glorious double rainbow sets itself against my back garden wall of Spanish Ridge and I go out to work. But not for long. From behind I hear a grunt. Not knowing what it is I walk quietly into the trees. He stands there with great wondering eyes, legs splayed to support his silver grey body, a caribou calf not ten yards away. He looks me up and down then being in no doubt turns and trots back on to his trail and disappears.

Building with vertical logs

The last four wall logs are put up and pegged before supper. Spruce twigs are placed on the warm ashes, a thin wisp of smoke rises and they ignite. A fire is made up and the kettle set to boil. A covering of safflower oil heats in the cast-iron skillet and the three grayling are swabbed in flour. Thrown into the pan they sizzle and start to curl, a knife keeps them flat and turned

once on each side each fish becomes a golden gastronomic promise. Why I don't get more bears up here is puzzling – the smell is enough to give the most over-fed creature an appetite. My bucket seat is placed against the south wall and the saw-horse table set before it, tea is made and supper is ready. In a warm embracing silence there is total contentment. I look across to the south-west hills where far away, a tiny form at variance with the contour suggests itself and I stare – a caribou? I reach for the binoculars hanging from a peg behind me. Through them I watch a lone caribou walk right on top of that gentle rolling breast of hillside.

The supper things are washed and put away and I linger over a cup of tea watching the frayed ribbons of a cream and purple sky. Three loons fly over circling around from south of the lake, gaining height over the river valley as they head into the northwest. They are big birds. Their backs appear to be arched whilst their feet protrude from under a short tail. I envy them their flight. Where are they going? Only the glow of a descended sun lights the glass clear sky. There will be a frost again tonight. From the heart of the forest I hear the sound again – an all too usual sound – like the bark of a big dog. A wolf. The very ordinariness of it seems to emphasise that I am the stranger here. I feel a tinge of pride, excitement not fear, and thankfulness that I reside in the same country as this creature, this very embodiment of all that lives free of Man's yoke. I haul the food bag up into the tree away from bears and crawl into the tent. It has been quite a day.

The cabin is shaping up well and the walls sit square and solid, nineteen feet across, fifteen feet front to back. The front wall is twelve feet high; the back is six, the side walls angle accordingly. The roof can now be started. Seven, twenty-four foot long logs are dragged to the site. Two are used as central trusses either side of where the chimney will be and run from the front to the back wall. Both are pegged firmly in place. The remaining five are carefully manhandled up on to the side walls from where they are worked across the width of the cabin. Holes are augured and pegs are driven home through the purlin into the end grain of the upright log and also into the two truss logs. The whole network makes for a completely rigid structure.

Days are now spent in cutting and trimming several hundred small diameter poles and these are carried in and cut to twelve and thirteen foot lengths, they will form the base of the roof. Each pole is stripped of its bark then laid carefully, allowing for its natural taper and normal crookedness so that the gap formed with its neighbour will be at a minimum. Every lath has two holes augured through it and into the purlin below, and each hole is angled a little differently so as to forestall any wind lifting the roof off as one. Not a nail is used throughout.

In a playful breeze I cheat somewhat and lay out a sheet of polythene over the poles and weigh it down around the edge, Over this will go the burden of sod, And the sod is extracted from what I affectionately call my 'sod mine', a small moist hollow at the bottom of the clearing,

some sixty yards from the cabin. It is all dug out with a folding camp shovel, a tiny instrument, and ladled into a five gallon plastic pail that has previously carried thirty-five pounds of flour. This is then hauled up the incline across the clearing, around the back of the cabin and up the hand-made ladder to be unloaded on the roof. As the sod creeps forward long poles are pegged lattice-wise to hold it all in position. In placing one of these I strain hard to hammer the peg through. Suddenly I hear a muffled crack from beneath my sweat-stained shirt. A broken rib. I descend to wash my hands and to find an elastic bandage that somehow I contrive to wrap around myself. Then slowed considerably I go back to hauling sod.

Cabin roof construction.

The next day I still wear the bandage but to be effective and relieve the pain it has to be tight. But tight enough is too tight for breathing – at least breathing hard while carrying sod buckets. It is starting to snow. I should be lying down, being administered to by some cool, soft hand. Sod buckets cannot be carried on half-wind damn it – and the bandage is whipped off. I have visions of becoming a deformed curiosity for the rest of my life. This is what a quiet dread of all things medical does for you. Such frightful, blissful ignorance but maybe I shall live twice as long because of it. A breeze is again threatening to whip the free polythene off the roof. To hell with the rib, the body will just have to heal itself, I have work to do.

In the soft realm of dusk two Richardson's owls often call at the cabin. They are small bundles of feather that perch secretively upon the yellow rope washing-line, their faces filled with question marks. 'What strange life are you?' Then from the depths of their wonder they take flight to play tag with each other from spruce top to spruce top around the cabin. Tiring of their game they come back to sit near my head, to be talked to, to stare, to blink, to think. Are we really any more intelligent than owls? When it is not the turn of the little Richardson's, Hawk owl calls. The first time he visited I thought maybe some Indian spirit was passing by. I was inside the cabin, still door-less, and the walls still chink-less when a loud thump sounded from the roof. Outside nothing could be seen. But again a heavy thump and then a breeze of wings not six inches above my head; truly some ghost. Then walking to the tent I felt I was being watched and there to my left he sat, on the washing line, cool and collected, swivelling his head abruptly alert to my every move. He appears to enjoy my company – but he may be indulging me. However his air is characterful and Hawk owl remains a thorough individual. Tonight I watch him fly directly one hundred yards into the topmost branches of a spruce and there surprise and dispatch a sleeping Whiskey Jack. He is well named.

Only once so far, have I been honoured by the presence of the 'Cat owl' - the Great Horned owl, a truly magnificent beast. I heard his resonant hooting from the trees nearby then by the light of a young moon I spied his dignified silhouette but in the blink of an eye and on silent wings, he was no more.

September 6th has brought the first real snowfall. It is too cold for fishing. Spanish Ridge is the most beautiful sight. The snow has come half way down to dust the higher trees and etch them into the picture whilst below, the warmer colours of underbrush still persist as a now doubtful base to the encroaching world of white. I push Canoe out through the ice-tinkling reeds and paddle across to the opposite shore where a clean creek provides my drinking water. My eye falls on a group of saplings down the lake I have not noticed before, which is strange, but then their mass moves and what were trees emerge into the wet black flanks and spreading antlers of one enormous bull Moose. With effortless, almost slow motion precision, he melts before my eyes into the forest. I canoe back with a full bucket and climb home with the two gallon, two day ration.

The year has advanced both imperceptibly and with drastic swiftness. Along the trail my eye falls on a bloodshot leaf, just one, no more; but then overnight dozens of bloodshot leaves as if a wounded bull moose had walked over the land shaking himself, his blood liberally sprinkling the green of summer. Summer was dead.

A view west from the cabin at Broken Skull.

Early afternoon, my thoughts far away, I quit work and before the blood-red sun drops into the mountain I stand watching the river. It is my first foray down here and the furthest ventured from camp. Only a mile, but a mile of confusingly similar brush, forest and scrub willow. I had grown at home in the clearing and on the lake and now the Broken Skull flowing deep and swift into the south unsettles all such feeling. The wildness of the river pervades all my senses. It is lonely. The mountains I had become so familiar with, to the point of naming them, lose their friendly faces and loom larger with an indifferent countenance. New ranges bare themselves in grandeur and the Ragged Range exposes itself, pinnacling into the sky.

Enough. I turn and head for the comforting security of home. On my way I become mislaid. In the gathering gloom amongst the crowding shoulders of spruce trees it is an unnerving experience. But the forest, unperturbed, looks on, saying naught, and teaches its human fawn a lesson. The little Richardson owl is waiting for me when I get home. The sky has cleared to a cold pale blue with high wind sign. There is silence but for the floating noises of the river and a caribou chewing lopped spruce tops, unseen, two hundred yards off.

Beneath the grey cloud banks and sombre snow-leaden skies, from the north come the geese. I have never witnessed this before, the sound is new. What is it? From where does it come? Wolf cubs at play? Too many. It could be the baying of hounds. The cries grow louder and I am turning every way. At last I look up and there, tiny black specks, two straggly skeins, pack hounds of the wild skies. It is a haunting, utterly emotional sound. It is more than animal noise, much more. Like an ancient folk song, foreign to my ear, yet evocative, yearning for a response, a calling to kindred spirit and the so wild melody of these geese calls and calls and in spirit I am

with them, breaking the turbulence at the head of the skein for many a mile. If only I could. Land-bound I gaze after them into the darkening south. In silence I turn, dejected and crushingly lonely. A wet snow has started to fall.

Snow and rain now alternate and the chinking has still to be completed. Obtaining dry moss is impossible. There are lots of other small jobs to be done: windows to be put in, roof logs to be trimmed, door to be made, chimney fixed and a stone surround built around the oil-drum stove, as well as the inevitable joinery work inside – table, shelves, bed and so on. The weather doesn't help at all. Cloud smothers the land and mind. The eye and brain are totally enclosed by cloud and ongoing labour. I am sentenced to a solitary confinement, walking through empty rooms opening doors into more empty rooms. For days on end air is a wall of grey, only the ground under my feet recalls reality, the rest urges me to float away while touching claustrophobic nerve-ends.

Three inches of snow falls within an hour. I decide I shall have to dig for moss along with the caribou. It is imperative to get this chinking done. Throughout the day I build up a small mountain of moss before the stove so that it may thaw somewhat. But it really is too wet then and tends to disintegrate under the wooden wedge I call my 'chinking hoof' as I hammer it home in between the upright logs. Slowly, the wet, green bouquet creeps upward and around, locking out the daylight from my organic, earthy home. Last light is now 8.30pm and after supper I go out to take my time and stare. The mountains across the valley are faintly visible in the faded grey and thin cream sky. From over Spanish comes the distant calling of geese. I wait to hear them out of range then retire into the cold tent.

Moss chinking being applied to the south wall.

In the morning it is -5C. I work on the door all day – pegging small vertical logs together – and have it swinging on its hinges by supper-time. The hinges and bolts are a small concession to the steel age. I feel as though I am on the last step but still the weather could beat me. A winter's worth of wood remains to be felled and stacked and five inches of snow are already down. I bring my bedroll into the cabin and spend the night before the stove. It has taken me twelve weeks to get here.

Winter is like that, it possesses no calendar beginning, stealth is its shroud. I feel the hard ground underfoot where once water oozed. Broken reeds rustle their tapered coats and whisper guarded secrets to themselves in the catching and snatching of cold bottom air as it draughts this way and that, undecided as to its passage. The cavalier colours of a Canada Fall are being sapped and subdued, crushed by encroaching frost and veiled from view by the lengthening lace shawls of snow. The loons are now long gone and the ducks, who had delayed their departure are with me no more. I still canoe across the lake for water but often a fresh wind makes for strong paddling and a chill rain searches my exposed skin. On other days I slide upon a slow drifting mist, the steady whirlpools from my retracting paddle sidle away softly behind, forgotten in the fog. A crash of branches back somewhere in the forest signals the passing of a moose. It is the time of the rut. Stillness again reigns. Twigs do not move nor grasses bend, no bird sings and the sun is a fond remembrance. A supreme silence in this enclosing canopy of cloud rings its own peeling decibels within my head. It is as if this very hollow of sound requires listening to, and so intently and severely do I listen that I hear the rabid reverberations from across the wavelengths of the world, a coarse fairground of noise, but with every muscle strained to hear, the cacophony remains the quietest hush that can be heard. Such are the volleys of silence.

Before the sun rises in the cold blue, quietly I make my way north by west through the frost-spangled forest, parts of which are dark and looming and appear much as those ancient art pieces that accompany some texts of old Russian fairy tales. But if truth must be told I confess to meeting no hairy troll or willowy princess, though their lack detracted not at all from the real enchantment as the sun dawns, casting its myriad diamonds and slender pencils of gold to dart and weave, to pierce the sombre woods.

I slide and scuff my way down the eroded cut-bank to the level of the river flats. The flats where decades of the river's capriciousness have worn overflow channels, gullies and benches where now grow firm stands of spruce, willow jungles and poplar. And this same tempestuous current has stranded her burden of uprooted trees, some over a hundred feet long and two feet at their butt, upon the open levels where now they lie to slowly suffuse their organic beings back into the earthen womb.

Following the course of the river I make my way upstream. The Ragged Range rears loftily at my back whilst the sun ascends to light the eastern facets of mountain, valley, talus and hill. Numerous tracks cast solid in the frozen mud attest to the passing of moose and many caribou. A beaver too leaves his pathway clearly defined in the black sand up from the river bank where he has recently felled a six-inch wide poplar. The chiselled curls of wood still damp with ebbing sap. Over heavy shingle stones washed clean in the spring floods I walk slowly, watching, looking all ways, searching. A slight breeze cools my neck. Wolf tracks lead me on another mile. A black bear was about last night too, and that I think is the spoor of a lynx. Nothing but the breeze stirs, and the eternal calling river. I wait awhile seated on the carcass of a washed-up spruce. What was that? No, not game. A Dipper. That white-breasted acrobat of fast streams flies off from the opposite shoreline. I move on again up into the forest where the river has cut its bank sheer, but still no animals are seen. I turn to sit down and then I see him, upriver, a quarter of a mile away. A bull caribou is stepping out in my direction.

He is on the other side of the river yet my heart becomes quite audible as the adrenalin races and I experience that sensation that stirs a hunter. The water is too deep and swift for me to ford; he will have to cross onto that beach of shingle and somehow I know he will do just that. I slip off the empty pack and check the rifle. As soon as he hits the water I'll creep back along the trail down into that gulley, cross the stream and up on to that six foot rise of boulders, from where I should have an unimpeded shot. The breeze has died.

Any noise from my passing will be carried away beneath the careless noise of water. The bull comes on with every sense visibly alert, he points the air currents as well as any game dog, he watches every movement for an awkward form, he listens to the melody that plays, searching for a wrong note. I am no match for him so keep perfectly still. He now turns and moves into the cold water.

Peering over the rise of cobbles I see he is half way across, I shall have to wait, I don't want a dead caribou floating off downstream. As he gains ground with his forefeet I stand up, two hundred and fifty yards parts us; take careful though not rock steady aim, (my mouth is quite parched) and fire. A spring comes to life in his hindquarters as he shoots forward. His white flag tail erect he prances effortlessly down and across another shingle gulley. Obviously I have committed a clean miss. By the stance he takes I can tell he is not aware of my direction, the thunder of detonation makes sure of that. I myself am lost in it. But I have him in my sights, expecting his uncertainty, his hesitancy. At the top of the gulley he stands in profile, I fire again and he drops dead, three hundred yards away.

The valley rings to the shot as the sun reaches its zenith, the river races on by not deigning to cast a glance at this drama of no event. Ice collects in the back eddies and where the sweepers

of yesteryear have been beached and where the remnant roots overhang the rushing river, still living water spits spray at them, licks and caresses them till coated and coagulated, come contorted crystal sculpture.

Warm blood covers grey stone. Again I question the importance, the value of my life as I struggle and work the animal on to its back. On a slight incline of uneven stones I begin the surgery. Making a careful incision at the base of the rib cage I cut up toward the neck. Without gloves my fingers quickly grow cold and coarse white hairs from the underbelly cling to them and these matted with odd spots of blood and fat, delay progress. More carefully I reverse the cut hind-wards, at once a small green geyser bubbles out coupled to a quite odorous shock. Blaming at first my clumsy butchering I then realize the bullet has probably ruptured the stomach wall. I endeavour to turn the flow so as to taint as little of the meat as possible and continue on with the clinging, nauseous smell of fermenting lichen powerful under my nose.

Blood trickles from the animal's nose, its eye still stares wide open in the direction of the quickly departing sun. In three hours, and now in shadow, the life form is given up to four piles of red meat, a strewn array of intestines, hooves and skull. I wash my hands in the freezing water, retreat past the shadow line a few yards into sunlight and sit down to a late lunch of bannock and marmite, and a cup of water. Within minutes the meat is freezing to the stones. I stack about a third into my pack, lug it on to a boulder and squat back into it so that I can ease my arms through the webbing. Bending forward to take the weight, and wobbling a little, I stand with a hundred and forty pounds and slowly grind my way home.

Next morning in sub-zero temperature my feet tread the frost-clasped stones of the flats. An ermine stares at me from his home in the cut-bank. Against the fibrous clay he appears as if naked in his white winter coat. The skies darken and the ermine and I are treated to a sharp, brief snowfall. I pass on along the forest trail happy to note no new wolf or bear tracks and within a little while I come out into sight of the kill. Ravens wheel away on my approach and two Bald eagles stroke upward on heavy wings, lifting themselves to the top of tall spruce to overlook their find. The birds have ignored the red meat to feed on the nutritious offal.

In two journeys I have the remainder of the caribou, my winter's ration, back at the cabin, safe in a small T cache built twelve feet up a dying spruce. My clothes are sodden with sweat; I am chilled, my back aches. There is no water for a wash, or for tea. I shall have to go down to the lake.

Canoe I think has made her last journey for this year. I break through half inch ice to dip the bucket and then trudge wearily up the half mile trail to home. The sullen sleep of dull coals is

disturbed in the grey ash of the stove as I coax a blaze into the split logs. I put the kettle on, have a rub down, then set to and prepare a celebratory supper of liver and kidneys.

It is quite probable now that you are thinking: “don’t you ever get lonely”? And my straightforward response is: “no, I do not”. But in writing this out I think of the way these sort of conversations usually run and how accurate the rhyme and wit of dear old Gilbert and Sullivan: “what never”? you retort, and upon honest reflection I shall grant you, “hardly ever”.

Of all the days of the week Sundays are the most susceptible to bouts of loneliness, but these are never long protracted things. It is just that to me Sunday is a family day and being rightly a day of little or no work I have time to reflect on this and that melancholia which is the secret, suppressed joy of all true loners, creeps up to grab any stray emotions. This is the moment to steel yourself against the insidious attack, so whilst relishing the sentiment you simultaneously banish it to revel ever deeper in fathomless, utter solitude. Coupled to such wild vastness as this my mind yields up an almost awesome sense of power, that I feel can only come from complete physical isolation which in turn dictates a total dependence upon one’s self and one’s own mind. I do not believe I am unusual in my love of solitude, all of us to one degree or another requires a solitary moment. The herd instinct may be quite strong but it is in isolation that we perceive our own sanity. I am reminded of the words of Thomas A. Kempis: “as often as I have been amongst men, I have returned less a man.”

The coffee whirls its own creamy froth as I pour the boiling water into my china mug. October weather has been so depressing I need a stimulant and so have opened my one tin of coffee. Snow covers the ground but a cold rain is falling. The stove ticks in the ascendant as its sides begin to blush from the inner heat. The kettle sings. To my mind the kettle’s song spans the world, depending on the heat or the height of water, or is it just the kettle’s mood? It wails unending the muezzin’s call to prayer, perhaps a log shifts and with a shower of sparks the tune shifts, becoming tinier, garish almost but remaining decidedly eastern, conjuring up type-cast images of jostling bazaars and belly-dancers. On the boil it is simply a good solid kettle giving off that universal call to take a break. However on rare occasions my kettle has a penchant for organ music – no, not the set pieces of the great composers - have you ever slipped into cathedral or church on a hot, sun-dusted afternoon, escaping the roar of traffic and through the creaking iron-wrought door your baked feet touch on cool tiles as you inhale that first musty stillness of cloistered air and the tiresome sun shafts blue and yellow down stained-glass crevices, - no? You ought. For there you may hear my kettle, or rather the organist who freed from Sunday constraints and inspired by those dust-gilded shafts of sun gives free reign to his keyboard and the ear listens to a total freedom of harmony – and from a humble kettle too!

In the gathering light of afternoon I hear a plane and go out to recognize John Janzen's Cessna, flying in. I had met John over at Tungsten also, and twice now, he has landed on the lake happening to be in the area, and on his last visit he brought along a slightly air-sick RCMP constable from Tungsten who had been kindly caretaking my mail.

The plane skims loudly across at tree-top height banks steeply and comes in for another pass at stalling speed, a pennant of rushing polythene streams out and drops into the trees. I wave acknowledgement and John banks again and heads south. I have kept my eyes severely on the grouping of trees where the 'parachute' plummeted but now as I search I am becoming more and more desperate as the light decreases by the minute. I return to my fixed point, there is only one thing to do – square searches. I envisage Horse Guards Parade, myself in the centre. Five paces to the right, turn ninety degrees, six paces, turn, and in ever increasing squares repeat my search. Within fifteen minutes I discover the drop and the mail is secured. To my amazement and delight John has sent in grapefruit, plums, apples and jam and even a cooked, ready-stuffed chicken along with the letters. All are remarkably intact only one grapefruit shows what might happen to any other body falling from on high. What a feast. I feel like a marauding thief bundling my good fortune and hurrying back to my hideout. Supper is a straggly affair consumed in between letters. During the night I imagine the exasperation of searching for mail under a relentless fall of snow, to be hidden till the thaws of spring.

I wake early from the cold. In the dark I throw a couple of logs on to the still glowing coals and put the kettle to boil. Back in the sleeping bag I keep one ear open to learn when it is coffee time and then give myself a slice of bannock with jam and settle down to breakfast in bed. By the light of a single candle I read Margaret Murie's delightful accounts of life in old Alaska, in her classic book: "Two in the Far North". Finally I get up at 7.30 to start hauling logs for the log pile.

Snowshoes are strapped on and I collect the Swede saw and axe. The thermometer shows -20C on the outside wall, my senses have already taken an equally accurate estimate. The forest is quite still under a brightening grey sky. I take the south trail to where there are several dead trees I can take from a sheltered copse, big fire-killed ones that make for the best burning. A forest fire must have swept over this ridge years ago killing many of the trees, leaving them standing without burning them up.

In the cold, white stillness I kneel before the old, grey-lined tree. Lower branches are axed off. The saw bites deeply into the dry wood, I begin to grow warm. With a neat semi-circular wedge taken out I move around to the back and angle the saw to cut down and intersect at a point above and a little beyond the angle of the birds mouth. I have never felled trees before and I find tremendous satisfaction in placing the trunk precisely – cleanly between surrounding,

smaller, living neighbours. The seventy feet of spired timber seems to shiver, I stand to one side and ease the trunk to the south-east. There she goes with a soft, whistling rushing crash. I mark the length into five roughly equal lengths, with an odd bit over at the top, and get to work with the saw.

With my quota of three or four trees brought in, that is some twelve or fifteen logs carried, the morning's work is done and it is time to be thinking about lunch. Tea and bannock, always the same. Variety is demanded by social circumstance not a hungry stomach. I always look forward to lunchtime. I sit at the heavy log table with my back to the stove and the light from the two loft windows falls on the pages of my current book – The Gulag Archipelago.

I had intended on putting more than these two windows in but both time and winter did not allow. As it is, the cabin is dark but maybe warmer for that. The loft I built within the front section, for storing my food supplies and as a warmer place to sleep, above the stove, has proved an unnecessary measure – it is so hot there that sleep is out of the question and mice leave clear evidence that my idea of safe food storage has their approval. This afternoon I have to mill another pound or two of grain for flour. I bake a large loaf and fruit cake every Saturday. I brought grain thinking it would keep better than flour, this necessitated a small, hand-operated Samap flour mill – an excellent instrument, but I honestly could do without the half-hour arm exercise every day. However, considering this is all totally new to me, life is reasonably comfortable and well ordered. I am not complaining.

Water is brought from the lake through a hole in the ice. The snow is still not deep enough to conveniently utilize for this end. New snow has carpeted the lake. It is unbelievably beautiful. Cloud curtains off higher distractions to leave an enclosed world that centres its being upon this enormous sheet of clean white drawing paper. It is afternoon and already my side of the lake is in shadow. The dead grey sky has fallen to three thousand feet, (the height of the cabin,) the mountains are but a half-forgotten thought from the artist of ancient etchings. Upon a whim the low cloud lets fall a veil of snow, it is as the finest goose down. Through the snow two large ravens carve the air with forceful wings, creaking in rapid harmony like slabs of bend leather. Four months have passed since my arrival, I feel comfortably alone and very much at home. October draws to her close. On her last morning I look out from the cabin doorway on to a white silence where a lone wolf has left me a gift of his tracks. I wonder what sort of fellow he was? Not overlarge by the looks of his shoes. What colour was his coat? What was the colour of his eyes? The moon does not say. He is lost high in a grey-blue mist, sad as some forgotten half-eaten biscuit.

November is a month of lowering temperatures and when cloud permits, of beautiful skies. The sky is my entertainment, at dawn, dusk and night-time too, there is insufficient time to stand

and stare. How can I describe a sky? It is so much more than air. If it is but chemical science there is an artist who has formulated the laws of that science. If I were to paint such skies no one would believe me, yet this artist we cannot deny. This evening the multifarious factors of temperatures and humidities offer the painter of skies a simple palette. The whole wash east to west, south to north is in the palest of pastel shades. The gradation of colour flows unfalteringly, it defies detection. From out of the east above 'Spanish' the deepening night yields a lavender blue pierced by a silver star. The north holds pearl grey clusters of down, the south escapes the encroaching night by dint of lilac disguise fading invisibly to pink which lessens again to peach, to Devon cream – the colours of an unblemished, perfect girl. Such is an attempt at writing the portrait of a sky.

Caribou now follow my snowshoe trails, their wide splayed hooves finding firmer footing. They have come close to the cabin in the night but appear to veer away, probably at the first whiff of wood smoke. As evident as the caribou are the mice who have to brave the open air to cross my compacted trails – out of one hole and into another opposite – only I am not sure whether the bright drop of lime- green urine marks the exit or entrance?

Cold wakens me at 4.am so I get up and rekindle the dying fire. Outside everything is awash under the light of stars, a waning moon and a gentle green aurora. It is 35C below. After breakfast, at logging, my feet and hands grow cold whilst I am kneeling to saw through the dead tree trunks, but I warm up as soon as I am on the move. Whiskey-jacks, strangely silent and still, have moved to the highest spires of spruce to catch the first rays of barely warmer sun. Such featherweight creatures as these seem out-of-place in such harsh terrain, yet they sleep, wake and eat through each of the chilling days whilst the big bears lie unaware, slumbering on their summer fat. Thus the complex biota ticks. Bearing heavy dead wood that would have fed the wood ant, the Downy woodpecker, fungi galore, lichens and so much more beside, I slowly retreat 'neath the gaze of the Whiskey-jack. No one else sees my life's work, but I am humbled and yet, in my sweat, strengthened, physically and spiritually.

I like to think the Whiskey-jack may see inside my head – what complex data he would view.

After lunch I top-up the five gallon water bucket with snow and put that up on the loft to thaw. Grain has to be milled and then I get on with cutting up frozen caribou for a big pot of stew, throwing in pearl barley, lentils and lima beans. By the time that is all done there are a few moments left to go out and breathe deeply of the last of the day. The sky is now arced from deep blue into mauve, not far from violet through into the lighter shades of the blue spectrum, diffused one into another without blemish or distinction till now a tinge of green seeps forward and mingles to an icy blue. And still no brush stroke is seen. Sand pinks and salmon pinks embalm a set and sleeping sun. The river, pulsing like a dying heart, breathes. Her sighs come

to me through the forest and I feel she could be lurking feet away. The clarity of the air cuts cleanly all that is not solid rock and suspends the ethereal light. Words only fail this supernatural. Night encloses. A long luminous finger of green spans Spanish Ridge and far beyond. It is mean with cold.

-41C at first light. I walk down to the lake, breaking trail to the south end. The whole of the northern sky is purple, mauve and pink. Coming down from the part of the hill that overlooks the lake I see two caribou, a mother and yearling calf. Hurrying up I am able to crouch down into a snow hollow by the shore and lie in wait. They come quite close, pawing at the snow crust. A cold breeze freezes my face. After twenty minutes they trot off in that regal flowing step of theirs, heads forward, chin up. No one else shows. I go home to bake bread and spend the afternoon curled up with Sophia Loren's autobiography. What better way to spend a December afternoon?

Thick wide snowflakes fall in claustrophobic closeness and deaden all sound. It has been snowing for five days. Breaking trail through four feet of soft snow is hard work. All of my previous trails are wiped out. The trails down to the lake and the river are my main roads, they have to be opened – and to go out in this is irresistible.

It is like walking in a cave, all the trees are bent over, completely encased in mouldings of snow. The forest has an air of graveyards, still, deathly soft and of another world. My snowshoes compress and pick-up volumes of crystals and already the trail behind has lost its broken edges, beginning to mellow beneath the relentless blanket that is being spun. Looking up I can see no sky, only moving eternal patterns of shaded white, yet into the north a shade of purple sifts the snow and lends a small perspective to the otherwise walled-in white world. Canoe, upturned, now lies beneath her own burial mound. I snowshoe around her form compressing the snow down, then with a removed snowshoe spade the snow from off her.

The silence and utter void of the lake is all too inviting of an intrusion, albeit a quiet and respectful one – but an intrusion none the less. And so, with particular attention for the aesthetic I cut a smooth line of a trail into the south. By the time I return to the cabin I am more than ready for lunch.

It has stopped snowing. The trail to the river is difficult to find, but then it was always difficult to find! Even before the snow, a wrong turn could send one into quite unrecognisable territory. Now the land is quite uniform and to discern the subtle contours and the groupings of trees, or open places, which would turn one left or right, is an unusual challenge. On the river the banks are now bulbous with overhanging snow and I am surprised to see two open wounds of black water resisting still the power of cold – and the sheer mass of snow. It is colder in the river

valley; earlier winds have released many of the trees of their snow burden and these are thick in hoar frost. A cold fog rises off the black water. I hunch down in the snow watching the stillness and the quiet of the land and muse over what life is like in London or Montreal, Now. It is a strange, weird and rather sad thought. A sliver of moon has just appeared in the southern sky. A Boeing 747 jet flies over trailing a pink gold glow behind it – like a comet. The sky has become duck-egg blue and Jersey cream gold. Mist rises to hang on the shoulders of the mountains. The blue changes to pale red, it is a Turner's sky, yet more subtle.

Christmas Day. It is warmer, -30C. Ice crystals are falling. The caribou heart, wrapped in foil, has cooked overnight in the ashes. I get out a Christmas cake, gift of the Territorial Bakery. Logging is finished for the year, my only outside chores are collecting snow for water and cutting and splitting the logs for the indoor supply. In case of accident or sickness, a two week stack of logs is kept in one corner of the cabin. Today I have no work to do. Hardy's 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles' is my book of the week. Reading here extracts the ultimate from any book. I have two realities: outside, and inside the pages of words. Concentration on both is total, both provide a balance to each other and each an absorbing satisfaction for me. A perfect lunchtime is to be lost in the pages of a book while absent-mindedly enjoying good food. Hot black tea, sliced caribou heart and a cut of bannock – this is good.

After lunch I walk down to the lake, nothing stirs but me and the falling snow, the mountains are all blanketed out. Everything seems to be extra quiet and still. I return home. On this day of all days, I am not sure why I am doing this. Even the fire seems to be in a conspiracy of silence. Already the candles are alight at 2.30pm. Sometimes it is so quiet and one feels so alone, a thought crosses the mind, 'am I alive, or am I dead?' Tonight I leave the door open to cool the cabin down. Standing in the open doorway I play a poor rendition of 'Silent Night' on the harmonica. Only the spruce trees listen through the falling snow, do only the spruce trees see?

The year ends with a balmy -10C. I am lying out on the lake watching five caribou work closer, two of them are approaching quite near as I hear a plane, and John flies over. The caribou leave and John with Daryl, the RCMP constable from Tungsten, arrive. They cannot stay but just wanted to check that everything was alright and to bring mail that had accumulated over Christmas. After ten minutes I am once again one solitary mind amongst the vastness of the natural world, but the gregarious spirit of our kind has been asserted. Ten minutes, no more, yet how natural.

When I open the door on to Man's new year everything rests as it was in the previous year but then a note changes from up on the south hill. A song ascends to clear all those rank spruce, a lilting song, so pure, soft yet strong. No flute played with such clarity or sometime mellow chord. A single wolf welcomes me to his year.

Winter light. Broken Skull.

I chop wood, I carry water, mill grain, cut meat, tidy the cabin, prepare supper and walk through the silent woods; I read and I write, all within the day. At night I stand still outside the cabin door, entranced. All the art and glory of Man is but nothing compared to this: a million, million stars arc across, descending on all sides to touch the swollen flanks of blue white mountains. I could read by this light could I but tear my eyes away. Overhead the great heavy drapes of the northern theatre come down from nowhere to swing slowly, absorbed by their own green footlights. Curtains then glide away to be transformed as if in a dream, to become a sensuous neon tube. Brighter than the moon and eclipsing the stars this searchlight of luminescent green touched with purple, writhes, entwines, thrusts. Lessening in activity only to again coalesce, expand and explode. All in silent, silent night, veiling the heavens in ethereal light – Aurora plays.

The completed cabin at Broken Skull.

With the solstice turned the most important day of a wilderness winter has gone and the skies and the land ride downhill with an increasing acceleration to a lengthening light and the ticking, rotting, dripping orchestration of sun playing on a frozen world. Spring is way off yet but there is an intangible optimism, an altogether different taste to the air. The quality of light casts a new spell. But February brings a lot more snow. I stay indoors and cut up the last of the frozen caribou to string up as steaks over the stove. In a few days I'll pulp the dried meat into pemmican.

I have toothache and try to cure it with a wad of cotton wool soaked in clove oil. The toothache dissipates but it takes three days for the clove oil to do likewise!

A breeze stirs. Watch closely and you can see the tree tops swaying, rhythmic, lazily almost, but they never miss a beat of that rare moan of wind. The wood dances. Trunks ease away from planted feet, arms raised caress one another. The smallest movement extends the dance outward, fingers play to the tiniest pointed needle nails, up and down, back and forth, and snow ceaselessly casts its veil down over the dancers of the wood.

The wind has come lower in the night and now all the trees are unburdened of their great casts of snow. It feels strange to go outside and see black-green trees. A ptarmigan flies up from the base of the cache tree; he is the first I have seen here. Their tracks of rapid punctuation angle haphazardly across the snow down on the flats but their white plumage is difficult for an unaccustomed eye to observe. A Snowshoe hare shows himself briefly. Like a frayed grey rag blown away on the wind, in noiseless hurry he has gone before his presence registers. The branches of the trees express a pertness having sprung up from beneath their sullen winter weight. Combined with the beautiful day of a royal blue sky, spring seems not too far away.

It is -20C this morning and I am out on the lake first thing breaking open the trails. Several times as I walk over the deep crust of snow, that has formed above overflow, my weight triggers some release and a whiplash of sound cracks along the lake and each time my heart over-reacts, pounding faster at every sudden detonation.

A wolf has been out too and mink and marten tracks skirt the margins. Parallel bands of dove grey cloud descend over the mountain tops to show underneath, between the cut off peaks, crisp blue crotches of summer sky. After reading the tracks of the night's news I head back home to sweep the chimney before lunchtime. The afternoon is occupied with chores the last of which is splitting wood. I never tire of this 'chore'. The pure and simple pleasure of wielding a sharp axe has no comparison. Forever in competition against oneself and one's ability to read the grain of the log from both its sawn end and from its outer bark. Time flies by beneath the last herds of great buffalo-headed clouds that race on into the east.

After supper I again find my company with the lake and crunch swiftly over the fresh made trail. The moon illuminates the valley and clouds with a platinum light. The midnight blue is but a window pane to the billowing white curtain of cloud. There isn't a sound beside my snowshoes. The long lake stretches a mile before me, a silent, sparkling, dazzling white reflecting the jewel encrusted cloak above. I swish along on into the south, the cloud dispersing in wisps across the face of a silver moon. I wonder if the caribou will come tonight. Perhaps one is watching me now? Perhaps a wolf? I lie down and wait.

Gazing intently I watch the on-off pinpricks of light refracted and reflected from distant ice crystals. Concentrating upon one dancing, ever changing source, my mind plays games. The earth nestles close to my skin as I lie in shelter beneath the thin arms of a young spruce and the wind whistles down from all the high mountain tops, building golden grey clouds and stabbing with pencils of cold rain. The scents of silt-heavy water are churned to float over the white-caps and up into the forest of creaking, bending trees. I do not fight the cold. Stray fingers of old blueberry bush comb my hair, a small, so fragile yellow spider steps across the hairs of my arm to his grass-bladed home. I watch the waves and watch the wind, smelling the earth, absorbed by the might and the strength of the land and sky. Lying relaxed I stretch out full length, two caribou break through along my trail and come to sniff my prone form. I lay here in summer too. More clouds gather now, as moths to the light, around the brilliance of the moon. Gradually they turn the sky to shoals of sand rippled by the surf of a night breeze riding high. A tawny oasis of cloud shifts uneasily close under the moon. Through the dappled blue forest I climb home. Eyes of stars peep between the tree trunks and stars spy over the crest of 'Spanish' to watch the spruce-scented smoke rise up from the cabin chimney.

The wind that has mercifully left me alone all winter takes on a new and menacing air. From down by the lake I hear it start, from out of the north and high up on Spanish it roars; rushing straggly pennants of snow dust as the cracking trees trigger any remaining snow-nests. The detonations and exploding of timber sound like sporadic, distant artillery. The death throes of winter; it will be a protracted struggle.

Squirrels caught up in the high spirits of the wind are dashing madly all over the place, literally throwing themselves from tree to tree, pursuing their partners or rivals. The black advocate of the north flies over singing the full range of a raven's vocabulary, from throaty roar to bell-like clarion call that at times is softened to a quiet, echoing droplet of water falling from on high – into a tin bucket! He too knows that winter is nearly done.

From on top of the south hill I look far off over the Nahanni country where storm clouds are building; cauliflower head upon cauliflower head. A vast rainbow-hued halo encircles the sun

from where two great horns of light flare off to pierce the sky. Hail storms weave the mountain ridges and hide whole valleys whilst far below a wolverine lopes his brigand's way across the lake. A Golden Eagle sweeps overhead mastering with wonderful power the hurtling wind. What a perfectly wild day. I watch it all from on top of the world. A giant orb of moon comes silently through the trees, its brilliant glow holds me and I stay to watch its dawning when a movement across the clearing arrests my breathing – was it a caribou? From out of the forest comes the form of a wolf. Another follows, of a size quite equal to a yearling caribou, but this one is coal black and then he is followed by another immense black. I hold my breath, quite enchanted. The three are glimpsed between the trunks of trees against the snow, their tails are held stiffly down and slightly back as they walk in each others tracks with a thinly disguised massive stealth. The casualness of their appearance only underlines this. They fade into the wood where sighs of breezes stir gaunt dead branches.

I often go down to the river just to stand by the awakening water, listen to its babbling energy and admire its unhesitating determination to move. The great thickness's of ice are being demoralized, falling to the constant worry of new water. Against a pure blue sky the new poplar buds are noted with enthusiasm. Overflow seeps along my trail as I pass once more over the lake. A Rough-legged buzzard flies above – northward. The sun lingers now.

Spring comes with a determined flurry. Should you be an optimist though and look and smell for all those tell-tale signs, spring could fetch up way back into February as, on the day I watched, unbelievingly, the snow line recede from a sun-licked log as I sun-bathed on the porch. The lengthening days are ticked form the calendar and I wait for that fabled burst of northern energy. On the 27th April I thought it had come; the thermometer recorded 75F and I uncovered the bare ground below the last layer of logs in the log pile; the smell of spruce needles and moss preserved fresh and fragrant; what more could I want? But then the following two days were dull and overcast, this was a false start. Then on the 30th April the sun rose to a blue sky and I realized what spring had been waiting for. On cue, everything proceeded perfectly as in the very best of pageantry. From down-river came the now weak, sporadic call of geese. The first brave, wise skeins. How, how do they know? How humbling to stand at dawn, here in this great solitude and be the sole human witness to their passing. If animal life was put on this earth to serve Man then the purpose of geese is to check our conceit.

Two broken crooked vees work their way ever north. Their call has none of the excitement present on their outward journey. It is the very epitome of tiredness. Canada goose you are a brave soul. The geese are back, unseen beyond my horizon yes, but their wings have sealed the fate of winter and I have seen them come home. Days now come in warmth and sun. The snow skulks away, reluctant but overpowered. The 1st May marks the eighth calendar month of snow lying on the ground. Each morning or evening now sees the passage of more geese. The only

skein I noticed during the mid-day heat was in other ways unique to Broken Skull for they were Snow geese. I was searching the bright blue attempting to locate the source of honking when they came into view over the southwest hills, dazzling white with just their primary wing-tip feathers edged in black. The stark contrast makes for a regal appearance and these fifty birds over white mountains under blue sky give me a picture that will last my life time through.

As I write this, the hammock sways gently to the rhythm of my pen, it is still early, perhaps 7am and the temperature is climbing into the seventies. Bluebottle flies buzz their incoherent business; angrily it seems, over the eastern wall. The sun filters through the spruce branches and a Slate-coloured Junco pipes his sweet tune, proclaiming his territory behind the cabin. A raven flies overhead and the Whiskey-jacks are sun-bathing and preening close by. Squirrels chatter, richly vibrant in their new russet gold coats. The resonant drilling of a woodpecker comes from far off and a Bittern's monosyllabic dud note tantalizes as to its direction. One of the last icicles on the back overhang drips steadily with a loud plop into the well it has formed in the carcass of old ice, broken down in December. The silence of winter is being dispersed.

I have already been down to the lake over the frozen crust of snow, trails now slippery and frail. Overflow is apparent over the whole expanse, so the steady progress to open water has begun. But before the sun ascends higher I hasten back; the rotting snow, still too deep to wade through and now rending snowshoes useless, holds me a welcome prisoner here at the home clearing in the forest. A twelve foot swathe of bare ground lies to the south of the cabin and each day sees this extended, and around the east and west walls too. Entirely at peace I can luxuriate in the sun. I have survived, comfortably, the winter – yet living through those dark days awakens a deep awareness of spring that in no other way can be equalled. The balance of seasons is a fine thing, the geese play it with supreme accuracy, whilst I, now that I can read the season, wait with suppressed impatience to be like the geese, on the move, to see what lies beyond.

PART ONE.
CHAPTER THREE.

RIVERS, WATERS, BOULDERS.

It is cool. The song of a Swainson's thrush seeps crisply into the cabin. Dark luminescent light. A passing storm grumbles and glowers, locked outside as I try to sleep. The washing line has been taken down and lies coiled by the door, my hammock lives up to its advertising and is rolled to a pocket sized ball. Packs are packed and form greyer shadows, subdued in the filtered storm light. This is the metamorphosis of a home. I am passing through. I made the beginning, I am about to make the end. Too many thoughts; somehow sleep wins.

Whining. More incessant than alarm clocks. For the last five days a mosquito has haphazardly wondered through the chinking and woken me at this hour – I estimate at 4am. This morning I am grateful for I need to be up before the sun.

Two young bull moose feed across the lake only to stare unmoving, as I heave Canoe above my head to begin the long portage over the hill to the river. The steep trail is easier than I anticipated and the sun touches the crest of Spanish as I reach level ground. I look back down on the lake where the moose still browse. The loons are no doubt at their nest site, I said goodbye to them yesterday as I fished their water for the last time. Thirteen months of intimate connection has not made the lake overly picturesque or dramatic but its swampy shores and muddy bottom give to it a uniquely wild nonentity. In certain weathers it possesses its own distinctive moods and characteristics that offer names a-plenty, but these are silent things, things to be seen silently and heard in silence, not spoken. I shoulder the canoe again and leave the lake as I found it; and nameless may it stay.

The cabin acts as a half way mark on the portage trail and as the sun is quickly turning cool air to hot, I park Canoe by the door and enter for breakfast. Only at this season do I see the real efficiency of log insulation for whilst the heat of the day is uncomfortable the interior of the cabin requires one to don a mackinaw, so cool is its air. Packs and baggage are brought outside and I do a trial run on packing. The remainder of the day is spent in visiting particular paths and glades that I shall likely never see again. Once the evening settles in I complete the portage to the river and amongst the willow bushes, leave Canoe.

In the dying sunlight and across a shingle bar I suddenly cannot believe what I am seeing. Over on the opposite bank of the river, hidden somewhat by young poplars, a half circle of huge wolves. Can they be wolves? They are so huge, so still. A big white fellow next to a brown, a grey, but that is red there; could it be tawny and just red in this light? But they are so still. I think of howling but the pack seems a little close. Only the touch of red brings these wolves into question. Slowly, unbelievingly, I come to wonder if I have campers on my doorstep. I give a loud shout and after several minutes a head emerges from what I had mistaken for a white wolf. Finally, three humans are standing across the river endeavouring to conduct conversation above the roar of the water. Impossible. By signs we arrange to meet in the morning. Wolves would have been normal, having people about is a strange event.

I am at the river early to find footprints in the sand; whoever they are the hikers have swum across to my side but have obviously missed my discreet trail up to the cabin. After some to-ing and fro-ing I get back home to find three wild-looking individuals, one of whom possesses what looks like a sawn-off shotgun of ancient manufacture, waiting outside my front door. But my fears are soon dispelled for Carl, Wolfgang and Herman are from Austria and here to travel the country over the summer.

The three Austrians who paid me a visit.

They were told of my presence in the country and had I not disturbed their sleep last night they would have been coming across anyway to try and find me. They have been walking for nine days from Glacier Lake and are on short rations; so a fire is lit in the stove once again, a kettle boils and a pemmican pie is quickly produced. Breakfast is rounded off with the last of my

cake. Questions and answers flow back and forth and notes compared. My visitors are headed upriver to raft the Natla and Keele Rivers out to the Mackenzie; they look quite capable of doing it too. In exchange for food I am able to supply they offer to carry my remaining packs down to the canoe and so the task is quickly completed. That evening a campfire is shared and in the morning goodbyes are said with the hope of meeting again safely in Yellowknife.

Camp down on the river flats is not good. Horse flies in the sweltering heat and mosquitoes at all other times. But rain or shine, bitten or not I slowly get things organized and make ready Canoe for our four hundred mile journey to the south. My original plan to develop a base here has had to be rethought; a portion of my supplies have proved to be unusable and I would have to re-supply by summer's end. The game in this area strikes me as limited and I have come to realize the defects of the cabin site, that it is too far from the highways of lake and river. I see now that I have attempted too much, too quickly. Not so much in the sense of biting off more than I could chew, but in not realizing the tremendous diversity of these mountains. I would be restricting myself unnecessarily were I to stay here. Far better to spend the next few years travelling further afield, searching for an ideal location, before I establish any regular base for my work. Consequently this plan to exit now, and explore as I go.

The ashes of a mid-day fire have been dampened by a heavy shower but still they are sucked into the grey air as a chopper eases itself on to the spit of ground that reaches out into the river. Chris Lord gets out along with a friend of his, Leyland Wooley up from Simpson and Tim Cooper, the pilot, whom I have met before. It is good to see them, the fire is rekindled and the kettle soon supplies tea. Talk however is grave. It is obvious that I am about to take off downriver and it is obvious they reckon my chances of making it are about nil. The combined river experience of these three men is something to be reckoned with and I am told in no uncertain fashion that I should not attempt to get out via the river; that even if I get through the canyons of the Broken Skull, the Nahanni and Five Mile Canyon below the Falls, is bad water. Melodramatics play no part and I know myself that one upset in these northern rivers whilst travelling alone may very likely mean either a comparatively quick death from hypothermia or a prolonged one from starvation. My general inexperience of the bush and total inexperience of river travel leave my visitors with an uncomfortable feeling that they may never see me again. But all other options are now invalid for me for I know only one legitimate course can be followed, and that is with the stream.

By flying into this wilderness I am now convinced I cheated both myself and the country, for by so doing I placed myself in a situation I did not earn or deserve. I can never redress that imbalance but at least I can proceed with a greater respect for the land and in turn have self-respect. Three heads shake sadly at this stupidity for some vague and obscure principle. We say goodbye and the chopper roars off and I am left alone to ponder my decision.

Nighthawks skim the river and I sit on a big, multi-rooted tree stump washed up the shingle in the spring flood. I feel depressed. Clouds lie low over the mountains and my spirit. A breeze creeps down from the cathedral rocks and it is cold as smoke billows damply from the forgotten fire. I watch the Nighthawks, their sickle wings caressing and clipping the wave tops in acrobatic precision. Their co-ordination is inspiring, they so obviously enjoy daring. They must be the happiest of creatures. In watching the birds I become contented, and once more confident. I have to try.

Morning sunlight filters through behind my eyelids as simultaneously wolves howl in harmony from the trail to the cabin – do they know I am leaving?

Canoe 1 tarped up and ready to go.

'Snappy hookers' grip the gunwale and hold the bright orange tarp over Canoe as a spray cover. The last of camp is stowed before the 'cockpit' and very slowly I heave Canoe into deeper water where she floats as a dead weight, but in perfect balance. She has the air of a trim life-boat. So this is it fella: goodbye to home, the Whiskey-jacks, the flowers and sap-heavy spruce I

have come to know, the trails I've compacted a little, the ravens and eagles, the hawks and the mice, the ants who are making new homes under the cabin's sill logs, and the porcupine who calls by early in the morning. Only the future submerges that empty pit in my stomach. With a parched, stone dry mouth I lever Canoe slowly out and paddle furiously, angling her upstream in the eddy to let the nose come around in the faster water to get carried down by the side of the submerged boulders that create the home rapid. And so I get my first taste of river travel.

Looking south down the Broken Skull River.

A calmer reach licks along in front and I settle to the feel of driving this ton weight that has no brakes or gear shift. There is a bend up ahead so according to plan I ease Canoe into the right bank of stones and find that such a manoeuvre with this load can take three or four hundred yards to execute! Stepping out into knee-deep water on to rounded, slick boulders, the current catches the stern and a small battle of strengths ensues until I manage to lug Canoe higher on to the rocks.

Thank God the sun is shining, and I splash along the shore to check out the river ahead. Walking for about half a mile I come up against an eroded bank downstream of which a creek

enters. The water below is wild and I guess these waves are three feet high, a long hill of white extravagance. Viewing the rapid from higher up I can see a hint of passageway, a V of smoother water noses desperately into the foam and with a little imagination one can detect a continuation – a faint line of least resistance – through the succeeding troughs and explosions. I run through it in my head; enter the V hanging left, no option but to crash those haystacks, hang right till centre point, leave on a left bias. I hold the map in my head.

Quickly I walk back checking the smaller rapids as I go. Now I don't think, just move. Canoe rubs over the boulders into swifter water; my paddle digs off shore boulders. This truly is a river of no return. A number of rocks to be avoided and we get carried along to an irresistible fate. The whole river drops out of sight, only the rainbows of flung spray and the roar occupy my senses as the silky V lures me faster into its wild question mark. The trough at the bottom empties and the bow meets a high wave that rolls on to us at an angle, we sheer left and high up into the sky, exhilaration blankets fear and I think of the Nighthawks of yesterday and mentally embrace the river to feel its rhythmic subtleties through Canoe's skin and all the while every muscle is exerted to keep head-on to these monstrous foamies that angle first one way then another. Centre of rapids, hang in there, right, right, slipping sideways, an opportune wave puts me in the right place and digging into the molten, leaden weight of water I pass through. Nose-rearing, keel-smacking, buffeted, punched and soaked we gently bob out into the lower section of the running stream.

There is another bend ahead, another reconnoitre. I head Canoe into shore, a steep curb of slick boulders my only option for a landing. But the current is swift and before I can wedge the bow securely the stern is carried around and I tail end it with apparently increasing speed down a river-wide riffle. Another bend comes up after deeper water, I reverse the process, stern into shore and the bow comes around, lessening apparent speed as once again I face downstream. It is too late to get out; this one will have to be run blind. Four or five house-sized boulders glisten satin black in a puzzle of chutes, eddies and foam that move around a dog-leg arena, the outside of which is enclosed by sheer gravel cliffs. The permutation of routes is many and seconds few. My general impression is that things seem safer toward the right shore, perhaps only because that is the shorter route, but I am already in the thick of things where I am. If anyone thinks going downriver is easy, they have never paddled a fully loaded canoe alone in white water. I don't know where the next arm-breaking energy is coming from as successfully I pass within kissing distance of the first rock monster. Left or right? I choose right again, the standing waves beneath the cliffs look more ominous and that passage seems more boulder strewn than this. Water oozes smoothly down into a hollow gulley to form an eternal wave caught in the act of perpetual motion and too late I read submerged boulder. (And real fear.) A rushing shadow drags me into a watery black hole. Exhaustion fights its battles in my head as somehow I dig the mercurial waters and move Canoe over the hidden rock to see it slip by out of my peripheral

vision and feel increased friction as a skin of water lubricates us safely over into the next boil. A shallow rock garden marks the inside of the ‘dog’s leg’ and I seek it as my salvation, but inexperience coupled to current and Canoe’s overload, snatch it away and pull me backwards into the mainstream and I bump and lurch madly down the last crazy riffle, somehow avoiding the standing waves a few feet away by steering over my shoulder. Safely I turn about as the river broadens and come to a soft landing on a gently sloping sand shore. And here I sit, weakly, in the sun.

The stern seat is buckled and the aluminium keelson is bent in two places, but that is minor damage, the hull remains intact, without a dent. It is only the human element that is shattered. I have been getting by on luck and no ability, and nobody’s luck can hold out for four hundred miles on these rivers. Some sort of major decision has to be made. Right now though I am in no condition to make reasonable judgements, I am scared and only want to unload the canoe and sit on the warm sand. Later, the tent is pitched above the river on a broad expanse and camp is made ready. Gradually a rising fear of the water invades my head and all I know is that I want somebody to get me out of this mess. Fortunately the only thing I can do is wait.

In this state of nervous hydrophobia I want to see what I have saved myself from on the next bend and rapid. The river turns sharp left, a shallow riffle bar reaches out from the left bank into a narrow channel of deep water that is enclosed on the right by a jagged collection of reefs that step down along the shoreline and extend out to mid-stream. The standing waves present no real problem but manoeuvring the heavily laden canoe across the centrifugal currents between riffle and reef – the thought does nothing to allay my fear.

I think of caching everything here and walking out to Rabbitkettle Lake where float planes land into the National Park. Over supper I work out the logistics. If I had a radio principle would go out the door and I’d call up a chopper – and worry about cost later. But then from suburban safety my sober reasoning had forbidden radios. I walk downriver once again but this time for several miles, to the beginning of the next canyon. The prospect is no more encouraging. Water levels are low and leave options of bottom-breaking riffles on one side or whirlpools and souse holes on the other. I retrace my steps back to my ‘run backwards’ rapid where now in the clear light of evening I am glad I didn’t have a chance to scout it out beforehand; had I done so, I would never have dared run it, let alone ‘arse for’ard. A gold sun over the home mountains mellows the colours but does nothing to mute the enshrouding roar of water. I sit on a smooth stepping stone, one of many in this great gallery of sculptured caricatures of buttocks and eggs. Henry Moore could have learnt a thing or two here. But thoughts of transporting these eminent boulders to suave salons around the world, perpetrating a thoroughly artistic con’ are regrettably short lived, I have more pressing thoughts, and work at them.

After a hot drink I go to bed, still thinking and listening to the late chatter of a Belted Kingfisher across the river who is sometimes silenced by the bell-toned barks of wolves nearby.

I still don't know what to do but somehow I feel happier walking along the river in this morning's light. The sun is shining and flowers sparkle in their dew gems of morning dress. Grasses spire cleanly into the damp cold air and the river imperceptibly takes on a familiarity that once again beckons rather than repels. I continue on, sometimes in the canyon along the water edge, sometimes high up along the moose paths, all the time studying the water below. I walk the course twice more over the next two days and by then have talked myself down every rapid, riffle, boil and chute there is and into the only solution given my abilities.

Everything I can possibly do without has to be dumped and I have to go on in a more manageable, lighter canoe. I organise a ground cache way out in the open of the gravel beach, sorting all the gear and wrapping it over with a spare tarpaulin and weighting it down with logs for some future return. I feel relieved with the decision made and get to and cook up a grand hash of pemmican pie for supper and the days to come. Wolves again bay back and forth to each other as I sit over the little fire of driftwood in the sand, and I listen to the river's thoughts.

Under a solid drizzle I decamp, tarp' up Canoe and by 6am we are underway. My estimation was right. Power/weight ratio is now in balance and we are swept along as up on a spirited horse where hands and legs conjoin with a separate power to unite in a poetry of motion. Canoeing and riding are very similar to each other. Cleanly I cut across the current to the left shore and have ample time to line up for the tip of the riffle where there is sufficient water to carry us through between the shallows and the reef on the right. The river glides swiftly downhill bending left and so by cutting the corner on the inside some of that swell keeps us off the reef and we squeeze through on the channel of standing waves.

That gut fear a novice rider feels on a runaway horse and its counterpart for me in the earlier rapids now gives way to elation and I thank God I never brought in a radio. Had I had one, my initial reaction and fear would certainly have won the day and my life would be a thousand times the poorer in experience. As it is the best part of four days have been spent in deliberation, in thinking and slowly walking; time led me safely into my own solution; such a lesson cannot be learnt from books.

Mid-day I come to a bend in the river where cliffs rise and a big pool eddies safely beneath a log pile jammed up over many spring floods. The rain has ceased though clouds are low and prospects look dim. A little stream cascades through gravel banks and detours alongside a brilliant green sward of horsetail. Caribou tracks are freshly dug into the softer ground and blueberries crowd the bushes in a purple-blue mist. After lunch of pemmican pie I climb the

cliff's shoulder to look down into the stretch of canyon ahead. The first bend into the wall is slow and easy but then the river is split by a shingle bar. On its right, below where I stand, high standing waves angle back from the cliff face to race on down to meet the other channel that is slammed against a confronting face that turns the river sharp right. More water is running the left channel but the choice is a dubious one. Running the right course I deal with the vicious standing waves and then have the whole confusion of currents where the two channels meet. Going down the faster left channel I have to hope for sufficient water to carry me off that slab of rock before I slam into it. Six of one, half a dozen of the other. I choose left, it gives me longer in the rapid but a clearer view of the water ahead – and more time to react. This is going to be fun.

The moment of entering a rapid has no equal, an unsurpassed commitment to do or die, of being drawn in, willingly and knowingly. I draw out into mid-stream well ahead of the suction into the near right channel and line up clear of the left side wall, allowing for maximum water flow to keep me from crashing. Canoe accelerates then with frightening speed going straight ahead into the looming cliff face. But water is the power here and I don't deny it. Drawing out and back on the right I keep the stern in as the bow catches the swell just feet away from the rock and we ride up in to the decelerating water of the standing waves. But here I miss a trick, and the slip road, to be carried by the current and thrown into the surging boil where the two channels meet – and here we sit like birds in the wilderness – watching the water rush by! A strange feeling it is to be static in the midst of roaring river. But I haven't got all day. The water in the boil is the consistency of molten lead and to cleave a way through takes some hefty leverage on the paddle. The bow catches the current and we are sucked out into the slick thinness of racing water and the lower rapid of straight standing waves and on into a calm reach enclosed by low forested banks.

Due to low water one or two rapids are lined down and though I know the principle of lining, the practise of it is a different matter. Lining 'a la Larkin' is more akin to an Abbott and Costello endeavour as the rope gets hung up on boulders, willows or hidden snags and Canoe wonders who's in control.

Having walked most of the course only ten or twelve miles are covered for this first day of travel. I pull in about 5pm on to a gravel flat where back from the river a shallow bench dotted with small poplars provides a good tent site. I am tired, though more nervous energy has been expended than physical. Each canyon run blind holds back the breath and tenses every thought and muscle for the possible rapid or ledge. A fire is built and soup with pemmican pie is soon underway with a brew of Russian tea. Clouds mount in the north-west and a rain squall threatens, leaks a little, and passes on. The fire crackles and blisters to white hot coals. Wolves again keep me company, some behind my back, some across the river, barking to and fro. The

sky is darkened to the north in contrast to lingering southern blues. The river moves swiftly cold, the fire ticks slowly, hot, I am at the end of my day as the wolves begin theirs, but overall an enveloping tranquillity of oneness, the unity of contrasts in accord with a single rhythm.

With breakfast complete I scout downriver but the waters run wide and sweep downhill in the style of clean autobahns carved from clay flanks and forested banks. It seems pointless to walk on and so Canoe is packed and we sweep on in total freedom. The parched cotton-mouth I experienced whenever I pushed away into the stream is now a remembrance and anticipation of rough water is less a stomach-turning void and more an equal test, the river as examiner, always asking if I am good enough for her. Several times this morning I cheat the examiner though. The river veers sharp left as it is stopped by a sheer cliff and drops from sight, its passage marked only by the eternal dance of silver droplets of water suspended high in the air against a backdrop of dark grey rock. The shallow above the storm forms an upturned saucer of a boulder bar, uncovered in the summer's low water. I pull out to have a closer look. The bulk of water flows on the right crashing against the cliff and surging back as angling four foot high waves. A back snye runs around the lee side of this island and then a run-off from the main river cuts the island in two, to deepen the snye. I cross this knee-deep channel to see how they all meet up.

The further stages look like a nice run but the curling crashing waves hold my attention as they slash angrily back upon their spawning water. It is the steepest water so far and in the lighter canoe I would love to run it – but then, on the other side of the island, like some watery lay-by, this back-snye offers its own kind of turbulent challenge. I decide there is enough rough stuff ahead and begin to line down the first shallow hill of the snye, jumping in as the channel depth allows for my weight. And we dash on down slapping into the tail-end of the big waves as we ease over to the left to manoeuvre round a couple of sleeping boulders shadowed by the canyon wall.

Noise ceases. It starts to rain. Curve after bend is taken, quietly meandering ever downward to the sea and I think of the springs I drank from early in the year, their waters licking at Canoe. Light rain, light grey patterings, puckerings play upon the gentle convolutions of the river's subterranean subterfuge, all to a softly muted hiss and the fragrant indefinable odour of clean earth. We continue. Blue patches mottle the space above my head framed as it is by grey cracked walls. My knees are cold in shipped water but slowly my hat steams in mid-day sun. Sidling down this stealth-laden water in this cleft, lost to the world I think out loud Zhivago's verse by Pasternak:

"Blue the sky, soft breezes,
Tender noon caress,
Who is she? A lady?
Peasant girl? Princess?

Tightly closing eyelids.
Heights and cloudy spheres,
Rivers, waters, boulders
Centuries and years."

Rivers are feminine entities.

Noon time and I pull out above white water on to a boulder shoulder that backs on to old forest. Across the way, above the winding and constricted river, hundred foot cliffs rise sheer. Cold lunch restores flagging energy and river water, clear and cold, is the true wine of the wilderness. Shoes and socks dry somewhat in the sun and the little breeze that scuttles around in its canyon cage. Rock debris falls from the cliff face, playing a rapid tattoo on the water below to conjure hypothetical problems, so with the thought of what I would do should a major rock fall block the canyon, I pack up and hit the freedom road once again.

Down shadowed canyons of solitude, quiet in their age-old persistence, past monstrous boulders that protrude sleepily from mid-stream now as a reclining cow, now as some woman from a sculptor's mind, wandering through sullen curves, racing suddenly, boiling chutes where lone seagulls look carelessly on from ankle-deep safety of lapping backwater, stretches of slow levels where back and arms join in the rhythm of the digging paddle till each new bend is put behind and yet another pull lies ahead. Through into the lower country of burn and sand gullies, of bright green leaves and once more, wide skies. And likewise the river; she too spreads broad and flat 'cross channels, bars and riffles where Canoe scrapes bottom and the paddle becomes pole to push ourselves down.

It is time to find camp, and quite fearful clouds are over my shoulder. Down a wide riffle into swifter water the main channel bears gently left and there on the inside, a tiny back slough, fed by filtered water and nearly hidden by overhanging alder, shows itself and Canoe is pulled around into 'home water' and beached in her own private berth of soft sand. A fan of shingle cuts us off from the river and not fifty yards away a tent site and a safe fireplace in between. So camp is set as my usual triangle of Canoe, tent and fire and no sooner is it complete than the wind bellows down the river threatening to rip the tent up and the rain with the pent-up energy of many miles can no longer hold itself in and a deluge is released upon the land, blanketing out the mountains and lifting the river's horizon to a misty, puckered unity with the sodden sky. Out on the river in this and life would have been a mite uncomfortable, but here in the tent lying against my pack and sleeping bag I watch the drifts of rain lighten, darken, give birth to, or erase completely, the trees, the islands, the world. And like a giant passing over a mouse the storm passes over me on its way into the south. The rain stops and with it the wind, the sun

comes out in a blue wind-whisped sky and colours sparkle from their thorough washing. Silver spires of fire-killed spruce glisten wet in the western angling sun to a back-drop of red rock and white glacier. As supper is eaten wolves once again begin to bark, the old kettle steams on the embers and an evening sky slowly darkens above the shining riffles of the golden river.

The morning is fine with a hint of frost although heavy rains have again deluged camp in the night. Firewood has to be split from the heart of driftwood and the fibrous tissues splintered carefully in the fingers before a matchstick fire kindles into twig-sized pieces to step up into smaller logs. The damp glow of dawn gives way to a clear, drying sky and as the stored energy of driftwood turns cold river water to boiling, wreaths of cloud build and disperse around the peaks of the Ragged Range and the sun lights the tinkling riffles that fan out in a wide panorama of jewelled river. This is too good to part with, the place feels strangely like home as if I had been travelling a long distance in a dream over strange and unknown country to find myself in an old and familiar haunt. The mountains in the east hold my gaze as I absorb the cold scents of the morning and the mellower sounds of a warming earth. Thirty miles beyond is a lake which I had planned to visit in the summer, but now, with the sense of security afforded by this camp, plus the protective berth for Canoe, I think I can spare a few days from the river to hike there and see.

The Broken Skull country from the air.

The prospect of a whole day in camp is a happy one. The fire is raked to a square of red-hot coals and three pemmican pies are baked. Then a hash of dried fruit, peanuts and penole is fried up and compacted – so much for food. In a still backwater I suffer a masochistic bath. After an idle lunch eaten in company with the river I hike out to spy my best route for the 'morrow. The burn of the lower Broken Skull spreads across the land here and I need to cut my travel through it to a minimum. Rolling hills divide camp from the creek which I shall have to follow and so I line up my landmarks fore and aft and sit down on a small rise to think out the scene, its contours and drainage. Sure, maps tell you north and south but I cannot feel comfortable walking through wilderness if I am forever looking at a map or compass.

Maps are glorious inventions but they serve best to release the spirit besieged by city or town; they are the dreamer's machine, out here they can quickly become a curse and an onerous tie. With the undulating folds of land held safely in my head I meander back to camp through tall stands of lacy tamarack where a garden profusion of wild flowers blossom. Wild strawberries and fat raspberries offer themselves and delay me at every step. An enchanted place walled off from the world, mossed, luxuriant, eternal, hidden between the burn and the river, a bear's paradise. Then coming out into the stifling reflected heat of sandbar and back snye a line of clawed pad marks cut along the water line and are a small reminder that I am in no heaven and that a superior omnivore stalks my camp. Kneeling down I place my spread hand into the firmly impressed sole of the Grizzly's right forepaw and not a fingertip overlaps its size. From now on I feel and know this place as Grizzly camp.

The tracks are certainly fresh, perhaps he or she had smelt the campfire of the morning and detoured round this way as I baked or bathed. I question now my decision to leave the weight of the rifle back at the river cache. On balance I am comfortable and find confidence in the very confidence I have in animal – human psychology as I learnt it in the racing stables with some quite vicious and dangerous thoroughbreds. Perhaps not quite the same as Grizzly bears – but there again, perhaps the difference is not so great.

Smoke columns upward in puffy clouds to be lost in the blue sky, supper has been eaten and I am slowly sipping a cup of hot Ovaltine, it is really too hot and though Canoe is all tarped up and safe for my departure early in the morning, I go to check her once more. I look across to the setting sun beyond the spires of black and silver fire-killed spruce, patterned against the lower growth of young green pines that sprout densely all along the cut-bank, which drops steeply to the river and where every so often a minor cascade of loose stones falls of its own accord to play a surprising tattoo upon the moving water. Each noisy avalanche draws my glance; each time I think it might be a passing animal. More stones clatter down and I look; a huge chocolate and straw coloured Grizzly moves so elegantly over the quite yielding pine. This is the first Grizzly I have seen in the wild and I lose all sense of propriety. I am forty yards from the tent –

the Grizzly will soon disappear into the timber. I don't think – I run like the blazes for my camera. At once the bear is triggered like a coil spring. I have the camera but across the river is a weaving, sinuous cat of a bear, lithe and balletic.

My running, an unforgivable stupidity, has triggered all the bear's senses and he surely looks on me as food. Slowly I walk across the fan of gravel that reaches into the river, below and opposite this powerful animal and talk aloud, calmly and reassuringly as one would to a horse. He continues to weave, searching for a scent and peering with poor eyes as he stops to listen to my voice. I have lit a fuse and without this steep cut-bank and river my chances of extinguishing it may be slight. But he remains hesitant about descending.

Slowly we both calm down, I to sit on a stone, he to gaze down along the length of a fallen log. Through the binoculars I can see drops of saliva drip on to his magnificent coat. Unfortunately he is too far away for good photographs with the 210mm lens and I am torn between wanting him to cross over and wanting him to go away, for truly he gives the impression of laying siege, to me, to the whole land. A shaggy ruff of blonde hair supports the long-nosed head on shoulders of similar hue. The head itself is darker brown and matches as colour co-ordinates the deeper chocolate brown legs that bow slightly as he stands on all fours facing me. As with all the best dressed people, a touch of contrast, a small relief in a single colour that here has a riveting capability: his claws are amazing, even from this distance they tend to dominate his every posture and their creamy ivory cleanliness dazzles. Above all he is the most beautiful animal, not simply aesthetically but the intellect that reaches across the river spreads a sympathy rather than fear. He stays watching. He scratches a flank with his hind foot then settles down like a lion upon a log, chin resting on forepaws and we just stare at one another with only the tranquil river gliding between us.

The sun drops below the red rocks and only the tops of the burnt spruce show silver now. We are both growing restless. The bear then remembers other business, gets up with great dignity and with all the grace of a ballerina, shoulders aside young eight to ten foot high pine and walks over them with consummate ease, scratching his belly as he goes. This effortless strength stays in my mind long after I close my eyes, warm and comfortable in my sleeping bag.

The dark of dawn welcomes me from the tent. Cold stars look silently down and the river seems to hold its breath, so still the hanging mist lies above the water. Pink haloes the mountains where I am going and the grasses are heavy in silver dew. Too cold for breakfast, everything is packed, shouldered and away all within ten minutes. From on top of the first hill of the burns I look back down to the silver, blue-grey river and the glaciers beyond. The land holds no terror in its awesomeness now, the river is my road, she is my home. I am a little sad to leave her, and

especially Canoe, the bright orange tarp can just be seen far below, a strange dot of artificial colour amongst so much natural shade.

There are five hills of burn to traverse before the uniform living forest succeeds over the uniform dead. My mountain landmark disappears as I descend into the valleys but each time I crest a hill there it is again and on it will go till I am naturally channelled into the creek's valley by way of the predominant contours. From a forested escarpment I look down onto the creek – a raging river amongst precipitous canyon walls – and I immediately question the feasibility of this walk. The headwaters stretch north of where the cabin was, where I have to go is along a tributary which flows in from the east, the question will be how much water comes in from the north and how much from the east, for I shall have to ford at that juncture, if not before.

Skirting the canyon edge I head down and am forced into a deep gulley that is scarred by run-off flood and remains muddy and derelict. It is cold but a trickle of water surfaces and puddles over the boulder channel embedded in the base of the gulley and as I still have to satisfy a grumbling stomach I stop, put on my mackinaw, over my sweat-cold back, and dig out a handful of pemmican and penole hash. My thirst is satisfied from a small puddle. I do not delay but forge ahead to emerge at the canyon ledge. Forest spreads before me as rock folds away to a flat-bottomed valley and I aim to follow the river shore wherever possible. Finding a well-worn trail I am taken down to the seething water under fallen trees and around some hairpin bends so tight that I wonder if anything larger than a wolf could use this path; on occasions I crawl. Stepping down a bank of soft earth a rush of grey air seems to leap up from my feet and a tall lynx pads quickly away into the underbrush. From seventy yards he turns to look back, all I can see are his eyes – and then he is gone. The total quietness of his action makes me question whether I saw him at all. Out on the river bank I build a small cairn of stones to show on my return journey where I must head back into the forest. From hereon the river will be my landmark.

The questionable skies of dawn have become sunny and hot; sometimes I walk along the boulder shore and my passing is absorbed into the swallowing, kettle-drum beat and massed marching of the water, at others, garden fields open out and I follow easily the game trails frequented usually by bear or moose or caribou. The trees here are pine intermixed with a few spruce, black poplar and many more tamarack. Slowly the great shoulder of mountain that formed my original landmark folds away and a whole amphitheatre of mountains come down to surround me. By mid-day I am beneath the sand blasts, an eroded hillside of clay and boulder spires that reach up in precipitous fingers of neo-Gothic craziness. The heat is furious as it reflects back off this surrealistic desert-scape and I suspect problems ahead. I unbuckle my pack and sit down for a brief lunch and then scout ahead.

I can skirt my way along below the fragile-looking columns – between them and the river, till the last fifteen yards where a smooth slab of rock holds back the eroded earth and drops cleanly into a deep swirling pool of green river. Perhaps without the pack I could get across on friction and a prayer but encumbered as I am, I think not. I return and shoulder the pack and choose to weave a way directly up to where a grassy lip offers some semblance of stability.

It has to be over 100F as I seek the shade of the underside of a house-sized clay and boulder edifice that broke off from higher ground yesterday, or a year ago. I look up and meditate that anyone of these few boulders, were it to separate from its clay setting, could provide me with a decent burial in less time that it would take for the dust to settle. I am not feeling terribly happy so move out into the grilling sun and climb.

As I reach a point where it is necessary to move across to the grass, I look straight down to the whirlpool below; there is nothing but loose grit between my precarious point and the aimed for tufts. I tentatively move forward and slide down a sickening yard. The risk is not worth it. Perhaps a path will open up through these weird configurations which threaten on all sides? It is easier to move upwards than any other way but too late I find there is no way out but to back down; sheer walls close about. Like all vertigo fools I am alright in the ascending mode – with nose close to Mother Earth, but turn me about to descend with nothing but blue sky above and a watery grave below – it's heebie-jeebie time.

Gripping clay with the seat of my pants I struggle out of the pack and use it as an anchor and additional friction surface and stealthily slide and step back to my original gulley, breathing deeply only when I stand again in the shadow of the overhang that still threatens to break off and entomb me. It takes two hours of hard labour to skirt the hoodoos by way of the forest.

Later, down by the river again another obstacle confronts me and I am directed back into the trees to find a way round, or across, a deep defile in the rock. A small river has carved itself a gorge and with a little struggle I descend to find a hidden waterfall of quite secretive location. It fountains out from an upper chamber quite hidden from view and in this moist, black-walled cell the crescendo creates yet one more small world on my upstream journey. I remove my socks and with boots back on wade the ice water and rest awhile on a massive black slab where a small party of ants find their pleasure invading my upturned and drying boots.

Cloud covers the sun now and the afternoon turns cold. The mountains close in on me, their faces and profiles are creviced, ledged and turreted and it would be too easy to imagine I am watched from so many ideal hide-outs. The colours of the valley are predominately orange and grey, dead grass gold of the valley floor, white of the river and but a touch of green in the massed black of the forest. As I round a curve in the trail a large form disappears around

another bend ahead and I think I may be tailing a Grizzly. As the afternoon wears on the cloud descends lower and out on a level flat of stunted willow, well off the main game trail, I pitch camp. It is a wild, lonely place allowing only an atmosphere of cold and desolate echoes.

My route to Avalanche Lake.

In the morning rain patters against a wind-buffeted tent and I look out to cloud-shrouded mountains. Camp is soon back on my back and I follow the trail of the Grizzly. Long grass lines the path and boots and cords are quickly sodden. As the river loops I am obliged to make my way through a dense maze of poplar woods where, from either young growth or rain-heavy

overhang, I soon become soaked. Trails branch off into promising firmness down jungle alleyways, sometimes they open out into slowly dripping, secret, leafy caverns only to face one with a bewildering choice of new paths, at others they end abruptly against solid flanks of impenetrable poplar – moose do fly! The whole wood possesses the air of discarded gardens once tended by devoted gardeners for genteel folk of noble birth, strange oases of ghosts in the midst of uninhabited mountain land where the decaying ruins of marbled halls would not seem amiss.

Something else moves in the softly falling rain and I have the strongest feeling it is a wolf. But nothing shows and I continue winding and weaving my way through the wood. There is something very special about the orchestration of rain. An adult who has lost the joy of getting wet has I think lost that essence of being, which as children we all know but never reason. Is the age of reason rather the age of pretence? The music of the rain whispers closely against my ear, my boots keep rhythmic time and the river accompanies us.

No side creeks have been crossed to reduce by much the main flow and I am thinking that fording is going to be a doubtful task. By mid-morning cloud has covered the orange scree of the upper valley and I have arrived at the junction where I should head east. The creek from that quarter is small and barely lessens the main current. Along the whole length of the river it is a hip-deep boulder rapid with likely neck-deep pot holes. Cords and socks come off and boots go back on. A staff of firm wood is found – as if it were waiting for my passing – and so with a party of determined mosquitoes dancing about my head, or attacking my legs, I wade in.

The river is vaguely divided into two currents above the east creek, the first is a simple affair but the second one is a mind-bending, leg-breaking roller-coaster. I get a third of the way across, staff planted firmly downstream, water is waist deep and becoming deeper, I cannot move unless I fall forward. The pressure of water and the dizzying, dashing flow assailing my sense of balance halts all progress and only with the aid of the staff do I turn about into shallower water. Rain continues to fall, mosquitoes irritate and cloud lends a sombre mood. My legs are blue with cold and I barely feel my feet. I try again in another part of the rapid but once more, sense, cowardice or just straight impossibility turn me back. In a patch of mud I note a single caribou track, he probably crossed here, and I realise how unsuited to the land I am. Given a partner and each bracing the other, fording might be accomplished, but alone, the danger of swamping is too much of a risk. I sit under a small spruce by the water's edge and argue with myself – am I being scared off? Am I being sensible? I will never know.

The creek which was impossible to cross.

I am cold but movement only presses wet clothes against my skin. There is no timber for a fire. After a search upstream for a mile or two, for either a crossing place or wood, I backtrack down the valley. By the time I reach the waterfall crossing I wade across regardless so wet am I. On the other side of the hoodoos an ancient log-jam entangled amongst the boulders provides timber large enough to be split and dry interior wood with which to start a fire. A roaring blaze brings steam off my clothes, my boots hang upside down from supporting branches and as I turn about in the heat the rain stops and a weak sun smiles shyly through the scudding haze of cloud. The mud-coloured mountains appear cold, dead and flat, an exclamation mark of snow lingers high up on a background of grey earth. Water boils in my Sierra cup and I add tea. Slowly outer warmth seeps inward and while damp clothes hang limp on deadfall washed here years and many floods ago. Pemmican is chewed and chipmunks dart from woody crevices to peep at me with their mouths full of collected seed heads, tails erect. I go on drying and dreaming an hour away; thoughts return to Canoe and to ‘outside’; money will have to be earned in Yellowknife so that I can retrieve my cache before winter – I get up, dowse the fire and go. Sixteen miles are covered before nightfall when I look down again on the Broken Skull. Through burn and rampant growth of pine I make my way wearily into Grizzly camp. Canoe is safe, a kettle is boiled, a meal is eaten and bed is the most welcome place on earth.

Impossible-to-cross creek and surrounding country.

A relaxed start is made in the morning, the sun is shining and the sky is blue; I know that I will be on the fabled South Nahanni by nightfall and I cannot help but feel a few butterflies hovering in the background. My own river wends its way in wide sweeps eating out one bank, then another, the current quickens a little along visible inclines and Canoe responds like a well-bred filly. Whipping sweepers are the only danger to mar this passage. Sooner than anticipated the river divides into a puzzle of downhill highways weaving their separate and swift descents. The contours of the land ahead dictate a sharp left hand bend and, invisible as it is, I fail to see how so much water can turn in the restricted space without severe turbulence. But all the time I am being carried along till at the last moment a great irresistible scar of brown turbid water cuts into view and we skid from crystal drinking water in the Broken Skull to the big muddy of the South Nahanni.

Lazily I sit back against the seat, lay the paddle on the gunwales and remember that it has taken me the best part of twenty years from the first time I read of this river, and swore to myself that one day I would travel her, until today, when under the sweltering northern sun I canoe between these green banks and towering mountains, gliding silently along. It has been worth the wait. But I have been spoilt by the racing, peasant-girl spirit of my river; now for mile after mile and hour after hour on the serene upper Nahanni I dig the hissing, silt-laden water till the gigantic edifices of the Ragged Range move from my southern view to fill my northern horizon.

Green. Green that would rival any green in the world forms perfect oases of living colour along the river and it is within one such jewel I draw into an eddy and ground Canoe on a gently shelving beach of cobble stones set in mud. A cow moose comes out from the forest only to noiselessly turn about and disappear as she sees me. My triangle of camp is soon established, water is fetched from a still, back slough that is clear of sediment, and clouds that have hung ominously over the Ragged Range throughout the afternoon breed off into a dull pink sky whilst a quite fierce breeze blows up to gale strength. Tending my little fire on the shore I manage to contain the glowing embers and boil a kettle, make soup and mix in a slab of pemmican pie; the rain starts and I retreat with tea and food to watch from beneath the flysheet of the tent. The kettle remains to protect the coals from the onslaught.

Storm Camp, South Nahanni River.

Perhaps it is the same cow moose that now trots on down the river shore to swim out into the current; gradually she is taken out of sight. Slowly at first the rain pockmarks the river, throwing out pure circles to interlock and lace their way downstream as more are formed in their place and behind them till raindrops fall faster than the river moves and circles are flattened and pockmarks become tiny teeth of rain turned upwards to their parent home in the

black sky above. That rather frightening feeling of vulnerability induced by a lashing storm permeates Storm Camp. The tall spruce behind the tent creak over in the wind and across the river I watch those trees act like whips. Light plays the dominant role. I am cut off from the landscape by a dead grey-black sky relieved only by the wisp of smoke that escapes now and then from beneath my pot-black kettle. Slowly, gold outlines a distant peak of the Ragged Range and the light becomes diffused over all the mountains turning them silver and ink-blue. Greens re-appear and the land becomes iridescent to a thousand moving shades. The rain colossus retreats to a downpour and I wait with expectancy each subtle step down of wind and rain, the lessening pressures upon the tent walls and the miraculous return of daylight to my emerald bay where the river again eddies visibly and the centre current glides strongly by silver and black, to shine once again in the green-gold light of evening. I am fed and it will soon be time for bed. One more cup of tea, douse the still-red embers, shake out the puddle from Canoe's tarp, tidy camp, and that is it.

A hazy sun and a heavy dew. A lone seagull searches for scraps and stands about disappointed. It is a cold start. After several hours of steady, rhythmic paddling I come to a large notice proclaiming the boundary of Nahanni National Park. It is strange – what was all that land I have been living in and travelling through? Is that really a lesser land than this? Does that land deserve less care and respect than this? Is it not akin to nailing a picture frame on the Bayeaux Tapestry? The concept of National Parks is outdated, they are a stepping stone we should have left behind, instead they have become a stepping stone to the State promotion of a wilderness tourism, and nothing else.

Were you to live alone in wilderness and exit that wilderness by way of a National Park as I do now, you would feel the claim and power of humanity intangibly tainting the soul of this land. Somehow I am not on equal terms with this land anymore, my species has proclaimed forth, the United Nations have applauded (and surreptitiously claimed it as their own), all as if it were to Man's credit and I feel a mix of emotions between anger and shame. In our rationalisations we deny the true virtue of existence, this 'order' is nothing more than sophisticated vandalism. We have lost the art of being, of experiencing outside our rationalised, self-centred world.

Tradition, emotions, spirituality, have been left behind in an effort to cope with an impossible order of a Materialism which is driven by the lie of State-sponsored, inherently inflationary, inherently totalitarian, fiat money. No matter how many millions are thrown at 'conservation' as long as we subject ourselves to this lie – of a medium of exchange created from thin air – we shall continue to destroy rather than to acknowledge by our very economic existence and human action, our real relationship with this earth. Man has to work upon the land; he was not made to function as some prissy tourist.

Rabbitkettle registration point is a mile on from the boundary and is marked only by a couple of motor boats parked under the willows and a discreet notice set back from the river. The day is now fiercely hot and crickets lend their presence to round off all things that make for an idle summer day. Tying Canoe into the bank I head up the trail that has been neatly cut out with a chainsaw through a patchwork of old burn. All around is the dazzling green and white of poplar, wolf prints are scuffed by boot prints along the sand path. Over a rise I look down on to the sparkling waters of Rabbitkettle Lake and on across to the Ragged Range to a whole new vista of peaks in the west, below me flies that most simple yet evocative of national flags, the red and white Maple Leaf. I am relieved to see only a couple of tents at the campsite. At the warden's cabin an outboard engine is clamped upside down on a workbench, a chainsaw sits on the porch, but the inherent quiet of the land pervades the place. From behind the fly-screen of a factory-jointed log cabin comes a young, sharp-eyed character who has the air of an overgrown boy scout but one whom never-the-less has the noble and diplomatic skill of an easy camaraderie. I detect a keen sense of humour. We introduce ourselves and I relate to Tom my story of the previous year.

The group of four camped at the lake leave to start their downriver trip; they had flown directly to Rabbitkettle; Tom and I are left to ourselves. We talk, we talk politics, we talk people, wolves, canoeing and wilderness, bears, national parks, beavers and books – and about the only wedding that took place in July 1981 – (Prince and Princess of Wales). Supper is on the house and I am re-introduced to white-man food: milk, tomatoes, pork chops, mashed potatoes, beans and tinned fruit. A plane lands on the lake, caught out by the gathering darkness. There is gossip from Fort Simpson, a new nurse has arrived in town, a trip to Fort Norman, the costs of flying these days, and my first beer is drunk in well over twelve months. The tourists who come into the park are discussed and their capabilities are assessed by the way they organise themselves and their equipment. I cannot help but see the strange, surrealistic side of this outpost of small-talk in the heart of wilderness, and my second beer is drunk….

I am up early but the plane has already departed. Breakfast is eaten and camp is broken. Tom invites me up for a second breakfast of coffee and pancakes. I don't refuse. By noon I am back with Canoe and travelling down the grand sweep of unrelenting river.

Head winds make for strenuous paddling and around one curving incline a gale catches the bow and swings Canoe right around to race me on down stern foremost. It is a battle to right myself to avoid small sweepers and to get round the oncoming bend, but in the lee of a cliff the wind abates and we turn about. On spotting a Dall sheep and her lamb I take a break and secure several photographs. The afternoon wears on; the wide river becomes monotonous and trying to keep Canoe straight in the gusting wind, very tiring. But all days come to and end and after passing up a number of possible camps I am forced through tiredness and hunger to accept

Dune Camp. Canoe is berthed in a backwater of soft, sinking sand and supper is made ready. Sand accumulates into everything. I sit out on the level beach watching the river flow smoothly and silently by. I glass the mountains across the water and listen to the silence, it is the most peaceful of evenings.

I wake to the babbling-gaggling of ducks and quietly decamp under the cool, damp, blue and rose scarves of a chill dawn air and pole Canoe out to stick firmly on a sandbar! Freezing water bathes my feet. I lug Canoe into a deeper channel. At that a young black bear jumps out from the bushes behind, splashes across the snye and is gone in a rustling of the forest. I give the ducks a wide berth as I pass but still they rise in a great clatter of wings. A little further on I glide silently by an undisturbed beaver. The sun seems long in coming, my early morning paddle increases the discomforting chill and finally I pull out on a boulder shore, dry my feet and sponge out the water I've been kneeling in. Chewing a mouthful of pemmican I push off again feeling much happier with life.

By afternoon and around a wide sweep of river where the sand banks are eroded away to form vertical high walls where Cliff swallows nest and twitter above, Canoe cuts across to the inside of the bend and I spy the remains of Faille's cabin, now partly overhanging the water. We race down a smaller channel beneath the cabin to eddy out into a shallow pool of still water. Albert Faille was a lone trapper and prospector who spent forty odd years up on the Nahanni watershed, his skill in the bush and on the rivers remains legendary. For me, visiting this, one of his old cabins, I feel a certain poignancy, for had not red-tape got in the way I would have succeeded in meeting Faille. As it was, he died a year before I first visited Canada.

I look in through the window of the derelict cabin and out through the doorway that now overhangs the river, facing downstream out on to the same view Faille would have contemplated. The sky grows darker, rain clouds build over the red rampart cliffs to the north and the river reflects purple-blue shades. The unripe rosehips nod in the breeze and yellowed papers that hang from the interior walls conspire to lend a gentle loneliness to this most perfect of monuments. Nahanni National Park has certainly increased the movement of people through this country and it is comforting to hear the general acclaim for Faille, an overriding affection for his doggedness and skill – to many this is Faille's river – it is ironic to think that he, or his kind, are no longer allowed to live such a life. I retreat down the short forest path back to the river, leaving the cabin to its lonely vigil.

This evening I name camp Island Camp. It is the perfect home with a firm sand beach, plenty of driftwood and a protective bank with a little wood to shelter the tent from prevailing winds. The Sunblood Range now carves its way into the south and sheep paths are visible against the red rock walls of the mountains – just whispers of passage, but what admirably efficient highways!

Canoe is snug against a solid bank where a natural gradient affords easy unloading. The tent is set and soon I have the fire going down on the sand. Pemmican and soup for supper, dried fruit and peanuts for dessert. I walk round the island inspecting recent beaver tracks and cuttings. In a deep pool cut off from the river, two small fish wait for the next spring flood, or will they be frozen solid come winter? I retire into the tent; play a couple of games of Patience, then to bed.

Dall Sheep with lamb above the South Nahanni River.

In the morning camp is erased and no sign is left of my passing. Out on the river expectancy is running high, Virginia Falls is somewhere ahead. How soon will I detect them? From several miles away a small clean object seems to stand out from the massed forest, it could be a splintered tree cut down by lightning, or it could be a notice. The river winds widely but I keep

the white blaze aligned with Canoe's bow, cutting corners and tracking a straight line. After a long time I paddle round a bend in the broad course and the rock studded white water of the upper Falls comes into sight and beached canoes gleam across on the right bank. I have ample time to move Canoe over but I am nervous never-the-less – given the consequences were one to fail.

The beached craft seem close to the 'sluice gates' and once over I hug the bank in a fine display of novice caution. There is no man-made landing I am pleased to see, though the presence of board walks seems only a sensible intrusion. Canoe is hauled partly out of the river and unloaded then beached entirely and upturned over my gear. A pack is sorted out along with food and I backtrack upstream over the boardwalk to the designated campsite; it is mid-afternoon. Only two groups of people are in, one of which I had met briefly at Rabbitkettle – the foursome from Calgary. After establishing camp I go over to say hello and am welcomed to the spontaneous hospitality of Canadians in general and of wilderness travellers in particular. Debbie and Gordon are experienced canoeists and they are travelling with Al, a university friend, and Al junior, Gordon's younger brother. Gordon and Al are both in oil and conversation is interesting and varied. Mostly we speculate the rapids ahead and discuss the hard trip we've had in the headwinds down from Rabbitkettle.

Later in the evening I come down by way of the long portage trail to the base of the Falls. It is cold and I stand on the boulder shore amongst the scattered bones of bleached trees. How very old it all is, how very temporary am I. A drift of spray wets my face and I sit on a smooth round white log turning my back on the navy-blue silhouette of cliff and trees that frame the ceaseless cascading white water under the midnight sky, to look down the enormous canyon to where the river elbows first left and right to disappear through the dim red-ochre walls. And Patterson and one or two others more recently had poled and tracked their way upriver to here. Theirs would be the way to see Virginia Falls! For just as I undoubtedly garner a greater depth of feeling from the visual and acoustic than tourists who simply fly-in and fly-out, those canoeists who come upstream would earn a far greater experience still. By looking upon the same spectacle we do not necessarily see the same thing. What we see is commensurate with the effort we put into gaining the insight. Night closes over the canyon and stars light up above Sunblood Mountain, and over the endless forest to the north. I make my way back up to the campground, past the great still pool of deep blue above where the white rapids thunder along under the velvet blue of night sky.

After a quick breakfast I begin the portage, first of all taking the 70lb Canoe. I meet with a couple of Park Wardens and later on with the Park Superintendent and Chief Warden, Mart Jorgenson and Lou Carmen, who are planning their first unpowered trip downriver. A couple of plane-loads of tourists fly in and we intermingle on the boardwalk. It is a novelty to have so

many people to talk to. I cannot help but smile though when I hear a well-proportioned lady in pink sunglasses wheeze, “Jeeh but it’s a pity it’s so far to walk”. Is this really one of my own species? I leave off from portaging to spend the afternoon photographing the Falls and especially the Sluice Gates, to my mind the most exciting and spectacular section of the 316 foot drop where the placid river enters the canyon formation and begins its corrosive turbulence. A rainbow fans the crest of the Falls as pure white horses gallop in suspended animation beneath it into the depths below, manes tangling, tails pluming to disappear in roars of sound and curtains of mist against wet black, glistening rock. Implosions, explosions without end. Gazing down I feel hypnotised by the power of simple, vulnerable water. Diving, swirling, crashing, awash the rocks and whirlpooling in the suction of eddies, long surging breakers, tiny wavelets sneaking slowly down, all in myriad colours pulsing to a single deep rhythm from Earth’s own subterranean chord.

The South Nahanni River as it plunges over the lip of Virginia Falls.

I am making supper for myself, another party of four canoes have come in and established nearby when a smile that could only be smiled by an American comes across and asks in a seductive, honey-blonde voice if she can borrow milk-powder should I have some? I explain

that my supply has been used up in making snow ice-cream last winter – and so my story comes out. Linda invites me over to join her party for …… cocktails after supper! The group of eight are from Montana and we have a great time that roves from Backgammon to serious conversations on computer science, theology and international politics. Till 3am we talk under the star-studded sky by the soft glow of burning spruce and a faint Aurora. What a cocktail of experience here above Virginia Falls!

The author portaging at Virginia Falls.

The following day I complete my portage and so do Gordon and Debbie and the two Al's. The Montanans too are underway. Seven canoes are being packed and spray covered down on the boulder shore below the thundering Falls. The Park jet-boat is standing by – perhaps because of my known inexperience. As things stand it is good to be in this company, after well over a year of solitude I fully appreciate the sociable atmosphere, but had I come into the Park for a true wilderness experience, I would be sorely disappointed. The jet-boat, whilst not always in attendance, does endeavour to watch out for any inexperienced travellers through Five Mile Canyon. (I have not yet had any dunking in these ice-cold waters and perhaps I would speak differently had I had hypothermic experience, but lessen the danger and surely you encourage a lessening of common sense and skill to promote a wider recreational use by all levels of competence and otherwise, neatly forgetting that wilderness is not subject to democratic fantasy.)

Virginia Falls, South Nahanni River.

Being down in the canyon tidying up last details is butterflies-in-the-stomach time. All the stories of eight foot waves come to mind and the angling canyon hides what is to come. Several patches of white show but the height of the walls does everything to diminish the scale. There is a reasonable tension in the air amongst our little armada. No one seems to want to be first off, I am not used to waiting about. Out in front I can at least have the satisfaction of an unimpeded view, so I go.

The current is fast and I get swept along into the shadow of the first bend, the swell of the river is immense. I dig the paddle in only to keep Canoe's bow straight to the oncoming waves. Nerves begin to settle down, knees rest more solidly against the hull and my arms go to the task of controlling the passage. 'Keep to the left wall', I've been told but the swells look tricky there for one person to keep off the wall so I keep left of centre and plough on. I am in cold shadow as I take a quick look over my shoulder and like a party of painted Hollywood Indians, bright coloured in their life-jackets and spray covers, come the rest of the flotilla dwarfed by the canyon walls. The jet-boat putters by, I get the thumbs-up.

Canoe is seventeen feet long and the whole length is first angled up one wave and then down another, smacking and screwing around on the criss-crossing holes and hills. The strength of the water is manic and to ride this roller-coaster current in balance is hugely satisfying. I barely have time to note the canyon itself for all too soon we pass into sunlight and a broader reach. Behind, I notice several canoes pulling into shore. (Later I learnt that one canoe was swamped and only just made it.) I go on alone. It is evening and I drink in the magnificence of light and rock whilst ever careful to watch the river for the infamous Hell's Gate or 'figure of eight' rapid which is coming up. I pull in at the head of one island to wait for the others but no one appears so I go on again and soon come to the wide sweep of river that angles right, deflecting off a rising cliff to go on and break against a wall of rock where the volume of water is too great for the constriction of a small canyon. A wide, ever-circling eddy forms on the right and a series of boils enhance the downstream side of the centre line of standing waves. It is time to take a look from solid ground.

Splashing through a still backwater I find the old portage trail and climb to the point of rock that overlooks the river. From here both Patterson and Faille must have looked down on this, 'queerest piece of water' over half a century ago and now I too have a chance to pit my wits against the eternal examiner. Water levels are reasonably low and consequently 'figure of eight' is not the impossible piece of water it no doubt could be, however, it presents a tidy challenge.

As I look at it, the river comes straight at me; across on the opposite bank the canyon makes for a right angle forming a point of rock where the river races on down in angling backwash; once past that point the big standing waves start in a rough arrow formation, only lessening in size as they near the rock face on which I stand. On the upstream, or left side of the standing waves is a wide, safe eddy, on the downstream side of the waves are the boils and sucking currents quite strong enough to cause trouble. At this water level the upstream eddy comes back round on itself and forms a narrow V of calmer water ending in the same point as the arrow of standing waves. It is down this V I must come and hope, by leaning back with the paddle on the left, I'll hang round with the downstream side of the flow and slip by the rock face instead of slamming up into it. It is going to be an interesting ride.

The other canoes all arrive and after another look and discussion one of the Montanans gets away ahead of me and goes through safely. I blow more air into my Avon life-jacket, snug everything down under the tarp' and push out into the soon racing current. Everyone else is on shore or up on the vantage point of the canyon. All I have eyes for is that narrow alleyway between the eddy and the big waves – that is how I saw it from above but once in here the turbulence is impressive and I have to manage as best I can, slipping by some really big stuff. Canoe acts wonderfully and points her snout in the perfect position, smelling out the weaknesses. At the very end, but a few feet from the threatening rock I pull her over and brace

out on the left. The river pushes us down to the cliff face but I keep the paddle planning in the water, believing in the slackness of the current and we move around within eighteen inches of the rock. No sooner do I land on the little gravel beach beyond do we hear shouts for a rope. The following canoe has struck and both Montanans have been dumped. Diane drifts on down to be picked up by the first canoe but Marty, the other paddler, instinctively clings to the cliff where there is a small ledge. Fortunately I have a hundred feet of heavy half-inch rope so after a little delay we are able to haul him up to safety and a roaring fire. In fact it would have been quicker had he swum down to the rescue canoe but as he told us, he was so cold, once out of the water, he couldn't make himself get back in – even though it was thirty seconds to safety and fire. It is a telling experience. All other canoes come through safely.

We canoe quietly on in to the gathering dusk. The Montanans to make camp a mile on while I with Gordon and Debbie's party continue a little ways to pitch tents under a new moon rising up over the canyon country we have come through. Supper is cooked and conversation drifts like wood smoke about the campfire.

I am up with the sun and light the fire and putter about till the others get up. After an extensive breakfast I hit the river before the rest and have a good morning's run before they catch up at an incoming stream where I stop to refill my canteen. The weather all this time is perfect and the sun beats down from the deep blue northern sky. I linger by the stream to go on alone drifting beneath the towering walls of Third canyon, spying out tracking beaches sometimes and wondering at others how one could bypass obstacles if travelling upstream. I must find time to canoe up this river one day. Perhaps winter over on the Flat River as Faille used to and then hike over to see Virginia in snow garb and later in spring flood. That would be a worthwhile trip. The river bends sharply around into an angle of the canyon wall, I lay the paddle across the gunwales and take a few pictures of the rock formations, the current carrying me along, a stroke of the paddle keeps Canoe in centre stream, and I take more photographs as we round the corner and I find to my surprise Pulpit Rock dead ahead. The two Calgary canoes are beached up on the sand and I come out from the swift narrows of the 'Gates of the Nahanni' into the vast amphitheatre of sunlit still pool, spruce-fringed on the left, towering monolithic rock faces on the right. I slip Canoe quietly up on to the sand in company with the others. A couple of films are exposed and after a bite to eat and a lie-up out of the fierce sun, I leave to scout out a camp site where we will again meet up for the night.

A little rapid makes for some fun as I leave the great pool for the canyon ahead and as the sheer walls close about, a furnace wind bellows up the canyon in intermittent gusts causing alternate sweating then chilling. The river becomes swifter and some interesting water is run before camp is set up and once again I am joined by my friends from Calgary. Next morning I am up at dawn and in that first chill light where the forthcoming day feels at its freest, I lug Canoe from her

Canoe view coming into the Gates of the Nahanni and Pulpit Rock.

boulder bed and catch the passing current to be licked along quickly round sweeping bends and some racing corners. Sheer walls give way to broken hills, tree covered and intimate. Perhaps this is Deadmans Valley? Then I realise it cannot be and I am in fact leaving the Third Canyon for the Second Canyon. I pull out on a gravel flat and have breakfast. The sun once more warms the whole earth and blue sky brings utter contentment. The country all about does its best to attract me away from the river. Were I to delay now I think I would never leave this land, quite willingly staying forever – but the river urges on and on I go.

Second Canyon is run, only slowing once to watch a nonchalant black bear, and then rather abruptly from canyon to wide open spaces Canoe noses out into Deadmans Valley, one of the most beautiful places on earth. The river splits on itself as the land levels off. It is as if a constrictive belt had been taken away and the controlled sinuous waist now spreads into an unrecognisable flow. A wedge of silver cloud angles over the distant Tlogotsho Plateau and the mantle of green forest rests at peace below the blue, blue sky. And then from over my right shoulder I stare and question. A wisp of smoke grows out of the forest and taints the sky with nicotine shades. Forest fire!

Pulpit Rock, South Nahanni River.

Naturally generated, fire is healthy, but with so many people now coming through the country with the magnet of the National Park, I wonder if anyone else is aware of this fire. I lay on the paddle and race the lengthy distance down the valley to wherever I may find the Warden's cabin. The Meilleur River goes by on my right and wide islands open out and leave me questioning if the cabin is on the far side. It seems like a long journey till the alluvial fan of Prairie Creek opens out on the left and I see a wooden step ladder reaching down to the river from the cut-bank on my right. Pulling over I beach Canoe to find no one about save two rather spanking-new tents. So that's it, there is nothing whatsoever I can do. I dig out some food, sit on the bottom step of the ladder and have lunch, watching the Nahanni swirl by. Not five minutes pass when I hear a whistle and I spy two walkers coming in from upstream. They shout something but it is unintelligible. I try to tell them I know about the fire but their shouts and

whistles continue and I get annoyed with so much fuss. Perhaps there has been an accident I wonder but then I see them take time off to look me over through binoculars and I reckon the only thing to do is wait and I go back to my lunch. As they get nearer I hear the word ‘bear’ and so as they come within talking range I enquire, ‘Black or Grizzly?’ They affirm Black and quickly tell me that they have had this Black bear following them along the river and then they had seen him right above me on the cut-bank. Now I am far from being blasé about Black bears but the idea of this animal at the top of my ladder whilst yours truly sublimely lunched and munched on pemmican at the bottom rung – well, I would have traded a lot to have got that on film!

Apparently the Park authorities already know about the fire, it has been smouldering for about a week and they are keeping an eye on it. I am invited to stay around for a cup of tea but I can see my two new friends are a little uneasy when the bear wanders around the cabin into our clearing. I collect my camera from Canoe and sure enough he departs downstream, not deigning to have his picture taken.

I think perhaps I am a little prejudiced against these campers and unfair and unreasonable as this judgement is, I find myself being somewhat forceful when it is suggested that should the fire develop, as it seems to be doing, the Park should rescue us. I cannot hold with this and say in no uncertain terms that people travelling through wilderness should be responsible for themselves. Once you start bringing in rescue operations from the tax base there is no logical point to draw the line between wilderness and industrial society - but perhaps I am already a hundred years too late.

Their four other companions are on a hike up Prairie Creek, they are all experienced white-water paddlers and are somewhat disappointed in the water levels and consequently the difficulty, or rather the lack of difficulty, in the rapids. However they do feel compensated by the sheer grandeur of the scenery, which they had not expected. After an hours conversation I appreciate my fellow travellers a little more and travel on to make my own camp at the head of First Canyon.

The sky by now is blotted out in the northwest and the sun is easily observed as a dull red orb lighting the inner recesses of sickly brown cloud. Between Little Butte that guards the lower canyon and Ram Creek I make a snug camp on a shoulder of sand. There are many attractions to this place. Across the gliding water step the canyon walls where just as in Patterson’s day, Dall sheep stare down upon the activity below. Downstream is the gloomy, mysterious entrance to the canyon and to my back, upstream, the clean drinking water of Ram Creek tumbles along its boulder bed; to the north the wide vista of Deadmans Valley and the Headless Ranges. But by far the most notable asset to my camp is a boulder that centuries of the river’s passing has

carved into the most perfect of armchairs. I lay my sleeping pad on it and proceed with dinner as in the most elegant and select of clubs!

Ram Creek, South Nahanni River. Taken from my boulder chair.

The smoke is becoming dense, wafting into my dining room, in fact it is a little disconcerting, filling up the valley and choking the canyon mouth. A high wind probably caused by the fire itself, blows fiercely downriver and I debate the options that are open.

George's Riffle, a nasty piece of water by all accounts is invisible just around the corner and will require some reconnaissance before running the canyon, but I do not believe the fire is that close. However I understand now that smoke is the primary danger but reckon that with a little ingenuity I can get by till daylight if needs must. My only precaution is to leave the tent stowed while I sleep out on the sand.

Camp at Patterson's Lake before the smoke rolled in.

The wind seems to have cleared the sky in the north but as I stretch out in my sleeping bag the fine sand sifts and rattles along, making for so many demons to keep me from sleep. An hour or two later, beneath a darkening sky I take a look out and come wide awake. The western sky is a blaze of purple and gold and blue and crimson wings of colour all reflected off the surface of Patterson's Lake. The camera comes out and lying flat on the sand I wind my way through a roll of Kodachrome 64, hardly believing the vividness I am recording.

The dancing sky stays long into the night and I wake feeling more tired than if I hadn't slept at all. Burnt spruce needles drop into my tea and black flakes of ash cover everything while swirling down the sand to eddy in the river. A small pale sun rises above the canyon walls only to die amongst the thickening clouds of smoke. A weak red light hangs over the land. I eat breakfast sitting back in my boulder and wonder what I should do. My intention had been to head up Dry Canyon Creek and up to the open tundra country but I think I should now stay put for awhile and see how things develop. I am just thinking about dowsing the fire and emptying the kettle when Gordon's party arrive, so with the advantage of boiling water to hand they settle in to prepare their own breakfast. Little Al' who has been talking about getting home to his 'lazy boy' armchair gladly accepts my offer of the boulder equivalent, agreeing with me that its

ergonomics are superior to any upholstery. They too have had a restless night and by all accounts a more nervous one than my own. Camping along with the white-water paddlers at the Warden's cabin their view of the fire was extremely limited, surrounded as they were by big old spruce trees. By general consensus a watch was kept throughout the night, with canoes ready to make a dash for it. At that the three other canoes glide on by and six tired individuals wave their good-morning. Gordon's group plan to follow straight after breakfast. I am still inclined to stay by myself but first plan a climb up the Little Butte to see the 'line of fire'.

A young porcupine at the Patterson's Lake camp.

Once again we say our goodbye's and as with each of our departures down from Virginia, never knowing if we will meet up again for the evening, we spin the inevitable, 'see you at the Butte' – referring to Nahanni Butte village. We go our different ways, they to enter the smoky canyon, I to climb the forested shoulder of rock above.

A small, near empty stream trickles around the base of the domed rock and by following it back into the tangled forest I find a not overly difficult path to the top. Deadmans Valley stretches across and before me but the upper valley is quite invisible behind the smoke. The Tlogotsho

Plateau is partly obscured and the Headless Range to the northwest has disappeared. Only the immediate Nahanni, a silver twisting ribbon, shows itself snaking through the forest to a four mile distance where the fire takes over. A solid wall of smoke broken only by a few jagged red teeth of flame, so dense and powerful that I feel a respect which flame alone would not induce. I am not overly worried but realise I should be moving along. The Montanans and any others will not attempt to get through this smoke – I will be the last man out.

In the short time it takes for me to descend and reach Canoe the wind shifts and from reasonable discomfort and low visibility the smoke comes in like the proverbial pea-souper and I begin to feel a twinge of fear as the canyon below grows dimmer and darker in an eerie purple-red glow. I think only of running the rapids blind and never has Canoe been loaded so quickly. That's it, nothing left on shore, dig that paddle in and we glide slowly off into the gathering murk, eyes stinging and heart beating.

There is an island above George's Riffle so I beach Canoe on its point of boulders to scout ahead. Then from out of the fog I discern moving forms and recognise Al, Gordon's younger brother coming toward me. Apparently on their checking the rapid they decided they were too tired and as the island offered a reasonable campsite, the tents were erected and sleep was uppermost on their mind. However, with my arrival and the dangerously thickening smoke, it is considered prudent to move; tired or not.

George's is a wild piece of water, fierce on the right below the rock wall, lessening in aggression on our left, but in the overall atmosphere of the fire, getting through the rapid is doubled in importance and consequently takes on different proportions to wild water under blue skies. It is one of those times when things will become 'fun' when seen in retrospect. I don't doubt that there will be a 'retrospect' to view it from. I go through the rapid first, keeping out of the big stuff till the end when I feel the strength of currents skewing me every way and I pull out into flat water where I wait for the others.

Down through the deep silent world we travel. Cold drafts and hot breezes alternate and all the time ashes sting the eyes and blacken the face. Smoke makes for half breaths. The canyon quite literally is beyond belief as pinnacles, higher than I thought rock could be, loom from out of the red glow. Higher still the air has touches of purple and even green. Gold and grey are the muted shades at river level. At times the smoke feels less dense but only to thicken up again around a bend in the canyon wall. We all think of reaching White Spray Spring at the end of the canyon to enjoy cold, fresh water and relieve sore throats and smarting eyes. At least we are moving out of the fire. Someone has been reading a map and reckons the spring is round the next corner and so it is, along with the group of six white-water paddlers.

The spring is freezing cold and canteens are filled, drunk and filled again. We relate the latest news of the fire and have a general assessment of risks and dangers. They decide things will be safer at the Hot Springs, about five miles on and after a rest so too do Gordon's party. The spring here is a beautiful spot, damp and enclosed by ancient spruce which must have seen many a forest fire in the course of their lives. I decide to stay put, reckoning perhaps illogically that the smoke will lift –as if it were some English mist. So camp is set and Canoe is hauled up safely on to the boulders. I make a check on the trees across the river to gauge the density of smoke, so that I might know its increase or otherwise. I am about to turn when echoing from down the canyon comes the deep throbbing of rotor blades and appearing out of the smoke, hovering above the river, lights blinking and rotating like some sci-fi monster, comes a chopper. They see me and come in to a usually impossible landing, only my lugging Canoe further up the boulders allows the pilot to touch down with blades miraculously roaring between the trees. Mart Jorgenson, the Park Superintendent leans out and I crawl to meet him beneath the rotors. "Get out to the Hot Springs and we'll airlift you all out from there. The fire has jumped the canyon and another fire has started up ahead of you. OK?" "OK" I scream back beneath the roar and they ease backwards and are gone upriver. Silence, but for the gentle swallowings of the Nahanni. Camp is ripped apart, thrown into Canoe and away I go.

Low visibility in the South Nahanni fire. (photo : G. Ritchie.)

The lighting effects from the South Nahanni fire. (photo: G. Ritchie.)

Alone, the fantastic canyon allows for its full impact to be felt. Rarely have I felt so alone. Head winds seer up between the towering walls carrying the ashen debris that stings into my face and eyes. I can barely see. The lights remain eerie and ominous. I look behind into a silver luminescence as if hand-tinted with greens and blues, viewed through a rose-coloured lens. Ahead, a deepening sickly red, glowing to purple-brown fills the whole sky and by all the colours I should be fighting my way upstream, not down. This is pretty close to what the popular vision of Hell might be. Coming into Lafferty's Riffle I fail to make out the course of the river and get carried along in the slack water to the head of the island, only realising at the last moment that this is the riffle. Nearly grounded I dig down into the river bed with the paddle and grind our way down into the roller-coaster rapid; once again by-passing the big standing waves and come safely through on the left hand. I am afraid of missing the Hot Springs but no sooner is Lafferty's passed than the smoke appears to lessen, the canyon drops back and the stench of sulphur adds the finishing touch to the inferno. Canoes show their shiny hulls aligned up on a wide gravel beach and people stand about staring at my lone approach.

They are glad to see me in and I meet up with another group from South Carolina. I just have time to organise my equipment before a monstrous twelve-seater helicopter buzzes in like some obese spruce bug. Ten people and all their gear are squashed in; I wait with the Carolinians for a second trip and watch the manoeuvring antics of the flashing monster. It hovers and backs slowly along the beach, dips its bulbous nose as a charging bull and screams down toward us, accelerating and rising to throw its ugly body up over the encircling trees, carrying its human cargo to safer climes.

While awaiting his return the Park jet boat arrives to load up the ten canoes, and then we too are packed into the helicopter and carted away into a surrealistic and sickening flight over giant fires and mountains of smoke, hidden lonely valleys and terraced mountain tops, all the while being buffeted and blown like a paper bag in the wind. I feel sick and assess the landscape, hoping to see level land and Nahanni Butte. I felt a lot safer in Canoe. Finally we do descend and get out to walk on a mown field. How strange to see so much arranging – parallel lines, radio aerials, electricity lines, straight paths! Nahanni Butte is a small village, we have landed on the opposite bank at the Park's headquarters – a cluster of only half a dozen buildings, yet still I find it strange.

Gathered together, we river travellers look like so many war-torn refugees and we are catered for similarly. Chopped wood is brought to our allotted camping area by mini-tractor and trailer along with barbecue fire grates. A rumour goes around that steak is being provided too, but that remains a hopeful jest.

"So what do you think of being rescued now?" somebody asks me. By this time my hawkish approach has gone the rounds with no encouragement from myself and many people are discussing the pro's and con's of rescue. Without exception we all feel grateful to the Park authorities for getting us out and especially for the efficient way they handled the whole operation: no hesitancy, just action at the precise point where action seemed needed. Under such circumstances it is no time to quibble on points of principle, people are trying to help you so you do not turn around and be boorish. I only have the highest regard for Parks Canada and every individual involved in the operation – the wardens especially.

"But the problem remains" I point out. "It is not for the immediate responsibility of National Parks at large, it is for society generally to accept the inherent dangers of wilderness and encourage the park system, if we are to have a park system, to extend its boundaries to include the metaphysical. To have this we need real danger and we need self-reliance with which to meet it. Have these and you are on your way to preserving all wilderness land for its own sake, not for our own ends and economies".

I am not sure that my point is grasped. One of the Carolinians, who are all Outward Bound instructors, recognises the issue but points out that few people are sufficiently self-motivated toward wilderness to accept the natural balance of risks, people only desire the rewards which they believe should be attainable via tax dollars.

The purple skies above the Nahanni Range gradually pale out and smoke dissipates to hang in the air as a still vapour. On the following day I say my goodbyes, load up Canoe and cut out into the wide waters of the Liard. From the sweeping bend of Swan Point I look back, the bell-shaped Butte remains just visible, the Nahanni Range, jagged and stretching across the horizon, marks the end of the Mackenzie Mountains; I turn about, the broad expanse of river is my whole horizon, it fills the width of my vision.

By late afternoon I come to a home landing where a couple of motor boats are tied and a log house is back amongst the trees. There is a prosperous air about the place and I find I am right in thinking this is the home of Sue and Edwin Lindburgh, long time residents of the Liard country and friends of Chris Lord. I introduce myself and get taken inside for whiskey and later, for supper. The company is good, the food is excellent and the conversation relaxed. Edwin draws a map of the Beaver Dam rapids for me and offers advice. I have come so far; now one obstacle is left to run. I am tired but chiefly I am sad at leaving this wilderness behind, it is as if I were parting from an old friend and my freedom too is slipping away with the first strands of ‘civilisation’ drifting as gossamer on the air. It is late evening by the time I leave the kindly Lindburgh’s, fog moves softly up from the still river and a mauve-pink sky closes the day. I paddle Canoe quietly away through the mist.

I leave camp before dawn and find crosswinds make for difficult progress. Sand bars drag on Canoe or we are blown across the river only to creep along the shoreline, doubling our line of travel. Behind me the Nahanni Range remains faintly discernible, a small interruption in the vastness of sky and riverscape. The northern sky dominates all my senses in its huge strolling immensity; layer upon layer of flat-bottomed cumulus, cloud soldiers in cloud regiments stretch away into infinity; an infinity of blue and the palest of turquoise skies.

I am now at Poplar River, just above the Beaver Dam. I write this by the light of a setting sun whilst purple smoke haze drifts up from the west. The first evidence of ‘civilization’ has appeared on the scene: broken beer bottles, tin cans, broken light bulbs and plastic rubbish. On searching about I find a cut-road, no doubt down from the Blackstone road which is being built from the Simpson Highway to Fort Nelson.

Once again I am ready to be off before the sun allows the world to refer to its turning, but this morning I linger waiting for some warmth. I am not sure about these Beaver Dams and a bit of heat on the scene won't hurt should trouble occur. The Liard is a wide river by any standards and though water levels are low this only increases the problem of the Beaver Dam rapid, a twenty miles stretch of the river where ledges cross its width haphazardly and create a conglomerate of uncertainties. The only passage is to stick close into the right bank. I soon discover this means my wait for the sun has been in vain for the high banks and forest above, make sure I have no relief from the chilling fog.

Progress soon becomes rapid as I hit the first of the fast water but I take the advice of staying close to shore too literally and coupled to the low water levels I bounce Canoe off hidden rocks several times. After each hit I think of moving out but only tell myself these people know the river and I carry on doing as I've been told. At one point water glides over an obvious ledge after which a rolling breaker crests, things are worse out from shore, there must be a narrow passage that will open up, but none appears. Canoe clears the ledge but in doing so takes the wave at an angle and we are spun round. I dig down to find solid water and do a watery version of a three point turn, to avoid waves on all sides. Once about we go on and have no more nonsense.

Far ahead I can see the navigational aids at the ferry crossing and later still, the ferry itself. Canoe seems so tiny upon this huge waterway. We pass a couple of trucks waiting for the ferry, an Indian boy waves, I wave back. A couple of river-side cabins are passed where no sign of life welcomes my return. It is now late afternoon and the arduous day's travel has sapped much of my energy. I don't want the problems of facing Fort Simpson tonight. On a long lonely sandbar near the mouth of the Liard, I beach Canoe and pitch the tent for the last time. Supper is cooked and afterwards I take a bath in the river and watch a group of twenty-five Sandhill cranes circle overhead against the blood-red orb of a setting sun to descend upon the far end of my peaceful island. The evening star blinks softly above the Mackenzie River flowing silently a mile away and the serene shades of sand and sky mingle into night. My journey for the moment has come to an end.

Ariel views of the Broken Skull River country.

PART TWO
CHAPTER ONE.

THE MACKENZIE.

After a couple of winters working at my paintings and a summer at home in the UK. I am back with Canoe. Yellowknife has been left behind once more and so too have many new-found friends. There were just so many things to be seen to. Food was being trucked up from Edmonton on the 10th; the new canoe was not delivered yet; this had to be sold, that had to be stored; the apartment had to be cleared and cleaned by the 15th; a send-off party was for the night before; I still had no ride to Fort Simpson …. I could have done with a secretary!

Not to worry, it would all soon sort itself out, and it would all soon be over. Yet perhaps I didn't want it to end? At the party I was presented with a 'Grey Owl' laminated white-water paddle from Kim and Louise Poole – recently made friends who had somehow become firmly involved in my unusual life-style. Goodbyes took time; a lift to Simpson materialised from out of nowhere; back to blitz the apartment – it would be good to get out from this $600 a month hen-coop; last minute phone calls to the UK.

And now at Fort Simpson not four hundred yards down from where I brought Canoe in from her Nahanni adventures, everything has been dumped a good carry from the muddy shore. I am not sure who is more pleased – me, for at last getting everything in one place, or the warehouseman who has rid himself of the responsibility of my precious food supplies. Mosquitoes are thick as I struggle a virtual ton of assorted belongings down to the two canoes. Yes. Two canoes.

They say this time that I have bitten off more than I can chew, but you cannot fit a two year grubstake into one seventeen footer, so I haven't much choice. Long into the summer night light I struggle and pack, repack and rebalance till everything sits snugly and the two canoes are lashed together on four-foot poles, (one at the stern and one at the bow,) riding on the eddy level and fat – and heavy as hell!

Leyland Wooley who has been caretaking Canoe 1 for me comes on down bringing me a bag of oranges and wishes of good luck for the trip. He too thinks it may be impossible.

The night is a restless one, and a short one; I haven't time to waste on sleeping – there will be time enough for that come winter. It is July 17th, Simpson still sleeps, not even a dog barks as I push out into the mouth of the Liard and paddle forward into the immensity of the Mackenzie River. So what's this impossible journey?

My plan is to canoe from Fort Simpson down north for two hundred and fifty miles then turn left and west up the Keele River and go on for about a hundred miles till I reach the Canadian Wildlife Service cabin, which I have permission to use over the winter. The following spring, having eaten half of my supplies, I'll go on with one canoe – the new Old Town Tripper – up the Keele to 'the elbow' and on up the Twitya River to where it heads close to the Yukon border. A hundred miles should bring me to a pass through which I'll work my way on to the Mountain River watershed by way of Mountain Lake. At Mountain Lake I intend to spend a second winter. The spring of '85 should see me travelling the Mountain River back to the Mackenzie and down to Fort Good Hope. But of course – the best laid plans of mice and men….. Well, I really don't mind, I have the glorious prospect of two years bush ahead, the sun is shining from the magnificent blue northern sky, the mosquitoes have gone for a coffee break, and I am the freest person on earth! I intend to enjoy it all.

The last little houses of Simpson are left behind, the canoes fairly barrel along and I settle in to finding out how best to steer this overloaded contraption. The mud-thick Mackenzie swirls by two inches below the gunwales and I feel the full weight of the load in any paddling manoeuvre. Let's hope there's not going to be any rough stuff ahead.

The main problem is space. With two loaded canoes to contend with I had given much thought to having help along for this first section of the trip but now I am thankful 'help' never quite materialised. I can barely find room to kneel and the lack of space is a serious drawback that will no doubt encourage me to eat well. It has been awhile since I was last in this routine of river travel so I haul up early and find that stopping this rig is no simple trick. From what I see so far campsites are not going to be plentiful either. I feel a little awkward, like moving around in a new pair of shoes. Camp life will need to snug down a bit before I feel at home again.

Once more the morning dawns crisp, blue and early. The mosquitoes keep me moving, suggesting a breakfast out on the river, so everything is thrown, stowed and tarped but the mosquitoes, the bummers, hide away in all the shady corners of Canoe and hitch a ride in their own watery version of 'meals on wheels'!

I let the river work for a spell and dig into the box of raisins and peanuts; a canteen of fresh water is tucked under the seat. Far off in the shimmering heat haze I question the blur horizon,

as if some white city were at anchor – yet surely it is moving? What is it? Should I be moving left or right of it? It then dawns – a Mackenzie River tug is pushing some few Mackenzie River barges. The 'white city' of the tug's superstructure rears from the shimmer and the haze. I had truly forgotten all about them – never considered them actually. I had forgotten the Mackenzie Valley is now an industrial corridor. The pipeline is being built. Alexander would be thrilled.

I realise quickly enough that I had better be on my way and out of the way, but the only problem is knowing the direction of this behemoth? The left shore is closest; crab-like I lever the canoes as fast as I can towards that shore. We are five hundreds yards off as the tug throbs level half a mile away on our right, a dozen barges slicing the water before it. I lay off the paddle and watch the monster ride upstream.

…..and I can still hear it vibrating as it once more loses itself amidst the heat vapours of the horizon. Simultaneously I feel the slop-lobbing of the canoes as they sidle into a misguided tango. The swell is just coming into its own. At that, just as though its passing had caused the depression for it to blow into, a crosswind adds a secondary distorted rhythm to the dance and water starts to slap up over the two inch freeboard across the tarps – and the blue sky has turned to grey.

I am still far from shore. Propelling this weight anywhere other than directly with the current is slave labour. Waves jostle and slop up over the sides as the wind increases. Dam all tugs and barges. Inch-wise I scrabble over out from the gathering storm ahead as the waves become bigger and ever more threatening. Shore appears closer, I angle the hulls for a back- ferry but I just haven't the strength. Cobble banks are speeding past. We'll get in there yet. Paddle braking, steering, gaining a lateral yard, a sand stretch is ahead. I daren't let the sterns come about; the waves will roll us over. Paddle touches bottom, a little closer, track-line, stow paddle, jump. Waist deep but standing. Rope streams out and Canoes jam up taut and cautiously I bring them up the shore by the snout, snubbing them on the sand as breakers throw up the sterns, endeavouring to kick them over.

The load is too heavy to drag further from the water; all I can do is guide the canoes with a stern line, persuading them to rise to every succeeding wave rather than turn and broach. A black mass sits out in the centre of the river haloed in grey. A savage contortion of electric light crackles the black with silver and rain empties down in a solid glistening wall. Thunder fills the whole mad-cap, white-tossed river world. Flash after flash of lightning rips across and down to score a watery grave. Huge waves in a storm of white, greys and greens toss one into another, dancing their frenzied waltz out in the cauldron of mid-river whilst the canoes barely survive the furious pace of the surging tide. For three hours I play the prancing reins, easing both canoes into each successive swell. Soaked and starving I watch the storm retreat in widening

circles over the distant level of forest. Rain becomes a patter, the sun burns down, driftwood steams and horse flies drone out along their bull-headed way. A fire is kindled; canoes are baled; camp is set. I've had enough for one day.

It promises to be even hotter this morning. The sun is already high in the vivid blue and the distant green and silver of poplars dazzle from opposite shores. There is nowhere to rest one's eyes from this bright unending vastness. I search the horizon for clues as to what may lie beyond the wall of reflected heat but I am effectively blocked till a darker shimmer stays put to slowly materialise into a mid-river island. Looks like I should head left. The river is too wide to exert any real flow either way, until that is, it is too late and I see that the 'island' is but a rocky boil concluding a spit of sand. Once again I exert full force to crab over to the opposite side but current inexorably drags us into the shallows and though the paddle races to find deeper channels, the deception has been well laid and we grind up on gravel shoals.

I step out, there is deeper water ahead. I have only just missed safe passage but moving this dead weight a foot, let alone twelve, is questionable. At that a bright, shiny red canoe speeds by along the far shore, its two occupants staring across no doubt wondering why anyone should be standing out in the middle of the Mackenzie with two canoes. I put my back into it and start easing first one canoe then the other, wiggling and scraping them forward. Sweat maybe will raise the water level. Half an hour later they find their draft and I jump in. We are on our way again for an uninterrupted six hours.

After breaking camp early and only an hour into the day I look over my shoulder to see a tug bearing down. There is a slight spit of sand ahead so hoping this may break its wash, I race on in time to gather up the track lines and guide the sterns to meet the oncoming wave. Tugs and barges glide by, not slowing at all. Nervously I wait for the full effect; it doesn't seem too bad this time. The gentle swell lures me into a false sense of security. It happens suddenly, no warning, a great roll of water and noise three feet high breaks into the sterns, lifting them, twisting them. I hang on to the track-line keeping them head-on to the force. A second and third wave follows. Fear of losing everything, turned upside down six feet from shore in mud-thick water makes me seethe. This time my swearing may bring forth the storm but sure enough the skies blacken, the wind comes in and the rain lashes down. Free of barges the canoes are safe however and I set camp. It is in fact a nice little boulder beach where wolf tracks wind and a small stream tumbles nearby to replenish the canteens. Rain continues throughout the day and into the night. Not till early afternoon the following day, my patience fraying, does the wind abate and the rain cease. By now I am ready for a change of scenery and though it remains cold and damp, camp is packed.

Out on the river storm clouds still threaten from the rear and I race on. The mountains of the Camsell Range gather upon the horizon and a solid eight hours pulls them up around me. The river narrows and falls swiftly as the North Nahanni is passed, its waters are low with black snags protruding from mud banks and I wonder how one could get up such a river, and will the Keele be like that? It is time to be finding a camp for the night.

The great north-turning of Camsell Bend sweeps into view and I search out a side channel down which no tugs can come. Around winding quiet ways and faster turns the canoes slide into an eddy along a gravel shore and stop. The utter quietness of it all – it is so good to be back. In the soft glow of the evening camp is made and supper bubbles above the embers. Through between the islands a little cabin sits, smoke wafts up into the air and a dog barks a solitary voice upon the great peace of this twilight. For the first time I sleep free of the worry of passing barges.

A bannock has to be made for the next two days so that, along with a raisin one, are put to bake on the morning coals and an altogether leisurely start is made upon the day. The rock walls of Camsell's Range ease left as the Mackenzie eases right and on this sunny, lonely Sunday I settle down to a steady rhythm of solid, paddle-plying work. The river is quite immense, spreading over the land from this canoe-eye-level, rather than winding through it. Travelling upon this waterway gives a far clearer insight into the eternal North than any map could do. Maps are for planners and technocrats - ogres who live in plastic caves; rivers are for mammalian people and fishes. This one is surely an Anaconda of a river, more fearsome in many ways than rushing courses of white water. The very curvature of the earth can be felt as current lines deny their shortest route to flow a sideways puzzle around the widest curves, inducing dizziness to one who tries to unravel their swirling purpose.

From endeavouring always to keep close to shore it is all too easy to find the river has slyly brought one out into its mid-ocean – where experience has already taught me not to be. Blue skies, relentless, windless, sun-lapping life is not to be trusted. Miles away I line up some far point and steer toward it. Eyes ache in the sheer distance; deserts must be like this. Arms always pulling forward, I cannot just float along like so much flotsam – it is quite beyond my nature, and I think perhaps the river would not like it – a mark of disrespect, and take advantage of me.

Mouthfuls of peanuts and raisins have been my only sustenance all day, I never stop for lunch, places to stop are too few. Tiredness creeps down and a sense of claustrophobia competes for control. I have to get out of these kneeling, two square feet soon. That distant point has long been put behind as I now consider the left or right channel around the fourteen mile length of McGern Island, camp is going to have to be found soon. The left channel looks smaller – less chance of barges – and the four mile width closes to two. Not far down I find a sandy point and the canoes ground up in an eddy. I ache. Skin is taught from endless sun and eyes squint to

readjust to shorten focus. Considering it is a last option in a long day, camp is a surprisingly good one. A clear water stream fans across the little peninsula and a wide span of firm sand invites me to pitch the tent. Driftwood for a fire is never a problem, but the Horse flies which often are, are relatively few here. Wolf tracks line the beach. Supper is a hash of oats, pearl barley and dried vegetables and eaten straight from the pot while I sit against a sun-soaked log and meditate the view – till the sun begins to fall and the mosquitoes reappear from all their shady homes – and it is time for bed.

It must be very early for the sun is down on the horizon when I am woken by the pulsing throb of a distant tug. How long have I got before it comes to within striking distance? And will it use this channel or the eastern one? To be on the safe side I get up and have breakfast. Usually I don't bother with a fire, eating only a cold, compacted wedge of cooked oats, raisins, peanuts, honey and dried apple, but now rather than head off with the barges on my tail I kindle the fire and boil a kettle for tea – and wait for the vandal to come to me.

An hour goes by and I still hear the intermittent throbbing loudly, as if it were just out of sight beyond the crest of the river in the already gathering heat haze. Another hour goes by. It is no use thinking I should have gone ahead, these things always catch up and with one gone maybe I'll be free of them for a day or two. Everything is packed and ready to go. I make the fire up and sit, waiting. Constantly I expect to see it loom but only the menacing vibration of its deep churning engines play upon my nerves. Resorting to psychological tactics is hardly cricket.

Five hours after being woken the tug appears upstream. Will it choose east or west now? I have gambled on the wrong lane, it comes into the west channel, eight or ten barges before it. The width of the channel is not that great either; I'm going to be slaughtered here. Then a quite brilliant thing happens. The first barge disappears, slipping effortlessly under the sand! The second one too goes down, and then I understand what is happening. What I took to be the lower bank of the far shore is actually a well disguised sand bar. The tug and its barges sweep by leaving me safely alone. All I can see are the collections of industrial artefacts, pipe, scaffold, trucks and crates, riding along in true surrealistic theatre. Thank God for sand bars.

It is another blistering hot day of steady paddling out on the unprotected, evaporating vastness. The last of the oranges have been eaten and I crave more. By early afternoon I am ready to quit, a small forest-clad island can be seen miles ahead on the east so I decide to call it a day should a camp-site present itself on the lee side – free from the prevailing danger of tugs. The canoes are worked across the three mile width of the river and gauging the angle right we scoot into the narrow back channel to scrape up easily on a silver sand beach. This may just be paradise. Tall spruce crown the higher land whilst a perimeter beach fashions a desert island feel, an atmosphere enhanced by the water which is strangely still and clear, with Sardinia-emerald hue.

Most welcome of all is the lack of mosquitoes and Horse flies. This privacy and heat encourage a quick cold bath and a slow warming dry out on a sun-hot flank of a waiting boulder. All too luxurious.

Dinner happens unhurriedly between bouts of lazing on the sand. I stroll around the island leaving a necklace of footprints along its water margin and stay awhile upon the trailing upstream point to watch the Terns hunt and the descending lights burn from pink to gold, whilst all the time listening to the stealthy tread of this huge water beast beside me. (It is probably no bad thing to feel so small.)

The beauty of the place would have me linger but the year has of course turned and the downhill gathering of the days is a thing to contend with. An early start is made in the company of a drifting mist till our silent companionship is intruded upon by the closing whine of a kicker and I turn to watch the approach of an Indian in a freighter canoe. He passes three hundred yards away, I wave, he does not and the mist wraps us in our private worlds once more.

Old Fort Isle is just ahead and the river ripples and flexes into a higher speed. I feel nervous as it narrows, the rock formations of the Isle look interesting but I only have time to glance. Clay cliffs rise off on my left whilst the rocks smoothly protrude on my right and great mid-stream currents pull one way then the other and boils surge up to throw the canoes around – or they try to – for this is a bit of a fight. With two feet of water racing between the hulls each canoe leads a separate life with me steering from only one of them. The problem is that the outrigger canoe is pushed forward on the boils to race ahead and the only way to counter this is to paddle faster on the left. When the controlling canoe is surged forward it is simpler to apply the paddle brakes. But it is a short run, more useful than threatening and then the river settles down to a mind-bending, eye-wandering avenue that has no end in sight; but Wrigley village must be down here somewhere.

The heat is oppressive. I doff my hat, scoop up water and put it back on, and I am dry in seconds. Oranges keep invading my thoughts – what I would give for an orange now. Maybe they'll have some at Wrigley – there's bound to be a 'Bay there. (Hudson Bay Store) They're bound to have oranges. But there is no sign of Wrigley yet. Paddling, pulling, arms are machines; there is a certain purity in this grind. Something disturbs the far, near-invisible horizon, something different to the usual quavering level. But it takes three hours for my body to catch up with my far vision when we pass by an old sunken winch. Over on the right, under pale orange cliffs motor boats are drawn up on a gravel beach, a wind-sock hangs lifelessly above. It must be the airport up there and the village is down on this side somewhere. (The sun has got to me, since when do I put so much faith in maps?) Miles downriver I pull up at the old Wrigley – the village has been moved! The requisites of air traffic are the dictates of settlement

these days. More fool me. I should have known those oranges were only a mirage. Within a last eddy down from the wide flats of Wrigley River, I pull up and establish camp. Mount Gaudet rises sheer from the slab-sided cliffs across the water and the river narrows considerably to race down and split about Rocky Isle. Clouds mount in the west.

Clean water is in short supply so I have a long trek back to intersect the Wrigley River flowing in from the southwest. Patches of sand hold my tracks whilst boulders for the most part, hide my passing. Approaching the river I skirt about a pile of rocks when a tawny red fox leaps up and races away through the shallows and into the forest beyond. I dip the canteens for water suddenly feeling much happier with the day. I would never have seen him if I had found Wrigley. I walk back and a thin rain comes across on a chill breeze. It rains throughout supper and through the night. No tugs pass. Pouring rain imprisons me in the tent the following day and I discover with some anger, leaks all over this new, hi-tech, Gore-Tex home.

Rain and leaks continue. It is a miserably boring time, cold, wet and windy but I'm blowed if I am going canoeing in this. Patience. You have to work at it – like anything else, and a leaking tent is a prime place to practise. I retreat back to my sleeping bag and watch the rain steadily falling into the river and I count the mosquitoes on the door.

By the third day I leave Rocky Isle. The river narrows to a mile and I paddle for twenty-five. It is late afternoon when I look behind to see a tug and barges charging up behind, I brake into a convenient beach and man the lines. He speeds by and I handle the canoes well but then of all the annoying things, instead of going on his bullying way, he hauls up and proceeds to turn about to unload his cargo of pipe-carrying barges. Whilst I am trying to decide what his next move will be, the usual tug storm sneaks overhead. Quickly I tether the canoes and pitch camp. Then the granddaddy of all thunderstorms cracks down and blackens the whole earth. Lightning hisses and sizzles so close I lose track of which is sound and which is light in the enveloping, punching rain. On the next bend of the river I can barely see the tug's activity. Will he go on or come back? I don't trust them at all. In twenty minutes the storm has drifted from overhead, the rain is less and the tug manoeuvres out and I make a dash for the canoes. Though surely from a standing start he cannot get up much of a swell?

The tug passes, leaving the barges moored on the opposite bank, I watch the rolling swell begin, deceptively smooth and sweet. Both canoes ride to the pitch, softly to the sound of the small wave washing over the gravel, I think it may be alright this time. I begin to breathe in relief, then it comes, too much water, not enough space for it to flow into, the kick-back. Five feet of dirty water rolls back from shore, sucks its breath and throws itself down again, gravel-crushing and boulder moving. The canoes rear and wrench at their lines pulling me into the sinking sand. If they broach now – if that waves breaks – I regain my balance and line the sterns up into the

next wall of water in time. Sheer fury gives me strength, angry at my vulnerability. The storm has gone upstream, no doubt following in the wake of the tug, and the sun reappears properly for the first time in four days.

After baling the canoes of shipped water, cleaning up and tightening the tarps, I take my time over supper. The green of the land is unbelievable after such a charge of electricity and water.

I pass by the tethered barges with their cargo of oil pipe in the dawn light. The shallow outflow of the Blackwater River is left behind on the right. Further along up a steep bank along the left shore that rises to the forest, a neat white picket fence encloses some soul's last resting place and the river for a moment is extremely peaceful, quiet and still, allowing me to think of whoever lies there. Then almost straight-away the water picks up speed. Ahead, a sheer cliff turns the mass of the Mackenzie sharp left, there is no sign of white water but the usual horizontal plane of travel shifts a few degrees from level. So whilst the river pushes forward, gravity insists that it falls left. Given the mass of water involved the visual effect is disconcerting and the quite huge surges and flat, seething boils give the appearance of water moving uphill – which of course is happening within the limited hydraulics of these subterranean vortexes.

The crushing power below me is frightening. Two buoys, one red, one green, mark the channel for the tugs and tear the river apart in a sinister, hushed yet heavy breathing. I think it safer on the inside of the bend but I still have to paddle strenuously and brake alternately to keep the canoes from broaching – which would be disastrous in these whirl-pooling riptides. The river hill continues down to be turned again at the bottom into a right hand bend. So once the buoys are safely behind I cut out to cross the width so to line up with the inside of this bend. But I am only half way across and the river is already turning yet lessening its speed as the contours level off. I come out from the shadowing cliffs sweating into the sunshine. A lot of nervous energy has been expended. It is a pity I am not running just one canoe, which would allow me to relax far more. Tugs would not be a problem then.

The Dahadinni River is barely noticed as I pass by its trickle of water from the west; a small tug is moored opposite and chain saws are working up in the forest, probably something to do with the pipeline. The sounds of pots and pans on board float out over the still air. A motor boat speeds straight towards me. I flag him down, afraid of his wash but not till the very last moment does he slow up to draw along side. The man inside says something but I cannot hear him above his revving engines, I say 'thank you' and guide the canoes into his swell. He roars off. What a terrible way to travel!

The Franklin Mountains rise up away to the north-northeast and silver-blue clouds streak above the waves of forested earth. The day grows hot and heat hazes blur my choice of routes but it is downhill all the way in the centre lane till a small, chalk-faced island gets in our way and I steer left. The river is so wide and my three foot vantage point so limiting that it is impossible to tell which way the mass of water is flowing for the water horizon on these hills is never horizontal but always angling one way or another. It is leaning left here so I guess I am doing the right thing by going that way. But I have doubts now, there is an odd sound and beneath the rising heat vapours I see a line of drifting white that makes me suspicious. Maybe it is a mirage. Maybe it is real!

Oh no – rapids or riffles – get over right. But already I am too far left. The noise of the clattering chutes across the width of the left channel strikes up a minor panic which isn't helped by the fact that I still cannot see what is really happening. I'll just have to go for it. Hitting the first riffle I jump out into thigh-deep water, the canoes hit boulders and I hang on to the near-side stern, acting as an anchor and keeping them lined to the flow. I move them forward, the current takes over, snatching them into the first step – I follow- faithfully. More boulders slow the hulls and I work them through the shallows and down another step, guiding, anchoring, pushing. Further over on the left things would have been worse. We have been lucky. You just can't trust this Mackenzie. Deeper water comes up and I jump back into my seat.

Some miles on and Birch Island is passed and then further on again I ease into a cobbled bar to search out a possible camp. I am returning to Canoes when a Lund boat and scow roar along. Afraid of the passing swell I wave, hoping to slow them down, when the Lund boat wheels about and charges for shore and I recognise Chris Lord coming in. Chris is surprised to see me, thinking I would have made better progress in the past eleven days; he left Fort Simpson two days ago. I explain the difficulties I've been having with the tugs and that I've been rained off for several days. He is on his way up the Keele and will give me till tomorrow to catch up with him at the mouth. The Redstone River is around the corner then the Keele isn't far ahead. A drizzling rain comes on as we share a flask of coffee and Bournville chocolate. Perhaps we will meet up tomorrow then. He leaves me a supermarket chicken and a couple of garlic cloves.

In the steady rain I plough on. Sure enough the Redstone rushes out beyond the next bend but out over on the right, under sheer cliffs, the river narrows to whip itself over a series of reefs, kicking up a heck of a din and a nasty arrowhead of choppy seas. Too far left and I grind up on sand bars or get swamped in the waves of the Redstone, too far right and I'll get more of the same. I am cold and tired, the noise from the reef preys on my nerves, waves lob over on to the tarp and into the 'cockpit' but we get through and down another long hill. Round sweeping bends a side channel opens up – an unlikely barge route – so we slip down and ground up on a sand beach. We'll call it a day. The Keele can wait till tomorrow.

There is no drinking water, only the muddy Mackenzie, but it isn't a bad camp. Six foot high willows, dense as a hedge, form a windbreak behind and a big bleached log forms a table of sorts. The main thing is the canoes are safe. A fire is made, the kettle is put to boil and I search out a straight green stick from which I can fashion a spit and supports to cook the chicken. The rain eases off as the kettle boils, the coals are raked together and a slow fire soon has the bird nicely browned. Sandhill cranes call from some distant island, grey clouds break up and drift across a cream sky, I sit on the log and tackle supper. The sense of freedom is as tangible an entity upon the air as the aroma of chicken.

Rain drums on the tent all night. It is too windy and wet come morning to break camp. I stay in bed and play a game of Patience but tiring of the cards I play it for real. Early afternoon sees the weather moderating, I have to bake a couple of bannock so I'll stay put for today. I am building the fire when a Lund boat accompanied by a freighter canoe motor down my channel and swing in to the beach. Two groups of Indians disembark to make their camp some seventy yards off. I wave a brief acknowledgement and receive a nod in return. I go back to mixing the bannock. The three children are the first to venture over, though to play in the drier sand around my fire rather than to introduce themselves. Their Father calls across, telling them not to go into the willows, because of bears. I think how much safer these children are than their city counterparts. I watch the little girl, who is exquisitely beautiful, build a series of interconnecting houses in the sand. The boys have left her to her serious preoccupation, only the mangy dog remains. The four adults are busy boiling tea and roasting moose meat. The dog sniffs around my space-age tent and cocks its leg, the little girl looks up and her oh so serious face lights up in a dazzling smile. Her Father comes over to introduce himself. They are a Metis family from Fort Norman. I explain my situation and he says they may see me on the Keele as people from Fort Norman go up there to hunt in the Fall. After he has gone the other man comes across and offers me a hunk of red moose meat and a heavy moose bone still with plenty of meat on it. Frank Yelley's English is poor but he clearly understands my gratitude. The elder of the two ladies smiles and waves as I take the meat. Apparently she is the Grandmother of the children. I notice her quiet authority and quick efficiency. With their meal over they embark to continue their moose hunt and we wave goodbye. Since food is already prepared I stache the meat below the waterline in Canoe and settle down with my supper by a blazing fire.

The morning is still blustery but I have had enough and it can't be many miles to the Keele. Within an hour the western bank levels off into vast fields of sand that ripple back to waving willow flats and I see the course of the Keele feeding into the Mackenzie a mile ahead. To be on the safe side I bring Canoes into shore and track on down to the confluence. Now for the big experiment – can one man line two canoes upriver?

The mouth of the Keele is wide and split into three main outlets. With water running on a level with the Mackenzie only a few shallow riffles are present. We turn the soft-sinking sand corner, my boots digging into the yielding beach and I start pulling. This is easy! The sand curves around, rising gently giving a firmer, drier path. The two canoes ride side by side, the outrigger slewed back and up tight against the other, the track-line working off the inner canoe. The second riffle is steeper and I am not strong enough to pull the boats through. But that is to be expected, maybe one canoe behind the other is the answer, maybe I'll have to take one canoe through each riffle at a time. There is time enough to experiment. I can tie up here and scout ahead. The sun is shining and it is warming up at last.

A sunken poplar offers a convenient hitching rail so whilst Canoes remain tethered I go on to see what's in store. The river bends right then back into a wider left bend. The sand gives out to a steep shingle bank which in turn becomes a cut-bank of eroding earth, allowing no foot hold at water level. Twelve feet above the river, alder grow in such jungle profusion I can barely force a way through. This doesn't look too good. The current is deep and swift and three poplar trunks lash out from a small log-jam which juts six feet into the river – how do I get round that? On the far side it is sheer cut-bank. Not a pretty sight at all. Even if I axed away those sweepers it doesn't seem that I can travel further than the bend, for the bush is too thick to think of cutting a trail.

The remainder of the day is occupied with airing and drying supplies and equipment and tending to the moose roast that cooks slowly over a bed of poplar coals, its suspending snare wire revolving back and forth from the tripod of poles above. Every so often I notice the eddies along the river margin changing, Canoes are riding differently and I am obliged to tie their lines higher up the arm of the partly submerged tree. The river is rising.

Bed tonight is ideal. All the camp can be seen from the tent door and of course there can be no trouble from tugs and barges. Within the first grey shades of morning I wake to look out through the mosquito netting, Canoes are sidling out to and fro in fast water and appear to be coming into the tent! The river is up – and so am I. Pots and kettle are moved back from the now floating ashes of the campfire, the line holding the canoes is untied below water level and I drag them partially up the sand. The tent is emptied and carried back up the beach.

Reviewing the land and waterscape I can move three feet higher to camp along the edge of the willows but that is nothing if the river floods and the Mackenzie could cover this whole sand flat with ease. But perhaps should that happen, I'll find some back route up which the canoes can be hauled?

With camp re-established the canoes are having to be dragged back from the rising water every hour and I search about for anything I might tie them to. Way off on the baked hard-pan of the flats I find a black, dead log, rotting and still water-logged by the weight of it. With effort I lift one end to work my shoulder under, slowly easing my way to the centre point. Its weight compresses my bones, my legs want to keel under as I lift to balance it about the small of my neck, against my ear. Mentally I thrash myself to reach the river. Flood or no flood Canoes won't shift far with that tied to them. I spend the rest of the day trying to escape the fierce sun, the tent is like an oven.

I walk upriver again to try and think out some solution, something has to give here. Should I portage? The thought is horrific. The heat is intense, reflected back off every particle of sand. We are going to be in for some storm to break this up. There isn't a cloud in the sky. Blue waves of deep heat seem to weigh upon the earth. And no solution is forthcoming, but the cool of the willows is welcoming – but the mosquitoes chase me out. I do as little as possible; lie face down on the encrusted, cement-hard mud and shade my head with my hat, even thinking is slowed in this heat and the thought of having to light a fire for supper, is horrendous. Maybe I can wait here till the water levels drop and I'll be able to work Canoes up river then? What is for supper? Better finish that meat. But when the fire is ready I find that the meat is covered with fly eggs. I scrape most of them off and wire up the joint for cooking. Meat won't be exactly plentiful till winter. Black clouds, small and distant are building on the western horizon. The river is still rising.

Having dined, (there is no washing-up to be done when you cook your meat from snare-wire and eat with your fingers) the weather turns. The initial movement of air is barely a breeze, but it is enough. It is a mere symbol of what is going on high above us for within moments the distant cauliflower clouds are overhead sucking the hot air into their cold vacuum and the zephyr slips instantaneously into a gale. Hot turns to cold and the vast commotion spirals the dried-up emotions of sand-heavy, lazy, heat-worn vapours up into the black, crinkling sky. Willows flatten themselves, exposing the silver underside of their green leaves to the onrushes of the cold air whilst little wavelets of the riffles are decapitated in the blow. I watch fascinated till there is nothing more to see for sand screams all about and I dive to keep the tent from being torn up. Inside it is a zipped-up-bag-world being punched and kicked and in danger of being turned inside out in the clutches of this great wind oaf who screams across and pummels the land. I am scared of being demolished. Relax, enjoy it. What an incredible structure this tent is – to survive this – even if it does leak! My mind is not sufficiently in control, I cannot relax. I try to make myself as heavy as possible as walls smash inwards and convex poles twist to the concave. This is stupid. The crescendo of the first movement has been reached, slowly the screaming sand violins cease their lacerating cries and the wind section stills to a gentler pastoral billowing. There is then a second's lull in the score, everything holds its breath, then

the whole orchestra of the sky must open and a roar of falling rain gallops down in an impossible urge to be re-absorbed into the dried-up skin, into the very pores of old earth. This passion soon exhausts itself, the wind stops, the wet sand lies sodden, flattened. The northern sun laughs coquettishly from behind some northern trees.

From the northeast the same sun rises to light my awakening. I go to turn over and my back seems to shout. I cannot rise. With agonising slowness I crawl out on my side desperate to see this new day. Are the canoes safe? How high is the river? I peer out on all fours just as a few yards away a glossy, fat black mother bear with cubs in tow, rolls out of the willows to the side of me. We stare at each other – wondering perhaps if this is going to be a good morning – then she glides back into the greenery. I still can't get up. Must be getting old – not able to carry the logs I used to! The rest of the day and the next, is passed in pain, it is impossible to stand upright. No way now will I be able to get these canoes upriver for a hundred miles. I wonder if Chris Lord will be back down soon? No, I will get myself out of this fix. There is only one thing to do, I'll have to go on to Fort Norman – maybe that Metis family could give me a lift back up the Keele?

On the third day I somehow pack up and ride back down into the Mackenzie. The river now twists all over the place and head winds constantly blow me off course. The sheer frustration of fruitless effort is hard to imagine. Camp tonight is a forlorn gravel-splashed beach down a widening bend of the river that overlooks distant downstream islands, black silhouetted above the cold gold waves. The mosquitoes are thick and it is early to bed.

It is past midnight for it is dark when the noise of a tug throbs into hearing. Couldn't I just lie here? Maybe it won't do any harm? Bit I can't stand the suspense and it is already passing, the first wavelet is lapping the shore. I ease myself out of the door. Mosquitoes whine in my ears and bite my arms and back. Lights blazing, the tug churns on by, oblivious. Perhaps it is going to be alright? The swell rolls on down the beach harmlessly and I begin to relax, really believing that this time the currents and width of river are in my favour. I am on the point of being deluded when from around the upstream bend a gurgling thunder rips up the sand and gravel and I watch the unstoppable approach of this curling, twisted lip of water laugh its spiralling contempt down towards me. In seconds both canoes are lifted back then thrown six feet forward onto the sharp-stoned floor. The second wave lacks the strength to move them, contenting itself in flooding over the tarps. I am almost beyond caring. In my haste to leave the tent I left the door open and inside is a hive of prancing mosquitoes. I am too exhausted and crippled to do much about them; they might as well stay, little blood-guts.

Late the following afternoon I know that if this isn't Fort Norman coming up, I'll give up. The line of cliffs, where occasionally smoke rises from the coal seams, seems endless as I canoe

down alongside them upon this sea of a river. From far off I hear the pitch of laughter which gradually becomes louder as I bring Canoes to where I see a dozen or more children swimming and playing about a man-made promontory. As I reach them they swim out to hang on to the bows of the canoes, trying to jump up and asking questions and introducing themselves. They tell me I can camp around the headland so with fourteen children adding to my load I paddle up into the shallows.

Apparently it is after 6pm, the 'Bay will be closed but I am told where the R.C.M.P. post is, so leaving Canoes safely tied I walk up to town – still doubled up like an ancient hunch-back.

On the porch of the police house I introduce myself to Dave and Jim and within minutes am told that my best bet for a ride up the Keele will be with Jonny Lenny and I am directed to his house. I find Jonny bent over his newly built scow, (the plywood, flat-bottomed craft of the Mackenzie) which he is busy painting a vivid blue and bright red. Yes, he may be going upriver and I'd be welcome along, but he won't be sure till he sees his son who is working up at the Wells, (Norman Wells) sixty miles downriver. I should call back in a few days. Talking further, I learn that the lady I met earlier, the grandmother of the little girl, is Jonny's sister, Rosie Norwegian. I walk the mile back to Canoes to set camp.

It is a very public place this, too public for my taste and too noisy, but I can see nowhere else to go. Trucks roar down the road from the village, squeal their tyres around on the dock and roar back up the hill. This is the only road out of town. Night draws on and I go to bed but it is difficult to sleep. Very early in the morning I hear motor boats come in… stillness… lapping water and footsteps on shingle… quiet laughter. Someone walking away. Later still a tug rouses me and though the river is miles wide here I wait till it draws level then go out to tend Canoes – just in case. I cannot quite believe it. Even in the semi darkness the damage is quite apparent. But I still need time to comprehend it, to accept what has happened. I feel physically sick. The tarpaulins of both canoes have been torn off, food sacks have been slashed with knives, my rifles are missing, more sacks have been thrown out on the beach. It feels as if I have been punched in the stomach.

Under the gloom of a north-eastern dawn I climb the road into town and across the village to the R.C.M.P. house. Dave and Jim come to the door, they have only just come in from another call and they drive me back so they can inspect the damage. There is very little they can do other than make enquiries. I do at least find my rifles – thrown in the river. I proceed to tidy up as best as I can. Sleep is out of the question. I light a fire and brew up tea and porridge. The cold wind howls on all day, storm clouds gather and I am kept indoors. Waves breaking upon the shore threaten Canoes and I worry. I haven't the strength to pull them out any higher. I check their tarps regularly, no water is getting in. The day disappears, supper is a cold buffet of sorts

and evening settles in early and night quickly follows. I sleep in fits and starts, hearing voices in the wind and in the crashing waves. I check the canoes most hours but the storm does not abate. I sleep through the early dawn hours. I check the canoes again, both are half full of water; flour, oats, milk powder are sodden. The rain has stopped, perhaps I am stopped too.

I weight the tarps down on the sand and carry all my packs and intact sacks up the beach. Any loose food that can be salvaged is shovelled into black poly garbage bags. A hundred pounds of oats have to be spaded overboard and so too with the flour and half the milk powder, (my winter ice-cream supply!) Canoes are emptied completely, cleaned and then overturned above the beached supplies. It appears an enormous pile. I can do no more for the moment. My back is in agony and I lie down in the tent.

On hearing a truck approach I come out and am able to hitch a ride into town with the recently retired chief of the village and his wife, Mr and Mrs Wright, who are obviously concerned over my loss. I visit Rosie Norwegian and her husband Frank Yelley, who are happy to see me and insist I stay for coffee. They have heard about the vandalism. Rosie says that such behaviour is a result of soft living; if people had to starve a little bit – once in a while as in the old days – they would respect your belongings. I am inclined to agree with her old-fashioned common sense. The whole world has gone soft though. I show an interest in the moose-hide she is working and she gets out more – beautiful moccasins lined in white rabbit fur with flowers exquisitely designed upon the toe in beadwork. She complains that she is not as fine a needlewoman these days due to her rheumatism, but the artistry of her skills is perfection to my eye. When one considers that these jackets and gloves have all been fashioned by this grandmother from the raw skin of a moose through the age-old processes of fleshing, soaking, de-hairing and smoking to this supple, golden brown leather, with which no chemical tanning can compare, the end result is nothing less than a real work of art. On my leaving she finds an extra tarpaulin to protect my supplies and goes into her kitchen to return with a waxed brown paper package – a heavy slab of whitefish for my dinner. This kindness begins to place my problems in some perspective. On the way home, walking along the windswept beach, I find four big, perfect potatoes! Well its going to be fish and chips for supper tonight and the vandals and the weather can go to hell.

The storm conditions persist into the third day and I stay huddled in my tent till mid-afternoon when a very bright ‘hello, is anyone there?’ sounds right outside. I get out into the wind and rain where Dyllis Ranson introduces herself as the local nurse saying that I am quite welcome to call up at the Nursing Station for a cup of tea and a bath, should I have the need. The weather is not conducive to lengthy conversation but I accept readily and say that I will be up this evening. Dyllis is typical of the North, and she is typically English. Having resided in Norman for nine years she is a mine of information and I learn a good deal from her. I am introduced to her two

enormous cats who occupy the sofa, (naturally like all well-bred cats they deign to rise) but then outside in the back porch I receive a quite boisterous reception from her Husky dog 'Tiger'. So with animal introductions made tea is served and conversation flows. Dyllis's tea is as strong as her county accent and the sheer luxury of sitting in a chair, tucking into a cheese and tomato sandwich is wonderful.

As I explain the motivations of my journey and expound my principles of independence I fully deserve her bemused query as to why I should end up here looking for a ride back up the Keele in a motor boat? Surely I should have been prepared for such eventualities? I disagree, genuine travel accepts the disruptions and continues on accordingly, as fate throws it at you. Contingency planning to the 'nth degree is an unseemly modern trait that must be terribly boring. The implication today is that travel without your Amex and one deserves to break one's leg! Dyllis doesn't allow me to escape so easily but I think she sees my point for she is a thorough individual. She laughs when I tell her that for just such an emergency I carry an inflatable splint – the humour lies in the fact that the manufacturer has placed the inflating tube on the heel – picture the contortions of a solo victim. Photography too is one of her hobbies and I handle a Hasselblad for the first time, yet I don't really see myself composing an upside-down shot of a Grizzly somehow. The evening goes all too quickly but the weather has cleared to dry and I freely admit that I have become somewhat paranoid over leaving camp for overlong – it is time to go home and take up guard duty.

A few days later Corporal Bill Code, the officer in charge of the R.C.M.P. detachment, calls down to say that they have found the ones responsible for the vandalism, that they are young boys, too young to prosecute. Jim Hajash, the constable with him offers me a couple of hundred pounds of flour to make up a part of my loss so long as I send him a sketch or painting on completion of my journey. I accept and agree. No lift has yet materialised but Bill is confident that something will work out and says he may take a trip up the Keele himself, should work permit. But along with no ride materialising there is no noticeable improvement in my back, though I continue to walk into town each day. The village is getting to know my story.

I introduce myself to the young couple at the Pentecostal Church, Barry and Rita, who with their two young daughters invite me over for lunch and supper on a number of occasions. I call on Rosie Norwegian and pick up tips on the Indian tanning of moose-hide. I meet the Roman Catholic priest and the three resident teaching nuns who also invite me up for supper. Slowly I get to know a few of the Indians around town, though I doubt if even a lifetime here would ever bring this to more than a superficial level. I begin to see the breadth of the cultural gap. Days run into weeks and still no scow is going up the Keele. Sunny days lull time away and leaves already hint of the gold to come. A regular trio of young boys come to camp, always eager for scraps of my bannock or porridge, and to tell of their exploits. Benjy shows me how to imitate

the call of young geese. Rosie buys my old Coleman canoe, they need one at their second cabin out at Blackwater Lake. Barry takes me fishing up the Great Bear River. Coming home up the Mackenzie, a young black bear swims close by, we manoeuvre so that he swims away from the village where he would surely get shot. On another evening Bill and Andrea Code have me over for drinks. Fort Norman is becoming like home.

No way can I sleep tonight. A tug and barges have moored into the dock a few yards away and unloading has gone on into the dark hours and now the beach is flooded in brilliant artificial light. I walk out into the night air, the hustle and activity have ceased, a bargeman leans over the tugs rail, we start talking and I am invited on board for coffee. Having thoroughly hated these tugs it is strange now to experience their hospitality. For over an hour I watch television, drink coffee and listen to this likeable giant from Newfoundland. On leaving to check camp I am plied with apples and oranges.

The tug eventually departs but before I am abed an Indian scow chugs into shore and moors close by. Too close I feel. Rather than stay in the tent I go out again and join them by their fire. They tell me they are headed back to Wrigley from the Wells. I explain why I am here. Paul is an affable fellow, Joseph would be too but for the fact he is crippled by alcohol and threatens to ransack my tent to find drugs – that 'all mula (white men) have'. He cannot believe I possess none and waves a wallet-full of dollars to buy the stuff, shoving a fistful of twenty dollar bills into my hand. I put them back into his billfold. Underneath it all he would be a fine character. Where is the blame to lie? The world is a process of continual change. Long into the morning over the blazing fire I talk to Paul and Joseph, and to someone else whose name I am not given. They eventually fall asleep upon the sand under their plastic tarps and I go back to my synthetic tent.

Three boat-men have been approached and kept me on tenter-hooks as to whether they are going up the Keele or not. I have now been let down by each in turn. Yet the name that keeps cropping up remains firmly out of town in person: George Pellesey, Mountain Indian and river guide is spoken of with respect. By late August with the Mackenzie poplars on fire with frosted gold he arrives back in town and I have the opportunity to plead my cause. I have now learnt a little of the Indian way – impatience, hard and fast decisions, commitments are all white-man ways, they are not the way of the land I travel upon. Accept the wind, the rain, the snow, the sun, learn to bend, this year, next year – what is the difference? Life does not run to timetables. Mine is an inbred habit formed over the centuries since my race left the land to practise their dubious arts but I acknowledge our differences, and that is a beginning.

Yes, George will be going back up the Keele but the water is too high, we should wait for it to drop. A week passes, I watch the Mackenzie waters with an intimate eye and they are falling.

Maybe at the weekend. There are parties every weekend. George is asleep all Monday. I am patient. I chance to pass by his house on Friday. He thinks we could go tomorrow. Within hours it is known that Bill and Barry will both come, using Barry's scow and George's uncle, Gabe, will take his scow. Amos, the young chief and his son will also come along. George and Gabe are the guides. Early on Saturday I am ready and waiting. Tony an outside contractor has paid me for a few days work I did last week, painting three new house interiors. Letters have been sent out to Yellowknife to arrange a re-supply of lost food for next Spring and with the sale of Canoe 1 I am back in the black after much unseen expense. Scow travel is not cheap.

By mid-afternoon Dyllis has come down to see me off and so too Sister Edward and Sister Marie-Celeste. Rita is down on shore helping Barry pack. Then George and Gabe come along in their scows and Bill turns up. Finally an Indian start is made – it is after suppertime. The river air is cold and before long stars and satellites fill the night sky. I shelter from the river wind under the tarp in George's scow – he wears no gloves, no hat, an open-necked shirt under a thin nylon anorak. In the gathering darkness I watch him lead the way through the bars and channels unerringly and unhesitatingly at some fifteen miles an hour. Short of stature and swarthy the man exudes a quiet confidence, he is one of nature's gentlemen and possesses an entirely natural toughness. Midnight finds us short of the Keele and we gather at a pre-arranged, nameless spot where out on the sand a huge Indian fire blazes and a medley of suppers are cooked. Stars fill the sky, the sheer weight of their magnificence hangs heavy on the frost bite of the air. Words are few. I lay my bag beneath the heavens and roll closer to the embers of the fire.

On Sunday I travel with Bill and Barry and we enter the Keele and up past my 'Broken Back Camp' with no problem. The sun shines but all extra clothing is put on to ward off the travelling wind. The river is braided, flowing through a shallow land of forested hills and boulder islands that offer a multitude of courses to the uninitiated. George travels on all day and late into the evening. Camp is once again split on racial lines with neither party feeling thoroughly at home with the other. The whites are definitely the outsiders here.

As travel progresses into the foothills and the gradient of the river creates steeper and steeper riffles, there are times when progress harks back to a bygone time and engines are cut and whilst two remain on board to pole the craft, the rest of us take up the track-line and pull so that each boat is manhandled up the hill in turn. At these times of tracking or portaging, and there are a few of them, I begin to appreciate not only the skill of these Indians but their humour too. They are truly in their element here, only a generation or two ago this was their home country and they still use the land as home; it is no museum 'park'. I know that they are right and we are wrong. The plastic-clad, camera-toting conservationist is a walking contradiction of all that the natural land means and I watch old Gabe cut up in fifteen minutes flat the caribou he has just

shot. The European, the southerner, just has no conception of what Life is. We have left the rails.

Caribou ribs are strung from snare wire on a tripod of poles to the side of the habitual blaze, my old kettle boils coffee for all. Trout are caught, killed and fried. Spruce bough beds are made up under pole-supported tarps. No one is idle but no one seems to work. Camp and food appear with untroubled ease. Why can't we always live like this? Why do these people go back to their houses?

'Red Dog' is passed early in the morning. It is a cold start but all rifles are unsheathed. Water seeps down from a blood-stained cleft in the sheer rock face. This is local Indian lore and I respect it. As each boat passes the 30-06's, the 7 magnums and 30-30's blast their shells into the cliff. We have fulfilled tradition and secured for ourselves safe passage. A remnant of some ancient fertility rite perhaps, but I do not ask. (The mula are too inquisitive.) Instead I watch Gabe in the lead boat using his seventy years experience. Seated on a rickety iron fold-up chair, that has probably been borrowed from the village community hall, he keeps one hand on the tiller/throttle while the other hangs overboard holding a small stick that is jabbed into the rushing waves to gauge the depth of the riffle. The boat is held, stationary as a pausing fish, then angles right, hold again in the torrent, up left, pause, finding, reading the depth, backing down, right, across the head of the riffle, passengers run to the bow and fling their weight there, enough to give the kickers another inch of clearance and the scow runs over into smooth water. George follows. Barry comes up last with Bill and myself. We have tried to remember the way with our eyes but fail. They make it look so easy. Too suddenly the current catches the bow sweeping us about, we're broaching, we're going to get rolled over. I grab my canoe pole, the scow slews round, bows downstream, engine stalled and we race toward the bank. Maybe the pole can reduce the impact – I jam it forward as the boat crunches – fortunately into earth, and we swing into an eddy. Bill jumps ashore with a line. The other boats have gone on, someone spotted a caribou. We could be here awhile. I build a fire, Bill axes away sweepers upstream to allow us to line up and Barry walks ahead to see if George can return to help us out. We note Grizzly tracks all around. Bill is laughing, he still can't get over the look of utter consternation that he claims plastered my face as we headed for the bank. I suppose I should count myself lucky that he didn't have his camera to hand! By the time we have the sweepers cut Barry is back with George and the three of us take up the track-line while he motors out from the corner and up the side of the riffle.

By this time we are well out of the Mackenzie lowlands and into the mountains. The river has become much lower and three Lund boats from 'Norman have caught up with us. We are not sighting too much game. What is seen is shot and the butchered carcass is protected from flies by a pyre of cut willow branches and left for collection on the return journey. There is concern

that it could be a wasted trip. I am afraid that my supplies might not get delivered. All the engines have taken a beating and two are out of commission. Barry's boat hasn't the power for some of these riffles and it may only be his calm faith that gets us through. For Bill and myself are all too often frustrated back-seat drivers and I have to admire Barry for his unstinting patience.

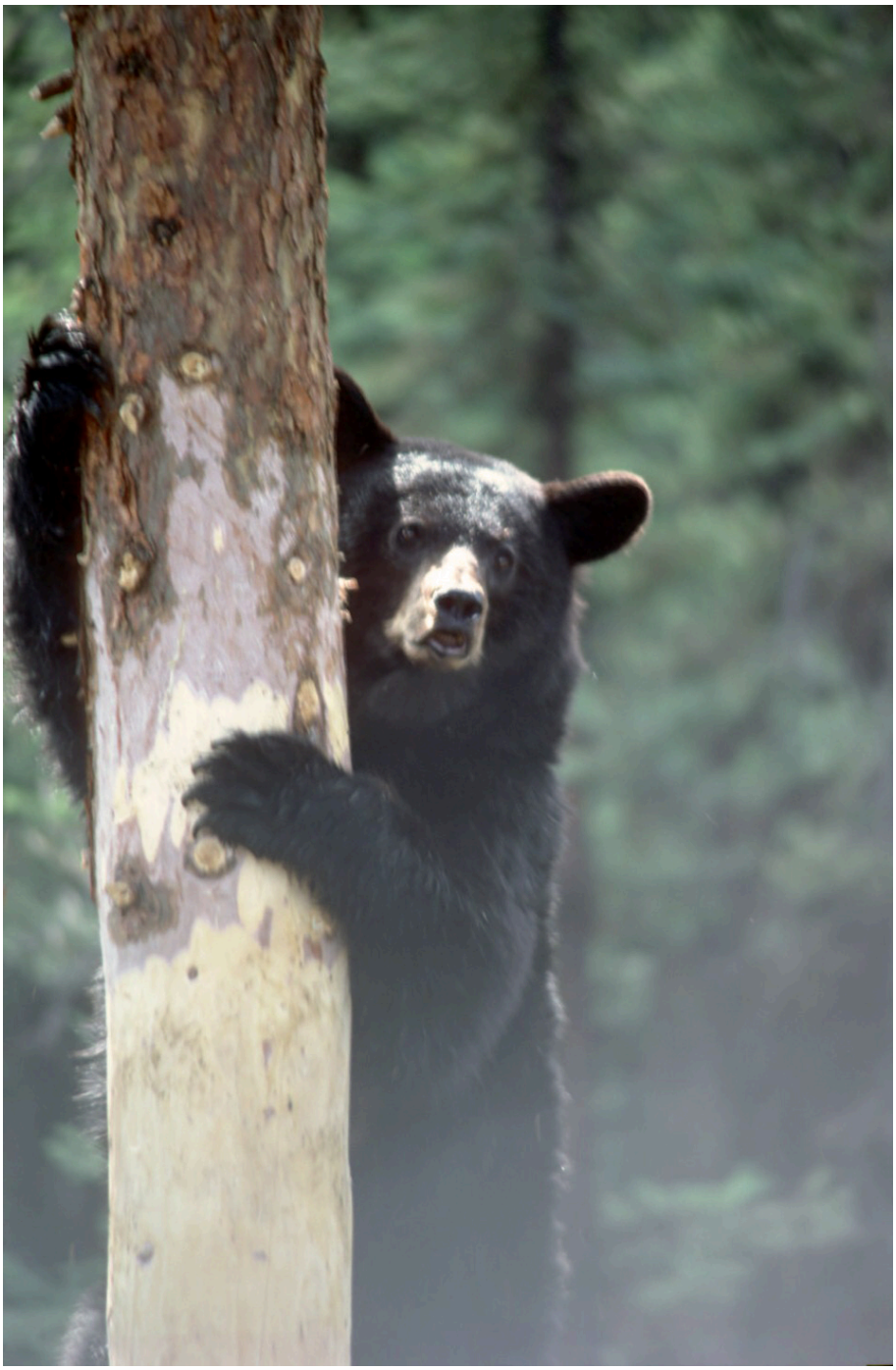
Six boats make camp on that last day and most are going no further. I am not at all sure what is happening – other than it is snowing. I offer to go on alone from here, I should make it by coming back for a second load as the cabin is only a day away. I suppress my impatience to be off though. There is a huge fishing hole where the scows are moored and I pluck out a good eight pound trout – and Amos lands a ten-pounder.

Supper is the usual mixed dish: caribou broth, ribs, boiled fish, fried fish and for me, a first taste of caribou stomach lining, which is really quite palatable. Gabe chases everybody for their fish heads, a first class delicacy by all accounts. In the morning I am the first up and eager to prepare my own fire, one small enough to cook my porridge on rather than have the usual wait for the habitual furnace to die down before providing enough embers for pot cooking. But before my fire is built someone is out and asking what I am doing and he is already off to the scows for the can of gas to splash it liberally all over my sticks and the log pile nearby. A match is thrown and up goes another conflagration of an Indian fire. Ill just have to wait for my porridge! The Indians are constantly jibing us about the white-mans fire; a white man they say keeps warm by running to get wood every ten minutes for his tiny blaze. Their observation is not entirely inaccurate but true to my Englishness this is one place where compromise may prove the best of both fires. An Indian fire is often just too hot to sit by.

Snow still lingers on the high slopes, rain spats across on a horizontal wind. George decides Barry may make it up to the C.W.S. cabin – where I am headed, so George in his boat with Gabe and Amos and I with Barry and Bill set off on the last lap with all my gear dispersed between the two scows. The river is a constant maze of islands divided by fast steep rapids but the sun decides to shine and it makes all the difference. By early afternoon we come round a bend in the river and there under a red tar-paper roof sits the cabin, a few yards back from the steep cobble bank of the river. This is the end of quite a journey. All my supplies along with Canoe 2 are unloaded and George checks the cabin he built some ten years back for Doctor Norm Simmons of the Canadian Wildlife Service, whilst he was conducting an extensive study on Dall Sheep in the area.

Everything is in order and I am left to my new home. The last thing out though is a small cardboard box that Barry hands over to me. 'From Rita and Dyllis' he says and on top of the box I read, 'Not to be opened before Christmas – unless you get bushed before then.' Well, I

shall certainly follow orders. George is anxious to move back, water levels are dropping and the hunt is all important. Bill calls out they may fly in in the Spring to check me out. Handshakes all round. It has only been five days and some hundred and fifty miles but the land has bonded us well. The scows are poled out from shore, catching the stream, engines whine and splutter to life. I am sorry to see them all go.



A mother black bear visiting the cache tree at Broken Skull.

A peeled tree trunk presents no problem if there is old meat to be taken.

PART TWO
CHAPTER TWO

KEELE WINTER

The wooden porch creaks under my step and the door scrapes across the worn floor boards as sunlight floods in and cuts the corner of the old wood-burning stove that sits in the centre of the cabin. Four bunks occupy the back left corner and a table and two chairs are against the end wall. There are four windows, two to the south, either side of the door and one to the east and one to the west, four square panes of glass to each window. Dusty red check curtains frame them. I go outside and remove the nailed-in-place shutters. There is a good feel about the place, there won't be any winter sun but at least there is plenty of dead standing timber so firewood will not be a problem.

My ears settle to the silence, no voices, no engines; only a couple of mosquitoes lend a friendly hum to my proceedings. But I'll just sit here a while to watch the river. I'll work flat out to get everything up from the cobbles into the cabin in another moment. It will take a few days to sort every item into its proper place but this cabin will be a sight cleaner and more comfortable by the time I get through with it. Not that ten years of neglect have made things that bad but the silt from the big flood of '75 lies heavy on the timbers. The high water mark can still be seen rusted two feet up along the back of the stove. A float plane docked here then was wrecked and Norm Simmons and the pilot were obliged to spend twenty-four hours up a tree. Doctor Simmons' wife and children sheltered from the rising water up in the cabin loft – fortunately the cabin itself was not swept away. If I have any say in the matter I'll be away long before flood time.

Within a week the cabin has become home. Windows are shining, the floor is scrubbed and shelves and cupboards washed out and now are packed with belongings so carefully wrapped and stowed back on the beach at Fort Simpson. Most have survived their adventures remarkably well, though mice at Fort Norman somehow zeroed in on the hazelnuts in the centre of a big pack and left everything else untouched! For the first time in months I can truly relax and the September sunshine offers me every opportunity. I busy myself with bringing in sound fallen timber and then move on to cutting dead, standing trees. Just three or four long logs for the log pile each day. I am frightened of putting my back out again for walking even a mile causes quite painful tiredness.

The Wildlife Services cabin on the Keele River.

Behind the cabin the forest blankets a wide level bench that folds up to the broken flanks of Punk Mountain. Level forest is always interesting for it encloses over, not allowing for landmarks and so to find one's way an intimacy with the trees is encouraged. From the air, 'forest' looks uniform but from the reality of forest level, nothing is uniform; no patch of forest or any two trees are the same. There are woods within woods, some sunny and scattered, some sheltering, hidden and dark. It is always warmer in these looming woods and imagination can run riot, but stay awhile and the trees are friendly giants, their lofty heads forever nodding in some upper unheard symphony of breeze. Sound is distorted here. I really did hear someone talking, a dog barking, it came from the direction of the river. Turn left for the river. Through the silent trunks I hasten, arms moving aside the spindly, light-starved alder, feet tiring upon the yielding moss of years, across the squirrel middens with their ankle-twisting tunnels all rich in nut-brown seed ends. Are you sure it was left? I have never been here before. Slow down. Left was right. To prove it all you need is confidence. The forest claims dead doubters, exchanges their question marks for graves. Eventually I come out on the river – where I do not know – but the terrain has to be upstream of the cabin so I move down. No boat can be seen, no voices, no dogs heard. A raven flies over, laughing. I wonder if it was him?

The river is dropping a little each day but in the riffle below the cabin, ten pound trout still lurk. They are quite exciting to watch. These great predators take my lure with an all too easy abandon and offer an all too easy meal for me. One filleted fish lasts two days, stretching my grain supplies a little further and gives me another day to hunt up my winter meat. Across the river there is an expanse of marsh the Indians refer to as the 'moose factory', though so far I have not seen a hide or hair of a moose anywhere in the valley. I slip Canoe out from her boulder mooring and track her upstream for half a mile. The current is swift but flat and there is ample time to ferry over to a convenient spur of boulders where a small brook enters the river. Canoe is tied to one of the rocks and I pick up my rifle and stuff a bannock lunch into my mackinaw. The day is early with a touch of frost and only a blue sky can be seen above the yellows, greens and greys that shelter all about me as I tread softly along. Whiskey-jacks flit ahead in their ghostly manner while I struggle through tangles of alder to where I think the marsh should lie – under a towering wall of scalloped rock, a thousand feet high. Old tall spruce mark the edge of the forest and golden grasses merge with green moss while much older and ancient willows stand out in the open field. A golden expanse of reeds slashed by flat, still lakes of violet blue. Against the weathered ribs of the ancient willow I sit and watch.

There are no moose here. Cloud rolls up from the south. I wonder if there are sheep sign below these cliffs? I walk through the swishing golden grasses and a light soft rain whispers down to lend a quietly rolling tympani to the rhythm of my stride. Moose tracks are all over the place but none were left today, or this week. I climb the rock-strewn hills under the cliff face. What a view! A great bowl of forest, river, marsh and clouding sky, mountains all around, except to the south. There is no sign of sheep however and it is growing cold. In the lee of a four foot boulder I shelter and eat lunch. Every so often I glass the country below, but nothing moves. I'll work westward to the river and head back to Canoe along the shore. The ferry back home is made easily in an empty Canoe. I wonder when meat will show up?

Fishing is becoming difficult. The trout are moving out to deeper water; when reeling in, the water on the line is freezing and ice blocks on the ferrules. I go hunting for grouse along the beaver creek. I am lucky and kill two. The beavers are busy preparing for winter, cutting poplar. I suppose I should lie-up in wait for one but I am not that desperate for meat and a beaver would provide for only a few days whereas a moose will supply me for a winter and summer, they are both only one life yet it is a better balance for my city-bred sentimentality if I can subsist off only one of them. I skirt the beaver dam where, if I am very quiet, I can hear their near-imperceptible mewing, and then softly I continue home. Around a bend in the near-dry creek three mallard clatter up on sudden wings to be silhouetted against the cold ruby pink of a dying day. I come out to the river where thin ice-lilies are floating downstream and here, away from the cabin, I pluck the grouse. Innards and heads will serve someone else well tonight – no one dies in vain here.

And this is where I introduced you to my life… an Indian summer is slowly giving up to the ghosts of ice and snow, the kerosene lantern is alight, grouse breasts are frying in the cast-iron skillet, spitting fat over the stove top and I watch through the black eyes of window the gathering shoes of ice shuffle and waltz their slow-time down to the Arctic Ocean. You cannot have any idea how good life can be here, others prejudice you against this place, this wilderness. Perhaps you will experience it someday?

October persists with some warm and sunny days though ice grows amongst the stones of the river bank forming strange pebble optics. The days become shorter and shorter and the inevitable cold of outer space claws nearer, reaching rheumatoid fingers of ice out into the river. Soon thick decks of it provide walkways along the shore, water licking their flanks and adding crystals to their width with each minute. If this all goes smoothly freeze-up will provide me a much easier passage through the valley than I have now. But I shouldn't wait till then before taking another look at the 'moose factory' for I am growing a little tired of oats, barley and dried vegetables every night.

Canoe slides easily over the ice and I hold tight as we approach the edge – if it is going to break I'll be jumping in before I hit the water. The ice holds, Canoe slips to the water and I step in and kneel, my paddle stirs the slush of ice and we move across. I am not sure how we will land on the opposite shore, the ice shelf is some six inches thick but it could be unsupported for ten or more feet and there is no slack water, only the steady pull of the current running in its three foot depth. I graze Canoe into the frozen ledge and the pole wedges down amongst the stones so that I can lever it over to squeeze Canoe by the gunwale into the ice. Track-line is already in hand, there is no way of knowing if the ice will hold me. Quickly, quietly I step out, leaving the pole in Canoe as I go, the ice holds and I pull my boat up after me – easier than parking a car really.

Again I travel the golden, snow-sprinkled marsh and once again no sign of life interrupts the absolute of still quiet. Not an animal seems to have passed through the valley this Fall. I shall wait till freeze-up before I come over again, for I stand as good a chance of spotting game from the cabin as I do here. Yet with no tracks anywhere I have the feeling this place is going to be a dead loss – certainly for photographs. Over the mid-day and early light of afternoon I hunt about and find no cause for optimism. I go home. Ferrying back the mush ice is noticeably thicker and though soft enough on top, below are solid lumps that the paddle cannot break. Fifty yards over and I am having to work hard to hold my own, the deceptively soft tinkling as the ice sidles and crushes up to Canoe is pushing us backward and closing around. The thick brown pans swirl up to kick themselves off the hull in a lazy circling motion, the paddle has no room to move and I am not adept at poling although it is the only answer now if we are to reach home ice. Using the pole I guide Canoe through the thickening brew till I can step out onto the frozen

dock, from where I carry her up to the east wall of the cabin. I turn her over and leave her to lie up for the winter, sheltered from the prevailing wind.

As the days grow colder the land reveals the chilling aspects of the site. Far off into the west the head of Mount Eduni reaches above the other peaks and along this trench from her high crest to this bend, gale winds blow down for four day bouts. I discover the cabin is pretty much a summer cottage only. There is no snow to bank up around the walls and the floor being planks and set off the ground, allows all the chill wind to blow through it. Finding polythene and sacking in the loft I lay a lining of each over the boards and top it off with my 'Persian rug', a dirty old tarpaulin left here to rot but now cleaned up and doing a fair job keeping out some of the cold.

Grizzlies are still around and one afternoon I watch a big dark beast climb with amazing ease the steep face of the mountain opposite. Through the glasses I study his rolling, muscular walk, up and up he climbs, never tiring, stopping only once to sit down on his massive bottom and scratch himself. I cannot think of any other animal that might possess the Grizzlies' air of solitary might. He is so thoroughly a part of this country as if he were born of the very mountains themselves. Another day I follow in one's trail downriver to the flats for a mile, wondering if some caribou might be drifting through. The trail of a lynx comes out of the forest for a few yards then back again into the trees, but there are no moose or caribou tracks. The trail of the Grizzly meanders all over and for awhile I go my separate way but then on my way home along the beaver creek, which is now frozen and flooding overflow, I tread again in his trail that winds before me. The beaver dam forms a convenient bridge and a wolf has been here too. Along the sheltered forest path of the creek bed I come back to the river half a mile below the cabin. An awful groaning is penetrating the cold of ground and air. The river is dammed and backing up. Another hour and this channel will flood. Solid ice sails by to be held downstream in the harbour of rising water created by some unseen ice-jam. As the river rises previously formed ice held fast to the boulder shore is forced to lift with the level, and the protestations are not without an audible vigour. I hurry home to remake the fire and to put supper on and get the kettle boiling for tea. Let's hope the climax to all this comes before dark.

Over supper through the falling dusk I watch the deepening water. Could I be flooded out? Great houses of ice are torn loose and upended in a terrible slow motion, the power is awesome. Creaks and tortured groaning penetrate the gathering darkness. Suddenly a piercing explosion rents the air, then silence. White indeterminate shapes ghost by, but now moving upstream not down. I stand on the porch watching, listening, but cloud covers the sky and the night has become a rare pitch. Only my ears tell me of the stealthy forces at work. I go in and read awhile but I am impatient for the light of morning so go to bed, allowing the grunting and rooting of this river beast to lull me to sleep.

On waking there is not a sound; the river, never noisy, has been taken away. A total hush invades the cabin. Deliberately not looking through the window, I open the door and am confronted with a stricken battlefield. The smooth ice shelves of yesterday are gone. In their place is a war-torn wreckage of broken ice piled in haphazard abandon. Slabs six feet thick and twenty, forty feet long, upended and thrown about. Two foot diameter boulders held fast in an ice grip are aloft and upended to the sky, torn from their ancient bed. The battlefield is quite silent save now for a trickle of still living water running below. Ice for the moment has won, but her sister water will return come spring.

By December the woodpile is complete and I settle to a slowed routine of twelve hour sleeps, reading, this writing, cooking and baking – all prospect of meat has been given up – and I make only short sorties out into the bitter wind. The sun disappeared behind the mountains back in late November, its light only appears high up on the flanks of the southern slopes. I need to feel it on my face!

From the blue cold shadow of the valley I snowshoe a trail downriver, cutting across the flats to the beaver dam now encased in ice. Its downstream side has been swollen and frozen by successive leaks of overflow water and the creek below is an undulating ice-field, polished smooth in the wind and contorted by internal pressures. Crossing this I head into the forest and start to climb toward the sun. Flocks of Red-poll shower through the trees and a Wood-pecker tap-taps above me. The legion spruce thin out and stands of twisted birch rove across the mountain, their branches an intricate latticework as fine as lace upon the blue above. It is a long walk to the sun but amidst the birches I climb till finally my head pushes through that aerial shadow line into the rarefied light and seeming warmth of its caress. I climb higher still to watch the shining orb ride over the distant peaks and to gaze down along the winding length of the Keele valley where we laboriously travelled a few months ago, the white water transformed now to a still silver ribbon, torn occasionally by black tears of open water. The blue stubble of forest falls away across the frost-bitten chins and cheeks of old earth and sitting beneath the crisp pink and silver curls of this silver birch I watch it all as I enjoy a late lunch at six thousand feet. The red disk appears to accelerate into the far away blue ranges and the shadow line races up to meet me. It is time I left this height for home.

Along the river, a cold, sunken glow of sun lights the sky above. Ice blue and black forest close about me.

Some mid-afternoon in late December. I am lying out on the river ice, my feet are slightly higher than my head; wrapped in my Cowichan and moccasin shod, I feel no cold. I am trying to discern the sky growing darker by the minute. It is doing so, but I cannot see it do so. I can

only feel its lessening light as my eyes swim in translucent ink-green emerald and violet pink air. It is so comfortable here, I should sleep out tonight. The smoke from the cabin wafts its white way into the lavender north and mocks my thought. It's no good, cabin winters are too comfortable, it is too easy to go in and lock the door on the reality of animal existence. It really would be more difficult to survive the off-season in some sea-side boarding house. From out of the trees, just across the ice, a dark forest voice wells up in a most powerful, prolonged Gregorian call floating out into the dying light. My neck locks into my spine, nape hairs rise, there is a sudden chill now. Such is the ability of wolf talk when conducted at this pitch. The sky has slunk away leaving only the ashes of its shadow and bone chips as stars. A long, low moan reaches out to me to be met by a higher song, then another that scales up and up to a sudden broken stop of silence. Absorbed into this whole primordial moment I stand to meet their call, looking to a brightening star I throw my head back and howl. There is total silence. I wonder if these wolves are quietly laughing? But no, from less than a hundred yards away, starting faintly, there rises a soft chorus to be met by that first great deep voice, so alive, so dead, surging up from the very heart of wilderness and I feel just as if a strong and friendly arm had reached out to clasp my own, tears come to my eyes, the communion is total. I howl and the wolves sing back.

Interior, Keele River cabin.

The wind is in its fourth day, I go out only to fetch water from the water hole in mid-river every second day. It takes more than an hour to chisel through the two feet of ice that forms in the four foot deep hole. Then the only way I can stop the sifting snow filling it up as quickly as I open it, is to build a half-igloo of compacted, wind-blown snow blocks about the western flank of the hole. Out from this protecting wall the wind cuts through all clothing. Ladling the water into the five gallon bucket I look down into the three foot depth of flowing river – a brown cameo of movement upon the silent, secret stones below. A grey-red light bleeds into the southern sky lowering a ruby veil over the west. It could be the last day. Snow devils scream a sinuous, spiralling path along the river ice tearing off into the forest to obliterate themselves in the branches and tired trees bend and bend again in the onrushes of the wind. Not a mountain can be seen, I am alone amidst the whirling crazy snow wind and a gloomy purple night blots out the stars on this mid-afternoon. It is enough to give anyone the heebie-jeebies but I face the wind and laugh – Cabin fever? Never. I love it!

The wind, forever hurling the grinding, biting snow granules has worn the rugged ice into a semblance of a level and I again hunt upriver for sign of game. Coming home from a fruitless search where only the tracks of a lynx have been seen, I wait awhile in the lee of the small rocky island a mile up from the cabin, when seven wolves trot out from the north shore about five hundred yards off. I howl and they stop. I howl again, hoping to elicit a response. The largest of the seven moves forward and then all of them start moving to and fro, intermingling with each other and in their different coloured coats, had I not counted previously, it would be easy for me to imagine more than a dozen wolves. They have an uncanny knack to stir the imagination – and though they stare in my direction I am not rewarded with their singing. After a little while they turn and race away into the canyon.

True to my instructions the ‘Christmas Box’ from Rita and Dyllis has remained unopened, left up on its shelf and effectively forgotten till this morning. It is Christmas, a little more snow has fallen this last week and it is -30C. The coffee pot is simmering and the porridge is just coming to the bubble so I’ll breakfast first and then open the box. With the saucepan washed and a fresh cup of coffee poured, I bring it down and tear away the wrappings. With bits of tape and torn packing over the floor the cabin soon acquires a Christmas feel, especially as silver paper too is unwrapped from every item inside: a jar of gooseberry jam, a tin of Nestles cream, tea bags, coffee, a tin of plums, several tins of meat, a tinned steak and kidney pie, a tin of pears, packets of Jello, bars of chocolate. This is incredible. Such kindness from these people. If I am obliged to spend Christmas by myself there really could be no better way than this and for the remainder of the morning I settle down to finish off the coffee and enjoy the chocolate while concluding my reading of Wodehouse’s ‘Life at Blandings’.

For Christmas dinner I heat up the steak and kidney pie with peas and pot barley and follow up with a tin of Christmas pudding topped with the Nestles cream. A fresh brew of coffee ends the feast and I think of all those friends around the world who are no doubt wondering what I am doing and where I am on this very special day of the year – a day that still centres our thoughts on the incarnation of our Creator made Man. I am not at all lonely in my solitude for there is much security inherent to this day and also in these friends and I let my mind wander back to Yellowknife, to Alberta, to England, Wales and Scotland, to Ireland, Germany, Spain and as far away as the Philippines. There is really no excuse for loneliness, I have too much to enjoy here, too much to look forward to. After a short walk along the forest edge where I wait for a red fox who ambles along the trail, I idle back under a pale blue sky, saw a few logs and then go back inside. I make up the fire, pour another mug of coffee and placing the two folding iron chairs alongside the table behind the stove, I put the foam mattress over them and relax – coffee in one hand and a James Herriot volume propped up in the other, allowing myself to drift away into the old dales and farms of Yorkshire.

It is a dark night in January, the wind is easing and it is a warmer -20C. If I listen I can hear the moaning of the tree breezes and a quiet whistling in the chimney, but mostly I have closed my ears to these sounds so that I might better absorb the scene coming off the page of Dostoyevsky's 'The Idiot'. By the light of the lantern I read my way into the dim, curtained apartment and the murder scene there-in, when with breath-catching timing a groaning dirge seeps through the walls of the cabin – an indescribable funereal lament from out of the forest, deeper and lower than any human keening. For a moment, although I am reclining by the stove, I go quite chill. Then I realise who it is, so finishing the page I go out on to the porch. Not a star can be seen and I wait. It starts again, not far from me, from the trees behind the cabin. So drear, so lonely. Who is this wolf I shall never know?

Though the freezing wind inhibits travel, winter is passing quickly. By mid-February the sun returns after a twelve week holiday in the south and I obtain photographs of an otter out on the ice and a wolverine calls by. I am stepping through the door when there is a commotion to my left, I turn and see this beautiful, bear-like creature jump six feet up into a spruce. The wolverine stares at me, gold guard hairs drifting in the wind over his silky, black-brown coat. The camera is two feet away but though I move slowly he rushes down and lopes away. I wait patiently on the step, camera at the ready and within the hour he is back for I hear him sniffing around the sill logs of the cabin, but the crafty animal never comes into view. After supper I leave some scraps of food a few yards beyond the door and sure enough, as soon as it is quite dark, I hear him scraping about. Through the window I watch his dark form snatching up his snack. I wish I had more food for him.

Six months of solitude is broken. On the last day of February I hear the unfamiliar drone of a bush plane then see it bank into view over the marsh and turning steeply before the rock faces, descending over the forest, banking again to sweep round and line up over the river. It speeds by at tree-top height, I only see a hand wave as I recognise the Cessna 185 as Martin Hartwell's from Fort Norman. He is obviously taking a closer look at the conditions of the rough runway I have snowshoed out on countless occasions, only to have it blown in again. He circles again and comes into land. Quickly strapping on my snowshoes I go down to meet them. Bill Code has come in with Roy Boullion, the wildlife officer, and of course Martin Hartwell is flying. They have brought so much stuff that we have to go back to the cabin for two small toboggans to carry it all. Mail, magazines, some flour I was obliged to leave behind, food boxes from Dyllis and Bill hands me over a leg of caribou. They are surprised I have seen no game. Though they stay for a couple of hours my tongue and thoughts are not sufficiently loosened for a lot of talk – as is always the case for me at these times – but I still give Bill the bare outline of my itinerary for the spring and summer offensive and he promises to let anyone who is travelling the river know of my situation and to tell them they should keep an eye open for me. It is suggested that I should wait till after break-up before I head off up-river. However, Kim and Louise Poole have phoned Bill to say they'll come in with Martin at the beginning of April and Martin says he may be in before then as others from the village want to pay me a visit. Time goes too quickly and the last word is a warning not to change my diet of grain to one of meat, too suddenly.

In fact I take this quite seriously but for all that, within two weeks I go down with chronic stomach pains for a three day bout of what is virtually meat poisoning. The following Saturday I get out of bed to walk around for the first time. Feeling quite weak I sit out on the porch in the sun but I haven't been sitting there long when Martin flies by. Rita and Dyllis and the nuns from the R.C. Mission come on down the river trail! Neither I or the cabin are in a fit state to receive lady visitors but they all prove to be a great cure for by lunchtime we are tucking into hot, ready-cooked chicken and pots of strong tea. Once again I am overwhelmed by their generosity and I fear I wont be able to eat my way through all these tins of food before my spring departure – when their weight would be too much to carry. Having heard of my meatless winter more caribou has been brought in too.

Fortunately it is a beautifully warm and sunny day and everyone enjoys themselves in and out of the cabin, even though I am the poorest of hosts. By early afternoon it is time to fly back and wishes of good luck and offers of prayers for my future safety are made. Martin says he will see me in a week or so with Kim and Louise Poole. The little Cessna kicks up a snow storm and is gone – high up over Punk Mountain - heading east.

Now to get busy. This meat has to be cut for pemmican, for a summer ration and while we are having spring weather I have to do some spring cleaning. The meat is dried above the stove top for the next three days then I set to and uncover the floorboards, putting away my 'Persian Rug' and cleaning out a winter's staleness. On the 30th March I even have time for a bath over on the far side of the ice where the river is running open along a two foot depth. On the 31st Kim, Louise and Katie, their Golden Retriever, fly in. It is good to see them again and they have brought in a stack of mail from home which they have been caretaking since last July. With everything unloaded to the river Martin is ready to leave saying he'll be in next Saturday 10am – and we are left to our week's holiday.

The author with Katie. Keele River cabin.

It is typical that Louise has brought in a set menu for each day of their stay and when we get everything back to the cabin they bring out a bottle of Glenfiddich single malt – to help me on my way up the Twitya! The eight days of their stay brings forth absolutely perfect weather – outsiders would never believe these April days. The snow has quite gone from the forest and the chipmunks are out from hibernation. Some days we explore downriver, some days upriver, and on some days we do nothing at all save laze in the soporific sun. Then if we feel really energetic we cross the river to the little creek opposite that has been overflowing all winter to build up a tremendous ice field spreading for acres through the trees and backing up a good half mile into its own small gorge. Climbing to the top of this with the two toboggans that came with the cabin, we have quite incredible races back down this natural 'Cresta run'. Of course Katie too insists on joining in the fun and though we don't let her steer, she does get more than her fair share of rides.

As we talk over my plans for the summer Kim expresses concern over the plausibility of tracking a loaded canoe through the canyons of the Twitya, which by all accounts are sheer. He wonders too over the load factors in pulling a canoe over the ice. This certainly is what I have had in mind all along but cautious as ever in putting forward too bold an approach in public, I have kept pretty quiet on the idea. Now though I can quite honestly say that I will be leaving the cabin after they have gone because it will be too lonely an option to stay – I have been spoilt.

With my original losses at Fort Norman my logistics were put out of joint and I have never quite come to grips with the food situation. Having no meat this winter has only confused things further. To be on the safe side I had asked Kim and Louise to bring in extra poundage to give me a margin for the next fifteen months. This they have done but Kim reckons it is impossible for one man to haul the total weight involved and insists we try a dummy run. I would be quite happy trying it out when I am ready to leave, but I acquiesce, knowing that Kim has a valid point. So with two spare bodies as part of the load we pack out another five hundred pounds, reckoning on an eight hundred pound load plus another eighty for Canoe and twenty for discrepancies offers a nice round figure for anyone to pull. And indeed it is! Kim is altogether heavier than I and makes good for a hundred yards, I am quite content with twenty-five. Why waste energy on trials? I'll need it for the real thing, though by the way this weather is boiling up I hope I'll have some ice left to pull on. But whilst the weight may be feasible the volume is worrying. Stubbornly I refuse offers of help to arrange a flight for the surplus to meet me at Mountain Lake in the Fall. That would be too easy and my friends are really being too kind for my own good, although the thought of travelling upriver with a lightly laden canoe has strong appeal. Somehow I will solve the problem. In my own way and in my own good time I'll force a solution through.

By Saturday, after a week of Louise's gourmet cooking, Katie's company and Kim's common sense approach I am loathe to see them off. I certainly do have a problem on my hands, not made any easier by the advancing age of the ice, but I know that it is I alone who has to make the decision as to what to do and how. (It helps to have virtually nine months of solitude behind me, I am in tune with the land and this allows self-knowledge.) We are all packed, ready and waiting on the side of Runway No 1, Keele River International Airport at 9.55am and Martin lands his Ursus Airways Cessna on the dot of 10 o'clock. Bags are packed in, Katie is lifted up and everyone clambers aboard to buckle up. I may not be seeing anyone for quite a while after today. The engine fires and I stand in the blizzard of the slipstream as Martin roars upriver to take off into the quiet blue. I see a hand wave from high up, I wave back then head for home.

The sense of desolation is choking. I could stand years of solitude but one week's good company is hell to leave behind. I begin packing right away. Canoe sits outside the door and by

night-time she is full to overflowing. That's not going to be any good – everything comes back inside and I go to bed. Sunday is spent deep in deliberation. Obviously I can take only the bare essentials – but I am damned if that excludes my books. I pack up once more with Canoe down on the ice. By the end of the day I get it right. There might just be enough food to see me through the following year – if – I get a moose at the onset of next winter. Books are in there too and I can still move Canoe forward on the ice. I tarp her up and stack the remaining food on the cabin table in safety. Maybe I'll get back to it somehow; anyhow I'll leave come morning.

At first light I am up. The cabin is swept clean and everything is left tidy. New kindling is in the fire box and several weeks supply of split logs are stacked on the porch. The window shutters are put up and the door is nailed to just as I found it. The place has become home and the melancholia inherent in leave-taking fills the air. I turn my back, climb down the bank and harness myself into Canoe's track-line. Let's get started.

Five hours later I am passing the island – a mile has been travelled. Sweat is pouring off me. How many miles did we reckon I should do before break-up? Twelve? I thought I would make it around the canyon bend today. This little canyon of sorts turns left upriver and all winter I have been wondering how it could be passed should I leave on open water, now I wonder if I'll even manage to round it on the ice. Past the island the ice caves down into gently flowing overflow and shallow open water. I dare not try poling through the overflow for Canoe may get stuck, so I cut up along the snow-bank on the left, just feet away from a ten foot slide down into the river. First I snowshoe a trail for Canoe then by her side I push and pull her nine hundred pounds while all the time she threatens to slip over the lip of snow into the water. Constantly I coax her, talking to myself, mind over matter. It works and I win through but that's as far as I'm going today. Noontime is softening up the surface and causing the hull to drag, and the beach here is out from the west wind. Don't push yourself on the fist day, a mile is far enough. If I can make a mile a day and there's ten days of ice travel left, I won't have done too badly.

I am quite content to lie on the sand in the sun. Two Golden Eagles ride the invisible thermals in the deep blue. All I can hear is my heart beating. It seems odd to be making camp within walking distance of the cabin, but it is now the season of self-containment – travelling time – and the break, once made, must hold till next winter. I ought to start new letters for outside and a new chapter in my log.

Overnight the old west wind returns and it is now screaming down the ice keeping the effective temperature well below freezing. My muscles are all tensed from yesterday and just to start Canoe moving is an effort. Out on the river heading up into the wind it is a job to keep upright. Over on the right the ice has fallen in to allow a silent green depth of overflow to pass through the canyon, here it has been polished like undulating marble in the winter winds and even the

snowshoe crampons gain no purchase. The corner of the canyon wall is two hundred yards off, the wind comes around it in great bellowing gusts under an overcast sky. Now I really do feel useless for if I push at Canoe I just slip backwards and likewise if I pull, all I can do is wriggle her stern and that gets us precisely nowhere. I try taking a run at her – hoping some forward momentum might transfer itself and get her moving, but the only place it gets me, is on my back. Gradually though by exerting pressure from the shoulders down, while standing lightly on the ice, I twist her to and fro and inch by inch we begin to tack upriver. Even in the cutting wind sweat runs into my eyes, it has taken an hour to cover these two hundred yards.

Around the corner the river forms a wide bend to the left where deep snow has drifted. The only way ahead is to cross the deep depression where the ice has sunk in to the wearing action of the river below yet still forms a cover of questionable strength. Leaving Canoe I go forward to test it with a pole – shell ice – but we may race over. With enough speed we might get taken up the opposite incline. I line Canoe to the best angle of attack – once we get started there won't be any turning back, for the banks are too steep. From behind I crouch for the great push – Let's go. Canoe races forward with me pushing and running flat out. I hear the hull grinding through the shell, snowshoes clatter underneath me, don't stop, don't look and I force out and up the other side. We're safe! Behind in the bottom of the trough I turn to see water oozing into our trail – well, I won't be coming back this way.

I am now amongst acres of dirty, half-melted ice blocks, a jungle of refrozen slabs of gritted snow. Up and down and in and out I have to pull, push and lever Canoe and I cannot help but admire the strength of her Old Town construction. This is punishment no canoe should receive and I can only take so much of it. Half way through I reckon it is breakfast time. Nobody objects to the idea so I don a mackinaw and hat and dig out a ration of semi-frozen Keele porridge. Later I take photos of this desolation.

After working through all the debris open water forces me to the right shore where a wide snow bank allows a dangerous progress until there is nothing else but to portage. The river below is deep and furious that it should be made to descend under the ice again. The trail isn't long but is awkward being over and under overhanging trees and all the time the ledge of snow slopes down to the cold green water. The whole business takes a ridiculously long time – but then it is the first portage and I shouldn't expect the smoothest operation at this stage. By the time we are through I need lunch. I sit on Canoe and watch shadow clouds race along the cliffs opposite while I eat my habitual bannock. It is cold and I am tired. I'll make camp up in those trees. Has a mile been covered today? Canoe sits safely on polished ice and camp is back in the forest. A fresh black bear track is noted, the first sign of bear this year – April 10th.

The wind is howling crazily this morning, I really don't want to go out. Grey clouds stream across a cold grey land and I dig down into the clothes pack for an extra wool hat. I wrap a short lead of rope about my moose-skin-clad right hand while my left fist closes around a knot of rope inches from Canoe's snout. On ice it is a straight head-on, crampon-digging pull but then along the thin, wind-blown patches of snow it is a zigzag back-into-the-wind affair or a pushing effort from behind. With head down into the punching wind all I see are the long line of raised paw marks where Katie walked with us just the other week – the wind having blown away the less compacted snow from about each of her tracks. It is a long lonely pull, my head aches from the cold and I've only been out for a couple of hours. Around a right bend the river turns toward a wall of grey cliffs where a small rocky promontory overlooks the ice and marks the sheep-lick – where Dall Sheep come to eat the mineral-rich soil. It also marks open water. The centre ice has fallen in, water flows so far along, as in a canal, then it disappears below into a dark bottle-green hole. It is too cold to think properly. I'm going to make camp in those willows and get a fire going. I can be no more than four miles from the cabin.

In the lee of the cliffs and behind a wall of willows I track through deep snow into a small glade of poplar where patches of bare earth show. It is a good campsite except that Canoe has to be left out on the ice. There is plenty of dead alder and I soon have a fire blazing. I wonder what I should do about that open water? I wonder if it is too early for lunch? It's sure good to be off the river. Maybe some sheep will come to the lick while I am here? For this afternoon though it is a book and bed. Let the whole world blow away.

At dawn the wind has ceased although the sky remains heavily overcast. Better see what the ice is doing. Climbing up the little shoulder of the lick through the scrub juniper I work along a semi-circular sheep trail that cuts across the eroded concave of frost-hard soil which is dotted with clumps of spruce and deep burrows where the sheep have found rich seams of nutrients. On the far side I come out on top of the rocky promontory that juts out over the river; the view upstream is impressive. Sheer cliffs rise from the ice whilst in mid-river a long lake of open water floats dead ice down toward me where it slowly revolves in never ending eddies. Below, massive pressure boils of ice have formed in silent tribute to winter forces and downriver of these the green water comes up again to flow into the slab-sided canal. It might well be possible to get Canoe through these boils and over the level ice by cutting diagonally upstream to the left, but I would be a fool not to fear the prospect. Maybe were the sun shining, I would try it right away, but it's such depressing, dangerous weather. Maybe I should go anyway? I am just deliberating, trying to talk myself into action when my eye catches a movement downriver – wolves! A caribou!

At the far end of the canal a caribou stands body deep in the flow while five wolves wait at ease on the surrounding ice. I hurry back to the tent and grab camera, film and binoculars.

Along through the willows I work downriver to a side channel of ice a hundred yards wide, a scrubby swathe of beach scattered with drift logs forms the far side and offers scant camouflage. I secure a few pictures on my way across. A wolf sees me, stares hard and edges back, alarmed. It takes the others no time to ascertain what is going on and they scatter back into the far trees and I am left to kick myself. I may have inadvertently saved one caribou but they were no doubt hungry wolves; there has been little enough game about. That could have been a unique photo opportunity too. At that the wolves start howling, sounding angry. I wait crouched amongst the thin sticks but after half an hour they seem to have gone. The caribou has turned about but remains chest-deep in the river. I am cold and uncomfortable. Five hours pass. The caribou climbs out, a little uncertain of himself, looks around, takes a few steps, then without further ado steps it out downriver. I really don't enjoy being an accidental god.

It is past lunchtime and the sun is making a brave effort to show itself, blue sky is opening from the west. I prepare a couple of bannock, one marmite, one honey and I retire to a convenient spruce backrest. I certainly won't be underway today. Lost in thoughts I am startled to see a big, glossy wolverine come trotting along the forest bank straight towards me. I leave the camera alone. How close will he come? From fifteen yards his nose catches my scent, he never looks up but with no hesitation he lopes round and heads back along his trail. I am beginning to see more animals here than I did for the whole of the combined winter back at the cabin.

It is Sunday and summer for the day. I have checked the position of the ice and it imparts no new confidence, but then it is such a beautiful day it would be a pity to start travelling when I could just sunbathe and wait for wolves and things to show up. On the shoulder of the lick I lie back against the warm earth and begin reading a canoeing magazine – one that Kim and Louise brought in. Not too many minutes go by when I have the distinct feeling of someone reading over my shoulder. This is odd. Very, very slowly I look behind. A young Dall ram stares at me and gives for all the world the impression that he too has been reading the article on the Hosner Queen from Vermont. Well I am the last one to argue the finer points of etiquette with literate sheep so again very slowly, I turn around and go back to reading. But I am much too excited to read. Just play this one cool. Patience. After a few minutes I look round and he has gone.

Quickly I pick up the glasses and camera from the tent then crawl and weave my way back up to the crest of the shoulder. I can hardly believe this – across the crescent of the lick twenty or more Dall sheep, ewes and yearlings and above where I lie, four magnificent huge rams. Dazzling white and golden horned – they are perfection! I press myself into the ground – how the devil can I get over and close enough without them seeing me? I know exactly where I have to be to frame those white rams below the green of forest and bright blue of sky. Inch-wise I drag myself up and across the earth, silently hoping that if I don't look at them, they won't look

at me. Yard by yard I get on to the main lick. Don't push your luck. Think as a sheep not as a bloody photographer. I move into a sitting position, looking out over the ice and sparkling water, all the while chewing imaginary minerals in a most contented fashion so that when I glance casually about me the whole party of sheep are watching my unconcerned performance. So as I ignore them to turn back to the view – and my exaggerated chewing, mimicking them – they likewise ignore me. From here I shoot the first roll of film.

With the 210mm lens I remain too distant for the best composition. I ease myself back and up another foot. The rams take no notice. Another two feet. Three more photographs. Leave them alone – look at the river – chew your vitamins. A little later – another few feet. I progress. The four rams take turns to eat into the nose-bags of earth below the roots of a desperate spruce. One muzzles in, another waits in turn while the other two stand guard duty facing opposite directions. They appear to be most fair with one another. The guards attention never waivers, they are obviously attuned to split second reactions. The Dall is no woolly-minded civilized sheep. I am sixty feet away and this is close enough for all concerned. For a moment I thought we were lost, the biggest ram started a guttural clicking, all eyes turned on me, I turned my back on them and thought of other things. They are still here. If I had four beautiful girls modelling professionally they couldn't be more accommodating. Turn and turnabout. Look left, look right. The great sweeping horns twist into the sun, a picture of gold, white, green and blue. This is too good to be true. Hunters can search for years for rams as good as these and then never get within killing range and here I am shooting at sixty feet. Trophy after trophy is indelibly recorded on the silver emulsion. Occasionally I shift to shoot the ewes who are relaxing and chewing their cud over on the promontory. After an hour I have exhausted the picture possibilities from this position. I am content. These alone have been worth waiting the whole winter for. I put the camera down and sit in the company of these scrupulously alert beasts. 'Sheep' gives no real idea to their almost mythical appearance and the strength of their muscular bodies. For another hour I am privileged, then by mutual consent all twenty animals move up to the lip of the lick and trail into the green forest – not so much as deigning to cast a backward glance at their photographer. I take it as a great compliment.

Now this casts a new perspective on my deliberations over leaving. Whether the ice bridge is safe enough to carry the nine hundred pounds of Canoe is unknown, but even if I cross and carry on, I may become trapped in some miserable corner of the river where there are no photographic opportunities – and I may not advance so much as two miles before break-up. Whereas if I stay here, camp is protected from likely ice damage and I am within walking distance of the cabin so I can make up my supplies. I can start the summer with a full load and in the meantime perhaps make up for the winter's poor photographic record. The one question however is, is my presence here a critical disturbance for the sheep on the lick? Photographers are quite capable of doing more damage than hunters.

It is no cut and dry decision for I have no idea of the difficulties ahead and I may need every day of travel to get into the heart of this immense land. But then I am self-contained, if I fall short of my planned objective: Mountain Lake, I shall have to hole-up wherever winter may find me – or maybe I could travel on after freeze-up? I begin to fret less over staying put for now and as for the sheep, I think that by keeping a low but obvious profile as I have just done on the lick in their very midst, disturbance may in fact be less than camping a mile away and walking here every few days.

Caribou venturing out into Springtime overflow.

The weather turns sour. Wet snow blizzards down the valley holding the land in white again. I walk through the moaning forest but cold forces me back to the tent where I spend the rest of the day in the sleeping bag – till suppertime. Breakfast and lunch are always eaten cold, supper though requires a wood supply to hand and coffee demands that a kettle is filled with ice – chipped from the marbled floor beyond the willows. This meal, always the same on the trail, does possess a little variety these days due to the generosity of my friends but basically it remains a porridge of oats, barley and pemmican, with macaroni as a recent discovery. Water is the first priority, then the cast-iron milk pan is filled with the usual ingredients down to the salt and cayenne so food bags can be re-stowed safely back in Canoe, and she is tarped up and made secure for the night. Kettle and pot are brought through the willows into the clearing, the fire is laid on the previous day's dead ashes and then one match kindles the twigs of dry spruce, a wood that rarely fails and a far better fire starter than birch bark – or gasoline. Thumb-thick alder and willow are built up over the flames and then with wrist-thick alder on top, it is soon a three foot blaze. The kettle is shoved in from the side, the ice melting in minutes, boiling takes not much longer. I stir water into the milk pan, letting it sit while the fire breeds hot coals. So on one side I add new fuel and build up the other with old so that the pan can sit flat on the steady heat of red ember. There is a precise artistry to campfire cooking – one is forever subject to the temperament of the wood fuel, and the wind, but these are not adversaries so much as partners in a game. It is a simple game of life, of death perhaps, but rarely is it serious. Mostly it occupies the simplest sense of being. Food is not social, it is sacred. How often we blaspheme it.

One can spend only so much time in a tent, I travel away from camp for a morning or afternoon only, nervous that a spring Grizzly may show up while I'm away. At other times I sit quietly, cold and waiting, waiting for the sun to come, the ice to leave, or animals to show. Two or three of the sheep arrive every few days. Single, travelling wolves are common. A wolf track circles the tent this morning. Grey-blue clouds wash over a weak, lemon sun, willows lean from the wind and ice dust snakes down the river as a black wolf walks by. The camera is to hand, I focus, expose and shoot. He looks into my thicket, inquisitive. I remember attracting a fox once by imitating a squealing rabbit but this wolf either has a better ear or is fastidious where rabbits are concerned. He trots away. I move out on to the ice and howl, long and low, not too loud. I want the company of this wolf. He is young and unsure of himself. He comes back, head slightly on one side. I am lying on my side uttering mournful sounds. C'mon fella, you're too far away. He backs off. I try and play him in again – thinking him in. He really would like to sniff this strange, odd creature that cries strange, part-wolf poems. He moves in again full of curiosity, but a hundred yards is his limit. I stand up to let him know what peculiar antics men can get up to, and he trots off along the river.

On the very edge of winter now and having had those earlier tempting weeks of sun, I long for spring to break through. Every evening I watch the sun climb up the side of Mount Eduni till it now clears the summit and rides down into the valley north of west. One evening in early May I watch the movement of the earth in relation to the sun and study the stirrings of ice along the stretches of open water. The great grey cliffs are cast in shadow and the distant folds of forest and mountain only show a gilded line along higher crests while lengthening blue shadows take their evening walk across the land. From nowhere then he appears below me, dark and shaggy and big as only a big Grizzly can be. Along the far shore ice he patrols upstream into the retreating fingers of the golden sun and I watch him along the blue shadowed ice till he is lost amidst the darkness of the islands. So Griz' is out is he? There is an understated thrill in the air. A softer breeze moves in from the south. Rippled plaits of pink and blue stream over the western mountains.

A subterranean rumbling disturbs but does not quite break my sleep. It is a dark grey night when the noise and vibration penetrate. Even then I lie on for a few moments hardly able to take it in – the ice is going out! In readiness for this I have moved Canoe into the lee of the promontory, up on the sandy beach there, feeling that she would be well protected but now in the midst of this grinding thunder, I have to make sure. Outside, white light is reflected back off a wall of broken ice fifteen feet high. Along the little trail through the willows under the lick I run to Canoe. High and dry this evening she now floats in an eddy I had foreseen but great boulders of ice float on either side of her. How she didn't get crushed I'll never know. I am only glad I didn't have to witness it taking place. I pull her up further. She should be safe for a protective barrage of ice bars all other slabs from entering the eddy. It looks as though the main flow has gone by.

Later in the day I climb the mountain behind the lick, through the forest and out on to the broken shale paths of the sheep that wind between sparse spruce to the high upland meadows where the wind blows free and the sun pours down and the first bright purple wild flower jewels show through. I watch five rams grazing the boulder strewn slope below. In a bend of the river a shelf of ice breaks off and I follow its progress into the current, crosswise like a giant bulldozer blade, where it is carried along into a narrowing gap in the ice to rear up and groan with all of the built up depth of water behind it. Irresistible, the shore ice is torn up with screaming protest and the white rafts churn off to spawn more damage below. The white rams are moving off in single file along a path in the thin forest. Through the glasses I track them to the pink lip of the cliffs and on the very edge of that bluff I see two animals rear and crack heads, a second later the hammer sound thuds dully in the still air and a puff of kicked sand drifts off into the five hundred foot drop below and the performance is repeated.

Far off upriver a dam of ice holds as a strung bow, behind it the winding river is choked with ice. Like a child I wish it would break. I have no more thought the thought, and cannot quite believe my eyes, but the bow is sprung and in a silent, so-slow motion difficult to place in perspective, though seemingly with grace from this distance, an arrowhead of ice flows into midstream. It might be a skein of geese winding, flying low around the bends of the river. But no end is in sight. It is time to view this fly-past from the home rock. Canoe may not be able to look after herself with what is bearing down on us now. I reach the lick and promontory rock just as the first rafts of ice glide on to the submerged rocks – I really do have a grandstand view – one could not have a more exciting finishing post. The rocks are well below the surface but the immense draft of these blocks cannot ride over and so an ever changing pile-up suffers an incredible barrage. For a mile upriver, along the straight under the cliffs, no water can be seen and likewise along the further bends, only a steady white broken mass moves. It is the most entertaining spectacle. Great roofs of ice rear up over smaller companions, their protestations go unheeded in the background swell of rising water and the softly venomous, hissing, tinkling, groaning of the mob. The gravitational attraction is anarchic; panic clings to the surface to suffocate all order. Ice drowns and writhes, murders, bullies and shoves. It squeals and scrapes. Broken blue veins shatter to the bulbous strength of mud-brown wedges wrought with boulders as knuckle-dusters. The river seethes and boils beneath it all, carrying this pandemonium of vandals upon its swollen, muddy back. Ice mile after ice mile rides past. I grow tired of the savagery and after four hours the armada remains. Not till suppertime does the remnant fleet of isolated ice drift by, but now the river has burst its winter bond and it looks like a giant spinal column had contorted upon itself and in an agonising spasm, shattered. For vertebrae of ice now lie beached on either side of the running spinal fluid. Other vertebrae, broken bits, still float down and I wait for the danger to pass, but spring is now upon the land.

I always move quietly on to the lick to see if any sheep are present but this morning, none are, so I come back down to camp. There is another smaller lick surrounded by forest and it is sometime since I went there. Among the trees I try to walk soundlessly on the crisp poplar leaves; arms of rose briar catch and tug at my sleeve; sun filters into the shade. The earthen face of the lick shows brown between the branches and from it a white ram stares at me. I freeze. Then backwards I move away, averting my gaze, hoping he will stay. Back in the sunlight my heart races – if he just stays there.

I know the land well. I circle wide about to climb above his lick and there on an open patch of earth I sit down to wait. The bank below slopes steeply away and I know that the two main sheep paths both to and from the minerals, climb this bank. If that ram follows the evidence of centuries he will walk up one of those paths, his head and shoulders should come up over the rise of earth before he stops upon seeing me. By rights it should be a beautifully framed portrait from thirty feet, the dark forest forming an out-of-focus background. This is going to be good.

Half an hour passes. The sun climbs higher. Patience. Listen. Smell – feel the air; count spruce needles fifty feet away. He has to be there, I am sure I can hear him. He's coming, it's going to work. The golden eyes stare into the camera, click, horns tilt, click. The shutter sounds like a bomb in the silence. He careers down into the thickets and gallops across to the main lick. I stay where I am, not making a noise, completely satisfied. Two perfect pictures. I walk round to the top of the big lick wondering if he is still about, but there isn't a sign of him. I move to go down to camp and he steps out from behind a bunch of spruce below me to canter over the promontory. He turns to look back and then trots off along the cliffs.

After lunch I am walking back from the side creek where I can now collect still, clean water when, along the edge of the willows, not ten yards ahead, a huge silver-grey wolf leaps out, turns and flashes a toothy grin and bounds on by. It takes a moment to recover from being so close to the sheer muscular motion of the animal; all I can do is stand and stare as he stops to look back, not quite believing perhaps that he isn't being chased or shot at.

In the evening I am in the habit of watching the land from high up on the jutting promontory. The silver-gold river lies stilly as a woven thread through the black-spired islands, about the mouldering mountains beneath the blue sky sheathed in the red wings of a dying day and often caribou shadows weave through the opposite wood. A rush of Peregrine wings land in the little struggling spruce beside me, we have time to recognise one another, then he leaves as quickly. It will soon be time for me to leave this place.

Sunlight brings me from sleep. The first job of the day is always to check on Canoe who floats idly in her protected eddy. Lazily I walk through the sun-shadow palings of the willow copse, out under the few big spruce that grow up from the small beach at the base of the lick, but this morning I do not reach Canoe, she is there alright and safe, but above on the lick I see the white flank of sheep. I am not seen. Silently I run back for the camera and film. From around the spruce trunk I ease out and look up. Looking down, a Dall ram with wide-flaring horns stares accusingly. "What the devil are you trying to achieve", he seems to say. Caught in the act I am not one to deny my guilt, so I move slowly into the open and begin talking to him very quietly and softly. There really isn't anything to be afraid of, I tell him. I stay at river level long enough for him to go back to eating his earth and then move forward. The slab of rock reaches up above where Canoe is parked and works round to the right into an eroded soil gulley that runs upward for a hundred feet or so, a little ways above this the ram stands.

Every movement is now open, never furtive. I talk quietly and continuously, just as one might to a highly nervous horse. The camera is never allowed to rule the situation and I consciously work at never forgetting myself behind it – or the sheep in front. I am fifty feet up the gulley

where there is really nothing to hold on to, feet slide down and I scrabble for a thin root. The ram takes fright and canters off to the edge of the trees above. C'mon fella, I won't hurt you, c'mon then. Tone is everything, but I consider it luck when he comes back. After minutes I work up for more photographs. He chews the ground quite unconcerned. The next advance is going to be difficult, the gulley twists left, it demands a swift movement. Then ice must break below us for something other than myself triggers him to flight. This time he disappears. I take advantage and move up – but not too far – eagerness will destroy it all. I don't know where he is so slightly louder I call him, retaining the same tone and pitch of voice. Those minerals must be quite exceptional for within five minutes he is back scraping the earth with his teeth. I am forty feet away shooting the second roll of film.

We are content with each other here but I would really like to fill the frame with his whole body; I move up again. My way is barred by a ragged, fallen log. I try to move so slowly but I slip, he canters out to the centre of the lick and turns to watch me. This third time I call him back and I begin to doubt that this is just luck. Whatever is going on here, it is unusual. He walks deliberately down the incline toward me, halting in a magnificent pose, front feet stand on a wide gnarled root of a fallen spruce, the radiant white body, all muscle-bunched is set against the green forest whilst my angle views the regal head and golden sweeping horns against the sapphire sky. Shot after shot. He steps down to me. I change films, twenty feet apart.

It is sometimes possible to be too close to your subject and even with the 70-210 zoom I am restricted now, but they are specific photographs that will be invaluable for future paintings – every hair is picked up.

The Dall though survives by over-reacting, he is content in a state of constant tension, perfectly strung to the play of every element. I have no perception of why but for the fourth time this old survivor bounds away. Lone sheep are more vulnerable, more wary. I do not move, only talk. I am lying down, I am relaxed, allowing my body to talk also; no sign of tension, threat. He walks directly to me. When a wild animal freely draws this close, not in curiosity or aggression, but to feed, I can only feel a unique rapport, a lost semblance of paradise perhaps? I know this ram. For three hours we hold this wild conversation. I take no more photographs. Gradually he nibbles across the earth, slowly I move away and down. By the time I reach river level he is up at the top of the lick. We look at each other for a long moment then peaceably turn to our separate trails.

The view west from the cabin at Broken Skull.

A mouse in the log-pile.

PART TWO
CHAPTER THREE

RIVER ROADS

The 19th May, the river has not run ice for three days, camp is packed and Canoe is loaded. I am nervous. I still haven't achieved any upriver travel under my own steam and ferrying out from behind the promontory cliff is going to give me no time to test the weight of Canoe against the current. I haven't much ground to lose. At least it is sunny.

The eddy is strong, keeping me locked into the rock so I have to back-paddle out, losing momentum, then into forward thrust. Canoe rides heavy but well and we work across to the other side of the river. I track down to the tail spur of gravel and ease Canoe round into the calm water of the back channel. From on top of the sheep mountain I mapped out a route through the islands and all I have to do now is remember where to cross and where to turn left or right.. My boots dig into the sand and Canoe takes up the slack to ride out on the bight of line. On the bend I ferry to the left, a riffle comes down over a wide span of cobbles. Canoe has had her load made up from the cabin and weighs her original nine hundred pounds, but muscles are slack from easy living. I wade knee-deep into the lower reach of tumbling water, feet twist on slick stones, water surges over, freezing cold to my waist. Canoe drags a dead weight on my right arm. It isn't strength that counts, you just need to be bloody-minded. I reach the top of my first riffle and question the sanity of continuing. The channel narrows, becoming steeper. Stones clutch at the hull and trip me up. Feet and legs are numb, sweat trickles into my eyes. Did I say somewhere wilderness travel should not be viewed as a battle? Well this is the exception to the rule. Just grit your teeth and swear your way up. If Canoe were animate she would be trembling. We work on up the back-river-alleys till the sweeping bend of the main channel is reached and I reckon we can make camp. Half a mile – a mile? It's good enough this first morning.

The campsite is an old Indian one, stumps of burnt wood lie about and the inevitable axed trees cut thirty inches from the ground. Old Spam tins and Coca-Cola tins litter the place. I do not admire the mess, I am conditioned not to, but I quietly smile thinking of the fury many whites would vent here. The Indian unfortunately, is obliged to bridge two cultures, independent one hundred years ago he utilised the land more efficiently than most, what he took from it, he made use of, then its purpose done, he threw it back. There was no room, or need, for a cultivated materialism because the land was bountiful left to its own devices. Our materialism has invented litter but to the Indian it still does not exist.

So whilst I collect the white mans invention to erode a little further in the heart of my fire, I am quite content and expend no energy in anger. The tent is pitched amongst the trees and I explore about to discover that this is 'Dead Ermine Camp' – a wizened and dried dead ermine is caught in the lower branches of a spruce, he looks very much like I feel. My back aches dully whilst my ankle is swollen and bruised and my arms feel as if they might fall from their sockets. At least on the rack they used to lie you down. I lie and read Graham Greene's 'Ways of Escape' all afternoon.

Night-time brings up the old west wind screaming like an old witch and the morning is too cold and fierce to venture the next reach. I stay and luxuriate in the warmth of bed. By evening I sit over my campfire, bake a bannock and cook up supper while watching the dots of Dall sheep on the home mountain. The weather is calming down.

The following morning I can delay no longer but I'm not at all sure how to progress. The river sweeps around this mile long bend along which sweepers ride and a necklace of ice still clings to the muddy collar. It is too fragile to walk on but neither can I wade beyond for the river is too deep. Perched up on the bows of Canoe I pick my little world war two fireman's axe into the ice, the river holds the stern in, and I pull up. Whilst the axe is retrieved my left hand claws in to hold us by friction and the axe picks down again a yard on. It is a slow progress but it works, even if my fingers do freeze. Sweepers are axed away or wound under. By the time we are through it feels like lunchtime but there is nowhere to stop. House-sized blocks of blackened ice sit in shallow pools and brood, a shallow riffle allows me an option around faster, rougher water but I have to literally drag Canoe up the gravel bed. We then move into a long reach of cobble bank. I am shaking from the cold. Canoe is berthed and I drag dead wood from the forest and a fire soon leaps upward. I take my sodden clothes off and warm up eating a cold lunch.

This is the first real stretch of tracking I've been allowed, but still thinking in terms of an eighty foot line I quickly find Canoe is in peril. Hidden boulders grab her bottom and she begins to broach – a split second affair. In the end I have her up on a short leash – six or seven feet out from shore. Generally I think its easier and quicker to wade her up; at least then we help each other to keep our balance. At the end of the long cobbles a steep little rapid boils down and I begin to see how this thing should be done. A grayling jumps out of the water ahead. I move Canoe behind a boulder, step forward anchoring against the front face of the rock, then bring her out and up. It is steep but with a method developing I can see that rapids should become less a mad battle of strengths. At the top a creek weeps clearly into the turbid river, a further rapid looks decidedly ominous but since there is a pleasant beach, it's time to stop for the day. I am unloading Canoe when twenty feet away a piebald wolf walks along the bench above. I say Hello but he is standoffish and travels on. Once camp is set I idle up to oversee the rapid.

The river rides down from the left into a slight elbow of bank that rises to an eroded, boulder-studded wall that turns the water left again. On the elbow a cobble bar creates two channels, the far one is a nasty bit of rapid and being under the cliff has no opportunities to offer my advance. This smaller channel is my only bet but it is strictly routed by the bar on its right flank and the cobble flat which is an extension of my camping beach. These cause the water to shoot down at a tremendous speed. To pull Canoe through I will need a direct hold on her yet the stones shelve down abruptly and give little purchase. Climbing this hill is an altogether frightening thought. I go back to camp.

The afternoon is spent contentedly in the sun. Mosquitoes are not troublesome yet and I don't bother to try fishing as it will not hurt to eat a few pounds off Canoe's load. A lithe otter glides onto the bank downstream and humps his seal-like undulating walk along a shelf of ice to plunge back into the river. A Red-tailed hawk wanders over the forest in the west. Supper is cooked and eaten, utensils are washed and stowed; we'll make an early start in the morning.

The first part of the rapid has gone surprisingly well but now, at the base of the real hill the water narrows considerably and there is no slack, even right into the boulders. Feet are constantly sliding down into deeper water or unsettling cobbles, rolling them into a depth. One large boulder juts out from shore, water carves off to surge about it in a small separate chute. If I put Canoe into that she will get swung out into the big waves where I won't be able to hold her. I climb on top of the rock, holding Canoe in its lee. Pebbles are worked loose with my foot and stones fall from around its edges as I move the boulder back and forth, water all the time washing up over my thighs and carrying away the loosened stone. In a few minutes I have the great stone egg slithering down and far enough under to allow Canoe free passage over the top. The force of this water is nothing to trifle with. I have to use every device and thought for leverage. While my right arm is pulled about dragging back with Canoe, my left hand trails the unsteady cobbles above for friction. Under the water my boots wedge into any convenient crevice as solid footholds are searched for before any step can be taken. This travelling is literally one step at a time.

A much larger boulder thrusts out from the bank, no way will I move this one. Its resulting chute is a menace that somehow rolls back into the kerb below. It looks like a six foot rise in a twelve foot length. I take a deep breath and step into it. Cold knocks the breath out of me. A step is gained, half of another, my arm is being twisted as I endeavour to keep Canoe in the slackest water along the bank. Stones roll from beneath my feet, we're being pushed back, my hand drags over the cobbles above for a hold, there is none, all I achieve is my balance and we get sent to the bottom again. I hold up here to catch my breath. At least I know the forces involved and we have been whetted for the fight. Water churns into and over us but I am less

cold and my feet dig into the rocks. Come on, get those legs powering. Don't stop, but I am upto the boulder and have to stop and Canoe streams out from my right hand – there is no real strength there, it's all talk. I have to bring my left leg from under the water to swing it over the boulder. Till I anchor my body on its upstream face there is no way we can move forward. It takes four attempts, water pummelling me down each time before I succeed. Then the right leg can slide around the outer edge so that the weight of the current holds me firmly against the rock. I lean far out and ease Canoe's snout into the roaring hill, tension strings my arm, for her to gain the height of the chute I have to move on, don't worry about Canoe, she'll follow, forget your arm, you just climb the bloody hill. Climb it. Water flails about as I wade into the shallower top riffle, I still don't stop, I'm going to reach flat water. At the very top, in safety, I look behind. Canoe, sure enough is still clinging to my hand. I look down the hill and to be upstream of this view is good. Feet lapped by calm water, I sit on Canoe for a breather.

There is an easy reach along this left shore, wading amongst the shallows of the cobble bars. Canoe lends her support, saving me from slipping on the rounded stones. This flat gives way to a forested bank and sunlight filters through the tall spruce above me. At thigh level thick ice juts out twenty feet into the river – looks like another 'picking' operation. I am cold by the time I reach the end. The end of the ice is the beginning of a problem. The river, way off on the upper right has been turned left by midstream gravel shoals and the bulk of the water fetches up against the earth cut-bank ahead, where alder and poplar fall off from the edge – due to the strong current eating into the sub-soil. I hitch Canoe via a long line and go to check the full length of this predicament. Through a little mixed wood I discover the problem does not extend far. There is no way I can line up but if I were to tie a line to this poplar I could perhaps pull myself and Canoe along. So all my rope is thrown out and tied together with sheet-bends to make up some two hundred feet of line which is carried to the poplar and tied. The other end is tied to a dead pole and floated back to Canoe. Everything is set.

Squashing myself into the bow I run the line through a loop and start hauling but before yards can be gained Canoe swings out into fast water, I find no way to control her angle in relation to the current and she starts to broach. The rope speeds back through my hands, I let go, Canoe shoots away and I leap into the cockpit for the paddle and we ferry out by the tail end of the ice shelf. There is nothing else for it but to pick our way up again, but the ice is breaking and I am forced to wade waist deep back up to the top. Maybe we could pick our way or go hand over hand along the earth bank? The rope still floats down from the poplar. I get back into the bows, axe at the ready. Ten yards further on a great pudding of earth falls off to bar our way, muddy water waves up. At least it didn't fall into Canoe. I lose the handhold and we get swept back once more with another race for the paddle and for the shore. For the third time I wade up alongside the ice.

At the top everything is unpacked and Canoe is pulled out on the shelf from where she is lifted and carried into the forest. The four hundred yard portage takes most of the afternoon by the time a trail has been surveyed and cut out – and I still haven't stopped for lunch. But this is as good a place as any, so we'll camp for the day.

Before the sun is properly up I am wading Canoe up a long boulder-studded rapid, the water is spread wide but it is a long hill all the same. At the top, a rushing creek cascades in on a right bend and the river deepens running into a straight reach. At first they are small enough and I can climb over them but now, towering ice-houses with ominous overhangs force me back to crawl in the water where it is certain death if I chance to be under one of these upper storeys at the moment it breaks off – a very real threat now. If the water is too deep – more than tip-toe to chest – I have to struggle out and line Canoe from up on top of some dirty ice summit. Down below she can all too easily become trapped. It is a nerve wracking stretch. Cold, deep in shadow, wet. The ice eventually gives out to shale banks that slip off into slick, polished rock and a treacherous footing, but we're still moving up. This has to get better soon – perhaps around the next shoulder? It doesn't. The river bed sinks away and any bank that was, cuts sheer upto a thousand feet of rock. A rapid curls across the river. I shall have to ferry.

To gain every foot before crossing I work Canoe up alongside the edge of the rapid but then there are no more footholds. I ease into Canoe and paddle forward on the side swell, we move up, there's an upstream eddy here! Right alongside the racing waves we power along in the opposite direction. Till now, and I am working for every foot at the top of the rapid by the biggest waves and our free ride has run out. I head Canoe over, no avoiding the rough stuff but not letting her come about. Waves roll into us, under us, up, down, to the time of the wash I steer. Paddle down in the troughs, power forward, water falling away, riding the wave as it carries us backward but angling Canoe so the current line aids the ferry. The tail of the rapid whips us into flat water, I fight and we soon scrape bottom and I'm out to wade up the lost ground, now on the right hand sunlit shore.

A small back eddy allows an accessible mooring so as there is a comfortable back-rest of a log I decide to dry off in the hot sun and make time for lunch. The cold, the wet and the labour of it all melts away into the soporific silence. I stretch into the earth and stones, totally relaxed and think of those crowding millions of people in cities striving for the progress of mankind.

Boreal chickadees flit down from the forest, the plop of a fish gives perspective to the distant hum of the rapid and I walk in the dappled light along the trail treading at times the track of a Grizzly. From the look of things I think we might make it round by this back channel, then we may have a decent free ride along a still lagoon – so long as there is an exit back to the main river! Relaxed, refreshed and re-fed I move on and with some serious work win a way up into

the lagoon. A steady paddle reveals a tiny, yard-wide stream spilling down and affording the only escape. I begin the hauling. It is a beautiful thrill to read the water exactly and to float Canoe up a small maze of currents and miniature riffles that can offer at best, a two or three inch depth. At the top there is a good mooring and since there is clean water filtering through the sand, camp is decided on. It must be all of four o'clock and we have made some good headway today.

Out on a higher sand bar I pitch the tent and collect driftwood for the fire. Ahead lies a long wide river, behind me Punk Mountain is already lost amongst a rugged world of blocks and peaks. Blue smoke puffs up from the grey wood while an evening sky fades slowly to blue and gold above the silence of my home. Thoughts are many, some are pursued and tarried with but in the end they have to be let loose to rise away in the thin straight plume of wood-smoke and my empty mind plays in the serenity all about and within.

An awkward ferry started this day and I think it has established a trend, for progress has been slow. Lunch hour, though in a serene setting, was spoilt by rain clouds coming over and now, across on the far right shore, noisy breakers roll over a jutting reef. In front of me on the left, the river sweeps around a mile long, semi-circular purple shale wall that has a distinctly wall-of-death feel under these lowering clouds and spitting drops of rain. The shale cuts down a 45 degree pitch while high up along its lip, a regular line of spruce corpses have been toppled by erosion and point spear-like ready to slide down to the river. Every so often a stream of stones rolls and bounces down to splash into the water. This is real landslide country and the footing is non-existent. I am forced into a steady walk – knee deep in the current – as the shale slides from under at every step, trying to catch me out, to slip me into the deeper, faster river. The rain isn't helping matters. As the steepness of the bank lessens it only becomes worse in that the shale is intruded by oozing earth and totally unstable islets where tangles of small tamarack conspire to defeat me, sucking my legs into their muddy hold. I weave Canoe along the deep, outer edge whipped by the river. Danger saps energy quicker than physical effort. At the very end four old spruce are undercut, leaning arch-wise over the river and snapping madly back and forth in the waves. There is room to go under but the water is far too deep and swift. There is nothing else to do but portage.

There is a minimum of shore – just slipped mud – up which everything has to be carried before I can haul Canoe out. A portage trail is reasonably straightforward, though one six inch tamarack has to be felled so that Canoe can be carried through a tangled copse on the far side of a deep defile. Rain continues. Back with the packs my eye falls on the triangular bulge of the Glenfiddich bottle – perhaps a wee dram? Just a nip, no more, but it works wonders! By the time everything is carried to the only place Canoe can be re-floated, it is time to make camp. In

the now pouring rain supper is cooked quickly, everything is washed and stowed and I am ready for bed. It is the only sensible place to be.

The dawn is close to a still birth, cold and motionless. Mist blurs the edges of the day and raindrops hang heavy and full, waiting for more rain or sun. My prospect is a short bend in the river. Four hundred yards away an expanse of cobbled beach spreads along the opposite shore and back into sporadic thickets of willow which in turn give way to the ever present forest of spruce. A cow moose browses the willow in her quiet, cow moose way. The river is too fast and wide to ferry but a little to my left, on this side, three canal-still fingers run along through thick vegetation. Beyond, the river rushes round the bend in an obviously deep current; and the bank above is too densely overgrown to allow a tracking passage. One of these canals will have to provide an answer.

Running into the first offers no problem but in paddling along the silent, secretive alleyway I soon find no way out. The second canal is an equal dead-end. Paddling into my last option is difficult for the main flow cuts across its entrance and though there is a slight eddy close to the bank, beavers have built an underwater obstacle course to effectively stop my paddle from digging deep enough, and I am obliged to fight the full force of water. Slack is then won and I drift quietly along under the narrow, leafy banks where beaver tracks punctuate the mud and a moose has left his cloven image deep along the water margin. But this back-alley peters out too in a leaf-lined shallow where a cobble isthmus cuts us off from the river, a mere forty yards away. It is a silly little portage but it remains a better choice than trying to round that outside bend. Before I can make a start on the carry, the rain decides to further dampen the mist. Rather than hauling everything out in the wet I leave Canoe and scout ahead.

In the end I progressed no further than the portage of yesterday, but now I am a good mile on after climbing a steep rapid over red rock and now find myself amongst a great expanse of sand dune. The day is very hot and the hard work is a pleasure even if at times I curse the channel for flattening out so wide, leaving Canoe with less than an inch to sit in. At other times the channel tumbles down short steep pitches and all I seek is a place to stop for lunch. Yet I am spoilt, everywhere is too beautiful and each succeeding length of this side passage attracts me further on, and up to a higher reach. However this waterfall will bring me back to the main road and if/when I get to the top, no matter what, I stop for lunch!

The channel narrows between a rocky shoulder that extends into small cliffs along the left and steep shingle banks on the right that holds back the main river above except in one place where the stone has been breached by a fast and plunging stream which fashions a deep, swirling pool across my path. I have been wading the right shore but to cross the pool I ferry Canoe to the left-hand rocks. To wind our way through and over the ledges and boulders is a slow business

but the pool is passed and then the rushing white waves jump down the hill to meet us – and I start to climb. It is a pure test of determination; physical strength no doubt plays some part but attitude decides our fate. (I love this mental challenge of rapids.) At the top of the waterfall a still deep eddy allows a comfortable berth for Canoe under big, old spruce trees and I dig out the bannock and Marmite. Far across the river, and a little upstream, small cliffs rise from the water. I cannot see the whole detail but I suspect problems. On this side my way looks barred by sheer rock. Best take a scout around.

I climb into the sunny, short-treed forest where caribou moss yields to every step and a few fluffy white clouds diminish into the broiling blue sky above. It is easier walking along the ridges but every once in a while I detour right to check where the river is and each time a broken precipice edge warns me away. After a seemingly long time I come out on a high spur that drops suddenly away to the river a good hundred and fifty feet down which now rides down a wide riffle to surge up against the base of the cliff I'm standing on. Sheered to the right through a narrowing gap it is confronted by the red rock cliffs I saw earlier. Consequently it is turned again in a quite abrupt manoeuvre. But whilst there are some nice waves the most impressive feature is the strong upstream current that rides under this opposite red wall. Obviously I cannot continue along this left side so that riptide may just save my day.

To ferry a loaded canoe across a wide, fast river requires work, but with a little knowledge of how water behaves and being able to read it, it is possible to make the river do some of that work for you. There is calm, deep black water running under these old spruce so I can paddle upriver for a few yards; the width is two hundred yards to a gravel bar that is formed to the same gradient as the hill of water. At its tail a wide, eddying backwater offers the only place to land Canoe safely. At the trailing end of the gravel, three boulders protrude and each of these in turn will act as marker buoys. It is a crucial crossing; a bad rapid is eight hundred yards below.

Canoe's snout moves up alongside the grey cliff and I ease her gently out to point a few degrees off the attacking angle of the current. Paddle digs in deep, keeping us head into the waves. We're moving backwards but a lot more slowly than the river would have it. Into the centre stream, energy is ebbing, we're racing now. Keep calm, get excited and you'll blow it. Keep that angle right and the water will work for you. We are across the roughest section, the gravel bar is streaming by, one boulder, get that paddle moving. My whole body reaches forward, pulling on a load of water. Get in there. Second boulder. The current is swifter than I thought. The eddy is coming into reach, flat and still. Third boulder. Time to get in. My mind clutches at it. Forested bank is coming up from behind, we're going to miss it. We can't. Work you idiot. Canoe is sniffing at the very edge of the eddy, paddle races, near nine hundred pounds hangs on the current line, only that working paddle is keeping it there. The river has all year, I, perhaps

another minute. I don't know where the strength is found, it isn't really mine, but we get in. That was too close.

In the soft sand I track Canoe back to the spur of gravel and begin wading up to go and see what's happening under those red cliffs. At the top of the long boulder-studded reach I lug Canoe into a stony berth below a sandy patch overshadowed by three enormous spruce, these and clusters of alder can shelter camp. Let's take a look at this water. It doesn't look too happy.

I am certainly upon an island for at this upper point I see how the river rides fast down alongside the little cliffs and how this backchannel, that forms the island, cuts off with no preamble at a perfect right angle to the river. On the far side of this back channel the cliffs begin and there is a hint of an eddy where I could land Canoe. But how to cross? It looks impossible. I need something to eat. Better consider this on a full stomach. As supper cooks I see a perfect boulder nearby and I move it into position – I need my little luxuries – it is an exact replica of an old tombstone and offers the most comfortable backrest. It is so good. This has to be Tombstone Island, Rest in Peace indeed. Sitting against the solid, smooth rock I eat my supper in the early evening sunlight, rest and think, then finally drag myself away to have another look at this water puzzle.

The river still comes fast and smooth straight from the 12 o'clock to the 6 o'clock and at the 3 o'clock the back channel still cuts off in a silky black silence. There's not a weakness, not a paddle-hold to be seen. The force of these two currents could never be fought against. Any portage would have to begin way back and it looks like a long walk up ahead too, though I may have to portage those cliffs anyway. The sun is sinking lower, maybe a lower light will show some fault line I can exploit. There just has to be a way. I hunch down on the very edge of the sluicing water – maybe - ? Find a stick. There are a few dead branches on the shore behind and I break off several foot lengths. I toss one out, it misses and is caught in the main flow. A second one hits the spot. There now, there is a weakness. There has to be if you think about it. With water racing down and water falling away at ninety degrees there is an invisible camber – a slackening of pressure at that parting. For a few seconds the stick sits idly upon that blind line proving the thought, then it is grabbed by the channel and scurries away. But it is enough, there is a line of least resistance across this mouth and all I and Canoe have to do is find it – feel it out. Let's go back to the tombstone for a last cup of coffee.

The morning is bright and sunny. Canoe is packed and we wade up to the dividing point of the island. The river has fallen a couple of inches during the night. I walk Canoe out as far as possible – now if we go wrong I want to get taken down the main river, not the channel, so err on the left – it will give us more room to manoeuvre. I ease into Canoe as she tips to my weight and the paddle holds the balance, then keeps our position up into the invisible divide. Not too

much now, steady up. I find the impasse between the currents; it's rather amazing; water fast left, falling away fast right, with a touch on the paddle we stay still. Edge up a bit, we're working quite blind, there's not a ripple to show the way over this knife edge. Feel it, stroke it, imagine it. Just a shade right – a touch left, gently. Like a silent holding of the breath and we are over. Did I imagine it? I would like to do it again!

I snug Canoe into the eddy and go ahead to look at the cliffs. Red-pinkish, twenty, thirty feet high, an easy walk over the top then half way along that riptide below washes back contrary to the natural river offering a tempting free ride. If I could only get Canoe into that. What if I were to try another rope trick? I can't wade her up and tracking her from the top is fraught with risk, but this current looks more favourable for pulling up from the bows.

The rope is tied to a boulder and loosed to float back round the sheer faces to Canoe. I get in to the bow and start pulling her up against the cliff. The water is fast, we begin to broach again. I hang on, hoping to pull her parallel with the rock. The gunwale is dipping down towards the oncoming water. Let go. We race back. The paddle is immediately to hand, furiously I work it to just catch our starting point off the cliff. There is slacker water and I hold on by friction. The situation gives me no time to consider the odds, I ease out on to a submerged ledge and start climbing along the cliff face, Canoe a foot behind. The ledge continues and I toe my way along to an overhang that pushes me down to double-up – nose to water – and another few yards are gained. Confronted by a sheer slab there is nothing to do but wedge myself in a crack and climb to the top and line Canoe round, the line taught as I hang my arm over the ledge to draw her along. Up and over a few more blocks, creeping face into the cliff, another ledge and then we are through. Canoe is parked, I gather up the tied line then put her to the eddy ride – she nearly takes off without me – but together we are carried past the remaining cliffs sweeping upriver with the powerful downstream running feet away. In a quiet side slough, deep, still and aquamarine, guarded over by a towering wall of crumbling rock, I stop for lunch. The air is growing cold.

On around flying saucers of ice that must weigh all of fifty tons, up into the great riffle that I looked down on from yesterday's vantage point. It's a long slow cold wade that reaches up to a slimming river and steeper gravel-cobble banks where small rushing streams pour cleanly out from under green canopies of alder. I want to make camp. The skies are growing darker and a wind is rising when I stop by a large creek with a sheltered sand beach for Canoe. There is no great selection of tent sites though.

I have just been rained on for two days. The creek rose two feet and only now is it possible to cross. I haven't felt too good – maybe tiredness, lack of food, cold – I don't know. I don't want to know. It is a straight and steep bank of sharp stones up from here to where the river bends

left. Up in that bend now I spend the remainder of the morning axing out a trail to crawl along the overgrown and tangled margin. By lunch I have Canoe on a quiet bar and we rest up in the newly appeared sun, and the first Horse flies bomb by. Is this the start of summer? If only I can get to the Twitya before the flood. Mount Eduni isn't far off.

It is a long, long day that brings me under her flanks of verdant green poplar, dark spruce and splashes of bare pink rock. Low cloud wreathes the mountain and camp is made below in the forest, amidst volumes of moss. A lazy fire cooks supper on the rocks. Across the river the valley-way is marked by a series of pyramidical mountains, one after an other with unusual regularity. Up a-ways will be the maze of islands that separate me from the run-up to the Twitya. It can only be days away. If I can just beat the flood.

It is difficult to get out of bed. For sheer wicked comfort this forest floor would be impossible to beat, but breakfast is rarely dawdled over and then it is back into the water – those first few minutes are the coldest and this morning we are on black, slick rock. The going is very slow, for safety. The rock gives way to alder growth, I am up to my waste weaving a way under the overhanging limbs. This is the start of the islands. I wonder which way? After an hour struggling up one way I find it blocked by a log jam. It is my first back-tracking. Across to another run-off; its deep channel ends in an abrupt gravel hill falling off from the main river, a thin sluice of water seeps down. Can I drag Canoe up? I wedge her bows into the gravel, dig out the camp shovel from beneath the tarp and start scraping and shovelling a pathway up the bar. An hour on and there is a respectable few inches flowing over a three foot wide trail which is all of thirty feet long. Sometimes I have to get behind and push but Canoe scrapes through. She really is a tough cookie.

On the other side of lunch I have a problem. We are at the head of another island, water divides evenly and this time there really is no possible weakness. On the far right dense bush cloaks the bank and a portage there would require some hefty trail cutting. If only I could ferry across here I might just track up to the main flow. What stops me from doing so is the sheer speed of the water coupled to the fact that only a steep earth bank waits on the other side. But…? Let's go back down and ferry right on that still bend. In quiet water I tie up amongst a crowding of fallen poplar and climb out with the big axe. So just down a little and opposite the head of the island where I was standing, a couple of tall spruce trees grow up from the bank; I am thinking that were one felled to overhang the river, I could take Canoe back to the island, track up to its head again and then ferry right and grab the tree as we pass under. The tree will give me an anchor point and from there I will be able to tackle the few yards back to the main river. The manoeuvre will get us by five hundred yards of impossible tangle.

The first tree splits nicely and hangs perfectly over the channel till the water grabs its topmost branches and sweeps it back into shore, and I have to cut it free. The second tree goes down better and stays. Canoe is ferried back left and we track up to the head of the island above the tree 'bridge'. Let's go then! As Canoe rides backwards in the swell I ferry to midstream, the tree is coming up, paddle stowed, I duck and reach up grabbing the scratching branches and trunk. Feet now position Canoe as I stand up to work hand over hand into the bank, scrambling out with track-line in hand. Some trees remain to struggle around but it's not so bad as lower down and we've saved ourselves considerable time and work.

Beyond the point I bear right on to the main river where a rapid comes down alongside an overhanging cut-bank, a ferry to the far left is necessary but I need more yardage upstream if I am to gain the only berth across the way. But my luck holds, I can wade no further but kneeling into Canoe the paddle discovers an upstream eddy and we career forward under the grey overhang then ferry over at the top of the rapid with yards of water to spare.

There is a long reach now along cobble banks that lead up to a broad steep riffle. Riffle or rapid? Riffles are shallower affairs where the river runs down a gradient of cobbles. I'll often call a rapid a riffle, for at what precise depth of water or height of wave one should graduate to rapid I have no idea and understatement must be the better part of error. However, this is no text book, what I was going to say is that one should stand at the bottom of these things to read them. From onshore they can appear an altogether frightful sight – quite off-putting. What you have to remember, and perhaps foolishly convince yourself of, is that you are not battling the whole mass of it but just one small alley of water and it is from here, at the bottom of the riffle you decide up which alleyway you're going to venture. Close to shore, where the current is always less, you will be hauling Canoe over boulders, too far out and the river will knock you off your feet, but somewhere in the middle there is a swathe of boiling water that you can use. It may be straight up or twisting about like nobody's business and sometimes it may not be read till you're on top of it, but the tell-tale boulders invariably show you a way and as you climb the river it is surprising and eminently satisfying to work out some little trick or other to aid the ascent. It occurs to me here that rapid climbing in league with a loaded canoe could become an ingenious spectator sport.

Boulders are easily hidden by the mass of water, I step round one, bracing myself behind to be able to draw Canoe up. There's seventeen feet to draw so I have to wade on. If I can't get a firm footing the weight of Canoe and force of water can easily sweep me back. The line of the hull must always offer least resistance, it must always point into the flow; even a little off can churn the water to overflowing the gunwale. It is unusual to get up one of these stronger riffles without at least one break, rest is called for. I stand, back to the waves and take a breather. I am finding that on particularly tough patches, if the depth of water allows, it is easier to walk

backwards, tracking across the angle of the current and allowing Canoe to float freely back. The legs create far less turbulence this way and one's sense of balance is improved.

At the top of the riffle it is worth making camp for the boulder beach spreads back to the forest and a deep blue pool of snow melt offers clean water. The sun is hot and the afternoon deserves to be a lazy one. On the far side of the river a rich, chestnut-coated bull caribou disports himself around the willow clumps – thrashing them with his antlers and prancing about – definitely a case of spring fever. I dry off on the boulders for an hour then busy myself with pitching camp and fetching wood and water till everything is ready for the evening meal. These river evenings are I suppose the best times of the day. River noises ebb and flow on the air but an overall sense of silence is accentuated by the low sunlight filtering through the grey-blue curls of wood-smoke. The cast-iron milk-pan has been emptied of my pemmican-oat stew and I sit with a slab of fruit bannock thickly coated in honey, a mug of coffee cooling beside me. I watch the fire fall slowly toward its ashen footprint; I watch the river and the sky and the forested ribs of Mount Eduni; I listen to this silence, beginning to sense its subtle changes, everything is still yet all is in motion; the loud slap of a beaver's tail disturbs the idle surface of a back pond; sleep folds me into the midnight dusk.

Half a dozen sweepers have to be axed away before I can make headway this morning, but once done there is some good going with the track-line. A mile on I am forced to crawl under a whole mess of overhanging spruce and old alder where deep still water is waiting for me to put a foot wrong, but by using Canoe as a pontoon I can often achieve strange contortions and together we win through. The Keele bends round to the left, I have a feeling the Twitya isn't far. I am faced with a short, sharp vertical cut-bank, overgrown above and sweepers below, an ominous combination. I'm damned if I'm going to portage. It is muddy, the river comes above my waist, I support myself on submerged logs and Canoe. Sometimes I can work Canoe under an overhanging tree – all I need is eighteen inches – but mostly I am made to walk out on top of the trunk till my weight forces it underwater and Canoe can be slid over the top – and on to the next one. It is a long slow business. Past these trees we move over a submerged boulder field and I lean heavily on Canoe at every step. Deep potholes wait to break a leg. The rive becomes much wider, the far side is quite irrelevant. To avoid a rapid I climb into a narrow back-channel – I must get out of this back-channel habit – they always end up in severe shelving at the top and a back-breaking pull. This one is no exception. Sweat is running off me by the time I reach level water. Let's stop for the day. And I do believe that has to be the Twitya coming in over there. I cannot see any river but all the land conspires to support the idea. And the flood still has not started. We'll need to make a reconnaissance from the cliffs up ahead to find out if it is the river and how best to cross this maze of channels.

From high up on a wide sweep of cut-bank amidst tall, wind-twisted spruce I judge where the Twitya River comes into the Keele behind islands of bright green poplar. Long, low-lying gravel bars channel the river. My ferrying abilities are going to be tested to the limit here. Five fast streams to cross that must span over half a mile of water. Back at camp a cow moose is browsing a willow behind the tent and I wait for her to realise she has company. Her awareness comes in stages. It is comical to watch it slowly take effect. She stops eating, then her ears go back and her head turns so that she can see what she has sensed, she begins to walk away, her walk increases to a trot till she thinks better of that and steps up into a canter to disappear into the woods. Supper is shared with an annoying party of gate-crashing mosquitoes.

To cross the first of the channels I need to retreat down a small rapid. Strange to be going down, instead of up. But I am out of practice. The shingle bar slews the water round in a right bend, I am riding close in to catch the small eddy at the bar's tail, too close, misjudge and Canoe slams her bows into shore, swings round and by luck I back-ferry into the eddy. Had it been done on purpose it would have been a neat trick, as it is I am thoroughly ashamed of myself. The following four channels however are completed with calm, hard work and when finally over into the last little backwater we track up to a picturesque sand beach and park. I go on to scout the Twitya mouth.

I am now on the baseline of a large spruce and poplar island, the bulk of the river comes down five hundred yards ahead so I walk along letting clothes dry on me in the sun, boots squelching water out on to the rocks. Martin Hartwell had told me back in the winter that he had seen the mouth of the Twitya from the air and he judged the waves to be four to six feet; he reckoned I'd have my work cut out to get up. Now from ground level I can confirm his estimate and his belief. My first reaction is that this is it, I can go no further. Indeed had I been flown into the elbow of the Keele (the river turns abruptly to the south here and the bend is known by that name) to track up the Twitya, I simply would not. But with a little experience behind me and having learnt a few tricks I am beginning to think nothing is impossible. I am scared of it but it provokes me too. We had better take a slow, thoughtful walk up to the point of the island.

From the junction with the Keele to the top of the island water boils down; the noise of it blankets everything else. At the mouth, a small boulder bar splits the full force of the river and guides a lesser channel into a slower curve – the far course just drops from view and is invisible from here – only flung spray shows its descending pathway. It would be a horrible rapid to travel down. There is no way a body could haul a canoe against that water but right in close to shore, the river pours and tumbles over two and three foot boulders – we might squeeze and wind our way up. At the top, the island splits the river into this left main channel and a lesser back-channel that rushes under numerous log-jams. Even if I could get up to here, how do I cross to the other side of this back-channel? The water is powerful and swift and a hundred

yards below an ugly little rapid is full of jutting rocks. The far side is lined with a log-jam and behind an upright ‘telegraph pole’ of a dead tree a small eddy suggests itself. It wouldn’t be easy to get in there. The river splits exactly upon the point of stones, giving no quarter in either direction. Ferrying over to the left shore is out of the question for it only goes on to form a wall of shallow cliffs; it’s this right crossing or nothing. Well I don’t intend to hurry, we’ve got here before the flood and I can sit on this for a couple of days. I need the rest too.

The mosquitoes are beginning to make their presence felt and coupled to the difficulties that lie ahead all is not conducive to a holiday atmosphere. But that I have in fact got to the Keele Elbow before flooding is no small achievement and I am more than pleased that I am actually progressing further and further into this wild land under my own steam. I think now that if, at the mouth of the Keele I had had a little tracking experience behind me, things might have taken a different turn.

It is the 4th June, the river shows distinct signs of rising. The Twitya is frothing at the mouth – huge muddy bubbles and dirty waves – it is even uglier than yesterday. I spend the day in deliberation. Should I take the risk? If I don’t, what? Questions infuriate me all day. I know it is just the way of fears showing themselves. Thank heaven nobody else is here. I can nervously procrastinate to my hearts content. But the only real pleasure in cowardice is overcoming it. The day drags on; I try and find rest; the river rises; if the weather is good, we’ll try tomorrow. Maybe it will rain? Flood water threatens the island; it is too noisy to sleep here anyway; we’ll have to move soon.

The weather is good; camp is packed. Mosquitoes dance around my head. I try and shut out the grinding, pounding roar of water; try and avert my gaze. For a natural wonder this flood has a certain intimidating obscenity about it. All I have to do is concentrate on the few square yards ahead. Canoe nudges the back of my legs and I keep her in close. Boulders begin to trap her and I haul her over. We are up the first gentler channel into the full-blooded run now. All one’s senses are drawn into the brown maelstrom yards away. C’mon girl, let’s climb this hill. Water cascades over the boulder field, at times it is three feet deep, at others, three inches. The route has to be planned – it would be all too easy to become firmly stuck – trapped. I pull Canoe up on to the next step, a waterfall plunges down at us, veer right – everything has to be judged in seventeen foot angles of attack – I wedge Canoe’s snout between opposing forces of water, her stern is firmly held by boulders, I’ll have to lift her up from behind and push her up. It does seem a bit silly – this lifting an eight hundred pound canoe – but it is an altogether bracing place, full of madness and the pulsing sound deadens the senses. Canoe lurches forward – stuck again, half in, half out. She needs my weight on her bows. There is a two foot deep hole where I have to stand so I can only pull up from shoulder height. This is genuinely the one time in my life I wish I were 6’7” and 240lbs not 5’7” and 140lbs. Nature must have compensated in other

departments though because the bloody Brit' isn't out of the game yet. A controlled anger might scatter the boulders then for a new battle plan takes the remaining hill and the point of land where the river divides. I sit and breathe lungfuls of air – the problem isn't half solved yet.

The stones of the point reach out into mid-river where water divides left and right with equal force, there is no middle ground to ride. Yet I need every inch if I am to ferry successfully to the right. I wade out, pulling Canoe by the snout. Thigh deep, I try to pull her up to gently ride about my waist. Not too far or she'll broach above me and knock me down, not far enough and I can't jump into the cockpit. Maybe I should be a shade right of here? I let her back and bring her up again. She begins to broach somehow behind me, water already quietly riding over the gunwale. Instantly I slip her back to the point, battling her increasing weight headed upstream. On the point I bale out.

Obviously this isn't going to work. Look, just stop your pussying around and cross the bloody thing. I shove Canoe out and let fly with the paddle. Current rushes us back for a moment – I hold my own – the angle is bad – the roar of the rapid below gets to me – move it. By rights I shouldn't have, but we slip by that gaunt dead 'telegraph pole' into the eddy – we're surrounded by log-jam. Time for a portage. Early afternoon sees us through six hundred yards of shady forest and out on this bank twenty feet above the river. Camp is set and Canoe stays up on dry land till I can find out what's up ahead. The river is still rising. Storm clouds are gathering.

I am too drained to worry over the river beyond. Supper is cooked amidst war parties of mosquitoes and I am just in time to retreat into the tent before a major downpour lets loose. As I am on a literary diet as well as a food ration, I settle into Flora Thompson's 'Lark Rise to Candleford' for a second journey through its peaceful pages. It is an ideal antidote to the tensions that have been building.

The mosquitoes are still tap-dancing on the door but the rain has stopped and the river is up, the sun is too and I have slept late. Breakfast is eaten behind the mosquito netting. Time to see what the rest of this Twitya is about… From here the river sweeps below a log-jam perched along the bank years ago by some exceptional flood and then it curves left around a dry flat of settled boulders and gravel where the odd willow shrub has taken root. This all works around as an expanded 'S' up to a higher forested bank where the river becomes narrower and a rapid churns down the straight, caught between the left hand cliff wall and the eroding earth bank on the right. A portage from this point will be necessary but once in the forest I wonder how? Cutting a trail will take forever. Dried-up log-jams scatter about with inter-connecting logs blocking each turn. It takes me a good hour to climb through a furlong of the stuff and reach the other side. Acres of boulders spread fawn and gold in the sun. Dark purple cliffs border the left of the river – now running more smoothly – while the boulder field backs up into an apex of a triangle

to disappear into a rich, red ochre rocky gulch over on my far right. Across this field of view a blue torrent cascades and weaves till it reaches a 'T' junction with the river. In a great downhill tumble it gushes out as if from a fire hose, it's crystal blue and silver stopping the surging mud of the Twitya in its tracks. This one really does look impossible. I can never cross this. I fill the canteen with the first clean drinking water I've had in four days and sit down and think. They call this Trout Creek so maybe I should come up here for the fishing and wait for the water to drop. There's nothing else I can do.

For the next four days I do just this and fret between 'Top of the hill' camp and Trout Creek. The creek may be dropping marginally but the Twitya is becoming even more aggressive and the hill down to the Keele has almost levelled off, for both rivers are now in full spate. I could never have survived the Keele in flood. As my walks up to Trout have progressed I have inevitably become familiar with the intervening forest and have found easier passageways – warranting the use of an axe and so now a portage trail has been cut out – should I need it. However I see little point in moving up unless the creek drops.

I would be frustrated by this delay but I know too well that the land or time will bring their own solutions. True freedom also means freedom from the everyday constraints of clock-watching. I have no train to catch – only a winter to prepare for and at Trout Creek today I have an idea. From where it pours out from its canyon there are two channels, the main one and a much lesser one, but a wall of stone has been built up across the entrance of the lesser so that one can stand at the bottom of the trench and see the silver droplets of spray fly by at head height. If I were to breach that wall I could perhaps divert a large proportion of the water down the right channel having previously brought Canoe up to this point and then, with half the volume of water behind us, we might succeed in crossing the remainder that comes down the central channel. I am sure it is worth a try.

Packing Canoe isn't easy down on the wave-washed shore. In a draining pool I see a struggling two inch Dolly Varden as he valiantly tries to cross the wet sand back to the turbulent river. I consider his effort – is it pure instinct? I prefer to attribute courage to him and easing him on to my palm, study his beauty for a moment then float him away from his prison to the dangers of his Twitya home. Canoe is finally packed. The 'S' bend has been straightened out, the willow flat is awash. To get out from the beach we have to turn the corner out into the fury of the local rapid caused by several bald-headed boulders that slyly expose themselves on every sixth or seventh wave. Past them we work across the flat intact then have a long reach of boulders leading up into the straight where the forest starts by the portage pull-out. In the beating, roaring turbulence an extreme haloed and bowler-hatted patience is called for. It is difficult to keep a physical and mental balance but panic stays put in the wings.

On one pitch I have just forced up open water to the lee behind a clump of alder but once here I find the waves on either side are too strong for both Canoe and I to power through. The only way is straight through the alder. I get by myself but Canoe has a broader beam and sticks firmly. I would be in danger of losing the axe if I were to cut the arms holding her so I work carefully back to her stern. If I push her too far she'll broach and everything will be lost. Back at her snout I gradually work her loose and we force up once more in the waist-deep rampage. The sun is high, it has to have taken two hours to cover that half mile.

With the portage complete we have a short track along the steep cobble banks leading to the mouth of Trout, then in a small, quiet inlet Canoe is tethered and camp is made up above on a pocket handkerchief plot of sand set amongst the boulders. At last I'll have clean water in abundance and in the reflected heat of this boulder field, mosquitoes will be reluctant to call. High mountains encircle this Twitya-Keele confluence: the Tigonankweine, Eduni, TenStone and Sayunei Ranges all lend a rugged calibre to the lowly river valleys. My view westwards leads me on to some quite lonely looking places but the very prospect of those gun-metal and rusted mountains are food to me. Great bowls of cumulus breed up from the southern ranges whilst a matt-black cloud sits across the western sky; north and east remain blue. Supper is cooked up in the sunshine but it is raining down on the Keele. The blue and purple mountains shine silver off their wetted flanks and a triple rainbow arcs across from the green of Mount Eduni to be lost amongst the nameless, steel-capped peaks of the Tigonankweine. An orange-yellow light filters over the tops of the trees and the western cloud advances steadily, covering the earth in its cold shadow.

Sleep never quite comes. Rain drums on the tent but from somewhere in the semi-subconscious I am dragged out into the early morning. A cannonading is going on, guns are being fired or somehow Canoe is being wrecked. It is still raining, we shall be flooded. From the tent I look about outside, the firing is muffled, yet defined. Little rivulets of flood water are encircling camp, yesterday's sparkling creek is an unbelievable sepia monster. I stare in wonder at what is happening. The deep mouth of the creek is choked full of water and I realise the sound of cannon fire can only be boulders being shot down the creek bed and rolled out of the mouth. The creek itself roars forward to cut the Twitya off cleanly with the force of its charge across to the opposite cliffs. The whole river is held back and it is hard to comprehend that the already swollen and dark swirling Twitya is now damned by the sepia torrent of little Trout. There is a good six foot drop from the water held back on the upside of the creek mouth to the downside, and Canoe rides feet higher than last night, but camp is in imminent danger of being flooded. First priority is to find a higher patch of protected sand for the tent, for we are well and truly trapped here and the old channel I was proposing to flood is now brimful, so we couldn't move back if we wanted to. I build a temporary dam of stones and sand to veer a new stream away from the tent. I don't want to move unless it becomes essential. After a worrying dawn the rain

stops and immediately the threatening streams recede. The creek remains incredible. At rock level, lens flicked in the spray, I lie down at the very edge of its power and shoot frame after frame of its muddy, light-catching contortions. This is wonderful!

The day sheds the wetness of night and slowly begins to steam. The mountains radiate a multitude of colours and the cloud-ridden dawn yields to a cloud-less blue. There is nothing I can do – floods of water boil on all sides of my tri-corn island. I can only smile at my timing. For two days I wait for the water to drop, on the third I go to work on breaching the wall – for it still stands. Boulders and stones are lifted and carried and thrown, feet scrape away at the gravel and soon there is a good deal more water escaping over a twenty foot long section and I scrape down again in the freezing flow. By lunchtime my hands and arms are frozen and I realise that in the overall perspective, my efforts are puny. Down at the creek mouth however, the continuing cannonade of boulders being spat out like so many broken teeth, has been building up a triangular divide that splits the force of the water to create a still deep eddy on its downstream edge. Maybe these boulders will build up so many divides that I'll be able to step across from one to the other!

Fishing in the eddy this afternoon the lure no sooner touches the water than a jolt snaps the line taught and a monstrous trout jumps out. I land him within a minute and he is killed quickly with a stone. There is no 'sport' involved, wilderness rarely allows for such excess.

Trapped on my triangle of boulders life becomes centred on escape. The creek is lower but remains higher than originally and what I need is for the Twitya to rise more and so level off into the mouth of Trout, for it is the downward rush of water, its velocity, that creates an impossible crossing. The sun glares down on the rock and there is no respite from its soaking heat. More boulders are moved but fingers grow sore and the work is dangerously cold. When the twenty foot section is demolished and I find the bed of the creek still shelving down to its own deep, I realise my effort is futile. Considerably more water is flowing across but it really is not enough. Some other way has to be found.

Days pass on the desert island. The creek has dropped slightly so maybe I should try fording Canoe across. Camp is packed up. Along the sinking shelf of gravel we work our way to the mouth. I let Canoe swing out into the current and wade the first small channel to ease her around the tail of the dividing bar up into the mouth. I step out, Canoe tucked behind me. It is very close – too close. I am nearly knocked off my feet. I retreat and camp is replaced.

I notice a diagonal line along the mid-section of the creek, it strikes me as a potential weakness, a line that might be blocked by boulders to provide a bridge of sorts. I am back to wading the freezing flow and arms submerge to pull, roll out and lift the rocks from their beds, building

them into a temporary blockade. The first shallow half goes along at a good clip and by the end of the first day I can walk to mid-creek with only wet feet. Fingertips are polished smooth though and dots of red lie under the skin. The second day I cross the creek for the first time with the necessary aid of a staff. From the far side I build a buttress of boulders out from shore. Lunchtime sees a six foot deep wall rising to water level and protruding six feet into the current. Fingertips are painful and bleeding freely. By the third day I am wasting my time. Two foot diameter boulders are about the biggest I can manage to roll into the remaining gap, I expend every ounce to get them there, but all the creek does is gobble them away with an insatiable appetite as if they were pebbles. I can't go on anyway, my fingers are too badly worn by the ice-cold and the abrasive rock. I sit down on a big boulder and overlook the streams of water coursing about the mouth of the creek. For a long time I think of nothing in particular, then with a head empty of puzzles I see what the problem is and I also see that I should have been moving boulders down here – yes, I really was 'up-the-creek' for it is still the velocity of water down the hill which is the killer. Were I to block that exit and get the water flowing over a drop into the river, the velocity would be dispersed or cancelled. I'll try tomorrow.

Supper is eaten watching a Red-throated loon sedately fish the blue eddy below. It is pemmican stew and dumplings tonight but though it is all soft fare, a large back tooth filling falls out. Later, in the tent, I fiddle with a tiny tube of 'Cavitt' that my good dentist gave me for such emergencies. With a pair of sharpened matchsticks I probe and push the cement into its cave. Rather to my surprise the Cavitt stays put and I am in fact rather proud of my dental delving.

Back in the big flood an enormous old spruce was washed out of the gulch and it now straddles the shore above the creek mouth. I ease its root stump into the water then roll its body over till it floats free. (I am essentially a gambler.) The lighter end begins to sweep across and the five foot root-stock is grabbed by the centre current, boulders then suspend it and it bridges the top of the main channel. Without Canoe and with the aid of the log, I can now cross the creek with relative ease – always mindful not to be on its downstream face. So with some to-ing and fro-ing the old tree is slowly worked into place to span the very mouth of the channel. Boulders are weighted at either side and more are rolled to sit under and up against the log. By bracing my body against its upstream length, crossing is quite safe in the reservoir formed. The creek now falls quietly over the round top of the timber to disperse its energy in a host of oxygen bubbles below. Three weeks after arriving on the Twitya and now past the summer solstice, we make our escape into the land of beyond.

From Trout Creek I have come up some muddy banks under islands of alder and willow where moose tracks are strewn and where sunny, rocky inlets open to reveal wild roses in a passion of delicate pink and white fragrance. And now I am beneath the great plateau of rock that has for the last few weeks appeared to guard the Twitya route. At the top of a broad riffle I feel the first

spots of rain. The plateau falls away down a sheer cliff side to river level and obliges me to ferry left to where only mud banks lie overhung by the inevitable green canopy of alder. Two bull caribou stare at Canoe's approach as we scythe across the waves. It is cold as I step out, legs sink into the ooze. A back-channel winds behind the caribou and as I head up into it they turn and trot, leaving deep cleft tracks for the rain to fill. And the rain wastes no time. It is coming down in buckets. I would set camp were there anywhere to do so. The mud washes from my boots and gaiters as I climb but one can only get so wet, so it ceases to matter – but for the cold. Along the grass-lined stream, gravel bedded, I tie Canoe. Set back from a reed meadow a hedgerow of alder gives on to forest, there should be dry wood in there. In the steady downpour a match kindles up into broken spruce twigs, alder is heaped above and logs are brought in to wait their turn. I listen to the soft, steady incantation of the rain in the grasses, the spitting of its death in the red fire, its steady tattoo on my Barbour coat. It really isn't sensible to put the tent up in this. For two hours I turn and turn about before the fire. The caribou come back. Under the grey-blue clouds against the electric green willows, I take a number of photographs; it would be easier not to, but the best photographs often come from rain-sodden photographers. By suppertime the clouds have rolled on and the blue sky shows. Time to feed.

There is a bite of frost in the air first thing and the water feels deadly as I start to wade. Up-a-ways a log-jam dictates a niggling little portage across to another channel and then that one requires a difficult ferry over to its far right bank where there is no place to land in the fast water. Only an alder trunk can be held as I exit Canoe. It is a deep and tedious wade up to the river proper but before we get there the channel splits into rushing, shallow gullies and I am back to hauling Canoe over two inches of water – a bit of a drag.

The river winds down from the upper right to lower left where a not high rock wall protrudes into its path. Angles and forces produce little turbulence but instead the river curves back upon itself to complete the most perfect whirlpool I've ever seen. It spans the whole width of the river, right across to the cobble bar on the right. Downstream of this bar is an eddy lying at the mouth of a channel that cuts down a rugged little rapid from well above the whirlpool. I could work my way up there probably, but to ferry across I'll need to paddle up on to the edge of the whirlpool to gain requisite ground, for a fast rapid lies seventy yards downstream. Canoe rides up nicely in the slack water brimming over from the lip of the saucer. There is a definite camber on top and I think it may provide relatively neutral water for me to ferry over – I don't know because I have been denied the opportunity of playing in whirlpools till now – Canoe starts to hover, requiring less power to keep her in place and I have an excellent view over into the swirling bowl – this is stronger and deeper than I thought. Back-paddle! For moments it is a bit of a tussle and I haven't come off too well, the rapid is tugging us back but I suppose it is preferable to spending the rest of the day circling down and around Piccadilly Circus. It is hard work exiting the rapid.

Lunch is eaten below the right channel. A red rock canyon waits for us upriver. Camp is made above the top rapid back on a tiny beach amid densely grown alder and I go on to scout the canyon. Not a true canyon for the left enclosure is for the most part steep scree slope and though I might track it the scree gives way to rock overhang on a crucial bend which would prevent me from ferrying the fifty yards back to the right where there is a small beach above fast water.
Over all this however, perched on the very edge of the right cliff top is a shiny white commercial refrigerator – a small solar panel upon its back and a black cable running to the water a hundred feet below. It stands out in stark contrast to its surroundings and a landing site for helicopters has been cut from the forest. I presume it is a water measuring device. Innocuous enough on the face of it but why go to so much expense to collate such information? The fact is even way up here, rivers are far from 'safe'. Some Canadians want to turn northern rivers south, and Americans, when they have wasted and poisoned their own water, have the financial and political power to muscle in on this northern 'surplus'. The information gathered in this automatic device, and similar ones elsewhere, will assist in the long term planning of the dams necessary for such continental shifts. Some of the dams are already in place, others have been postponed, but the blueprint is ready.

I do not walk any further but retreat thoughtfully to camp. It is raining. Under the partial shelter of the surrounding spruce I cook up the usual fare and mosquitoes join in. The rain continues for the next two days. The river rises. I am forced to move the tent. Then under still dubious skies I set to and cut out a portage trail as far as the 'refrigerator'. A hot sun shines by the time work is complete for the day.

Over such a distance as this – maybe a mile and a half – cutting a portage trail is necessarily a slow business. There may be quite long tracks that require no cutting of trees but blazes have to show the way and one is always looking for the straightest and easiest course between the 'pull-out' and 'put-in' points. Gradually a trail becomes so familiar in all its tiniest landmarks that by the time a portage is complete, blazes are really unnecessary, but of course without them one's initial points of reference would be absent. Axing trees is hard work therefore a trail avoids thick copses and one works around to the contour of the land. Carrying a pack anywhere is no problem but a portage trail is essentially one that is 'engineered' for carrying a canoe, so blazes have to be visible from under the upturned hull. As one is constantly travelling back and forth a line of sight keeps the trail on a sensible line of travel. In difficult areas one also has to remember for the return journey, for I am currently carrying some nine or ten loads. Two days are spent in cutting this trail. On the last day I move everything up to the half-way 'refrigerator' camp. It is high here and gives a grand view back over the lower sections of the river and the mountains beyond. Under a blue sky the land is tinder dry already and a droning of insects

amongst the nodding flowers creates contentment. A cow moose wanders into the clearing and out again. I begin to muse over that shiny white box – it really does deserve some graffiti but a search for the Faber-Castell felt-tip proves fruitless. I shall not have to suppress my inbred respect for property.

It is a dewy start this morning but within hours the sun scorches down as pack after pack is carried through forest, muskeg, around hidden rocky dells, dappled birch woods and down a final slab-sided cliff to the waiting beach below. Canoe comes last of all, not the heaviest load at eighty pounds but often the most awkward with all her weight sitting on my neck and balanced by upraised arms. Early afternoon puts the canyon behind and as a bannock is needed I'll camp here and do my baking for the next few days.

The weather remains good, I have just tracked up on the right and now ferried to the left shore as the deep pulse of a helicopter invades the country. At one and the same time it is a noise both welcome and threatening, a sound to quicken the heart beat, a noise to unsettle any ear. From around the mountain ahead it throbs across the river, I look up, someone waves and I return a slow 'OK' acknowledgement . The chopper vanishes into the canyon leaving only the trail of sound vibration echoing back from the rock faces. Soon that too disappears – I wonder if they were landing at the 'refrigerator'? I should have stayed, they might have completed my portage for me. Later I hear the engines whine, though I do not see them. They must have set down in the canyon. What a pity I did not write that graffiti: 'Lady helicopter pilot seeks gentleman helicopter pilot. Apply within'.

Up into a river-wide rapid I keep Canoe along the left flank. At the top vertical rock forces me to ferry right but by now I have learnt enough to know there may be weakness under the cliff, or better still, a back eddy. From the shelving bed I kneel into Canoe, holding her against the wall, there is no eddy but by keeping the gunwale to the rock and with the occasional hand-hold we advance a good furlong before the current forces us to cross over. A short gravel bench provides a landing then it is out to wade under a laborious length of alder. On around the next bend I have serious fights with some fast and furious water that wells up over my chest and I only save myself and Canoe with the kind assistance of a convenient root-stock. We enter a calmer run of channels and I ferry left for we are now at the Canol Camp.

The Canol Road was pushed through by the United States Army during World War 2 to link Norman Wells oil to an existing pipeline in the Yukon. At that time it was one of the largest engineering feats ever tackled, yet the whole exercise was undertaken with no more than a few dozen words expressed on the topic by the Canadian Parliament. The impact on the land was obviously colossal and the oil flowed for less than two years before the project became redundant. There is a satisfying air of decay about the place now as nature takes back the raw

material that was wrested from her elsewhere. I wander about through the slowly rusting machinery, ironware and wooden huts; a pair of Flickers nest in the cavity wall of one of the bunkhouses; under a doorstep lies a 1943 issue of Life Magazine – an American GI stalks across the front cover – 'in pursuit of the Jap foe'; up the rickety steps I cross over the years and broken boards, faded pin-up pictures of Lassie and somebody's 'Home Sweet Home' hang limp and yellowed on the wall. The sad futility of war invades the camp and is made all the more poignant by the vastness of the surrounding landscape so utterly at peace with itself.

From above the river I trace the winding path of green poplar – new growth sprung up along this once muddy trench – all the way into the distant mountains. Far into the west I rest my eyes on the Sayunei's where a lone finger of rock beckons from on top of these dim blue, buttressed mountains. Over all a pale blue sky and the rolling sea of forest. The sense of total peace is a tangible presence on the air. Turning from this panorama I climb down through the forlorn monument to the might of Man, this camp which is perhaps the finest museum of war I have seen and rejoin Canoe, to wade on our way. By late afternoon on a beach where a young Grizzly has left his line of tracks, we pull up for the day. I am tired.

Rested and refreshed we again go on into the west. The sun climbs above the earth and I climb more log-jams and ferry more channels. There is a timelessness to existence. I am lost in a veritable maze of water and shingle. I have been trying to reach one far shore or another but the distant left remains full of impassable logs and the right is hidden and unobtainable. So I am at the head of a gravel bar central to the width of the river – maybe two or three furlongs on either side – and I could be stuck. But the more I look at the lapping, somewhat wave-tossed currents ahead, the more I am sure that this expanse contains a shallows – shallow enough to wade. Way off upriver there seems to be a hint of a submerged bar, nearer the left shore, if I could wade to that, a ferry to the bank would be possible, for it would put us past the log-jams.

I start wading out. This would look quite ludicrous from the air. Water surrounds me on all sides, it is becoming deeper and soon my life-jacket will be floating me off the bottom. Fortunately the current isn't too strong (though strong enough to preclude paddling up) but the river bed is large boulders and I am having to tip-toe from one invisible rock to another where failure to find the next one will mean floating back with Canoe towards the last rapid. By all convention the water should be getting deeper, but I persevere till I find encouragement in a very gradual lowering of the water level against my chest and I see that that really is a submerged bar ahead. I feel elated to have been proved correct. From the gravel I look back – there is not a sign or a clue as to my route. The sun catches at the waves, a breeze blows down the valley and we climb on into more bends and banks, past silent vermilion valleys, whose stories I shall never know, on toward the Anthills where a long, zigzag path of constant ferries wins my passage.

Rain clouds move in on gale winds; on a vast sand dune I tether Canoe in an eddy and retreat with packs to the meagre protection of ancient willows. Wind scours the land and rain cascades down. Tired and cold I am sick of battling the river and the weather is beyond me. Tomorrow's breakfast – the usual cold repast – compacted parboiled oats, dried fruit, peanuts and honey – suffices for supper. I roll up in my sleeping bag, try to block out the screaming wind and rattling sand from my head and go to a hungry sleep. By dawn the earth is silent. Bent-wise I walk slowly to Canoe and find her safe. I light a fire for coffee. It is Sunday; we will rest today. I need a hair-cut too. All energy seems to have been drained from me. Fortunately it is warm and apart from vital chores, I lie up and idle the whole day away.

We are at the top of one more island. The channel on my left comes from a great flat pool below a tall rock wall. There are two fast rapid channels on my right and further over a wide diagonal riffle tumbles down to more cliffs – only at its head is there clear ground for tracking and a way out. I wade Canoe across the head of this first rapid. The second is much deeper. The tail end of its right shore (a cobble bar) holds a small eddy in confluence with a corner of the big riffle, it will be imperative to catch it. Ferrying directly into a rapid allows for little momentum against the flow – it happens too quickly – we are over, but Canoe is only half out of the fast water. The paddle strains forward pulling eight hundred pounds. Get in there. We'll be smashed on the rock wall behind if we don't. It is an absolute stand-off, but there can be no let-up, not a second's respite. In and in and in – a man powered paddle wheel. Canoe stays locked. Frustration builds. I could cry. Pain seeps into shoulders and lungs. I refuse to be beaten. Damned if I am. The sweet relief of slack water is immense. I wade out and push Canoe's snout into the sand and sit awhile. Then by wading backwards we cross the width of the deep, steep riffle and on up past the silent pool.

We track along the right shore now and then more cliffs cross us back to the left. The forest comes down to the water's edge and there are three channels. This left one has carved the soil and toppled clumps of alder and smaller spruce, there isn't room to ferry anywhere. Close to the top, surging water leaps out from behind an islet of fallen bank and I work into its lee. There is no way around it but now I do stand a chance of ferrying left to the first gravel bar. Kneeling into Canoe I ply the paddle, keeping us steady, getting into position, her snout to cut that perfect angle against the onrushing white wave. Now. Power into play. We come out racing, slice perfectly across and are grounded on the bar in no time. And we track up to the top.

From here I see that it is only one channel, for the second dividing bar lies below us. There is a chance I can wade this. It is fast and steep but the type of wave gives me reason to think it might be shallow enough. As a precaution though I turn Canoe about to lead her from the stern. It is a fortunate move. We are half way over and I am being swept off my feet – I can barely

hold my position. How the devil can I jump into Canoe though? To pull oneself out of three feet of racing water is one thing, to do so and fly over the gunwales of a canoe is another. Don't ask me to explain. I'm straddling Canoe and I'm already biting the rapid with the paddle. Shore is reached yards before the cliff face. And so we back-track up to the top, now on the right flank.

This is a fascinating way to travel! Canoeing is generally accepted as a slow and intimate procedure, but to canoe upstream is by far the closest way to associate with a river. Reading each small velocity counts and is transformed to pure pleasure – another mystery gauged and guessed correctly. And the sheer excitement – and dread – of some of these challenges, till a certain momentum is reached and a perhaps dangerous flow of achievement drives one on. Like today. Adrenalin still pumps but tiredness wants to take control; but there is no campsite. I think Hay Creek cannot be far off.

The river courses left behind a thickly wooded isle where broken cliffs create cool shadows in the afternoon sun. Canoe and I track up a steep rapid into the right hand channel. Golden clay banks break back to afford a rushing creek entrance and silent tombs of ice remain to drip and die. We could camp over there? No, let's go on. Hay Creek or bust now. It will be five miles today – a record clip. At the head of the island the river comes back together but on a little way Hay Creek streams out from the right to confront a shallow curve of cliff wall where passageway is yards wide, water spins upon itself in the converging current and one more whirlpool is formed. It is fortunate that it is so for energy is now absorbed in the ever-circling water and the downhill flow comes over the lip of the pool to spill away along the camber of a centre line – left and right evenly about the point of land where I stand. It looks like we're in for another balancing trick.

Canoe is waded out and up into the divide, right to the visible camber where I steady her and jump in. A few touches with the paddle regains our balance and we are sitting nicely corrected. Water pours away on either side and we paddle sedately uphill. In due time I pull out right and have a neat little ferry over to a sand-lined pool of deep turquoise water rippling beneath overhanging willows. Oh its good to have the day over.

This is a wild, straggly spot, forlorn with low cumulus clouds scudding overhead and the land speaks the poetry of John Clare. A pair of kestrels nest in the broken trunk of an old poplar and I watch them work the weed-ridden boulder field through which the grey-cold creek rushes and chases. Gaunt dead gibbets of spruce point accusingly into the sky that threatens rain and the wind scuttles across the beach and bends the pale willows above the tent. This is a lonely place in quiet possession of itself. I am an intruder, but not unwelcome. Wilderness is full of strange, land characters.

I stay another day at ‘Kestrel Camp’, catch trout for my food and watch the forces of water at play in the whirlpool. Crossing the creek when I leave will require that I track up the right cobble bank to make a sudden dash of a ferry over fifteen feet of boiling water; Canoe can then be backed down a tumbling side chute; the main entrance is too rough.

High winds follow my departure and in the grey of early dawn I have a long, deep wade up mud-thick banks – grass grown and alder arched. A fresh moose leg, meat clinging to it, endeavours to trip me up – I leave it for the trout. It is a long lonely day lost in the winding uphill trail, climbing ever upward to the land of the Divide. After cloud and rain the sun banishes the cold and on a wind-swept strip of sand that parallels the blue river, I make camp. Beyond, a tiny stream fills deep aquamarine holes under little cliffs where trout wait for me. With two taken for supper I take advantage of the mosquito free zone and wash myself in the cold water.

The flesh of the fish is broken into a handful of barley and oats along with a scattering of dried vegetable flakes and all are simmered in the cast-iron pan over the coals of dead willow. I sit back against the log and contemplate the scene, going over in my mind all the bends and riffles we’ve won through. Slowly I turn the pages of this day and of the days gone by to read the great plot of the mountains unravelling before me, scanning the land, animals and people playing upon it, their signs and purposes, and water, the essence of spirit holding them all together, flowing eternally about the earth as both servant and destroyer. I am alone and content in this vastness, accepting of the natural and inherent risk. Watching the river ripple by, being carried away by my thoughts. There is only the sound of sifting sand snaking along the beach, grains drift into the crevices of my clothing. Time I suppose to do the washing-up.

For some weeks now it has rained at lunch time and today is no exception. All morning I have been wading, keeping dry above the knee, and am determined to climb to the top of this reach before stopping, when yards short of a convenient gravel bar the river forces me to wade through waist-deep holes and then the rain starts a steady, relentless fall. Cold penetrates as I drag up on to the stones where only a green spruce tree lies. With excruciating patience flames are kindled into dead twigs beside the bark, branches are broken, twisted off and added. I don’t usually light a fire at lunch but soaked through now, I need one. I chew on the bannock. Rain patters over the shingle, lessening its volume, clouds remain. The fire eats through the trunk of the tree and I turn the top back upon the charred embers and a small pile of collected driftwood is added. Gradually warmth wraps my body at last yet it is time to go, to get wet again.

Along an overgrown indistinct margin I have come by some deep water and on the bend I hope for better but it is another poor prospect. I shall have to ferry right for a clearer view. Canoe is snubbed up on a sand bar and I scout on ahead. The river angles from the right into a slight

elbow where it splits on a rocky bar to form two steep rapids, but on this right shore the water is less restless, flowing deep by a flooded tangle of willows falling into the current. This all backs on to a wide expanse of grey clinker and gravel interspersed with sandy ridges. Only a large Grizzly's track lends an authenticity to the place and stops it sliding away entirely to the realm of derelict railway sidings. The water is far too deep to wade so I climb from one submerged bough to another, lifting Canoe to sit her weight on the branches so that she can slide over. I think it takes an hour to move one hundred yards.

A short distance on, the river bends down and around from the right and it must be Bluefish Creek that falls on the opposite shore. It isn't as big as I thought it would be. Its waters pour down over a steep gravel step into deeper waters of the eddying river and I track on to the inside of the bend before ferrying across into a midstream eddy where I can catch breath and size up for the next pitch. I need to catch another eddy above the creek. Canoe is angled properly but I am not thinking – I race her across the fast downstream flow to get her into the eddy and forget all about the strength of water flowing contrariwise. It is just as though a giant hand has grabbed us and the hull is slewed round and slammed into the shingle. We are lucky not to be overturned. That's what happens when you are too tired. I should have foreseen that. Canoe is tied in a lesser eddy and floats safe under a cobble bank. Immediately above, a small oasis of sand offers itself for the tent and a few yards away a run-off stream flows through sand banks below an alder copse where dry wood lies aplenty.

Bluefish Creek means we have now climbed over a thousand feet of water and there are fifteen hundred to go. Ahead should be a major divide of the Twitya where another river flows in from the south. Hopefully the reduced volume will make for easier travelling. From the looks of things we are really getting into the mountains now and may yet find some impossible-impassable canyons, but I have come too far to turn back. And with a moose I should be able to see a winter through where ever I am, and there is always the chance of travelling over the ice, depending on how freeze-up goes. In the lowering sun I look over my body and notice for the first time how thin I am . No wonder I sometimes feel so tired. The full milk-pan ration every night could always be eaten twice over and four small pieces of bannock see me through the other parts of the day; I must have lost a few pounds, though never felt so fit. My back aches now and then, but we used to walk the horses upriver to improve muscle tone, so a hundred miles of white water should be pretty good for me I suppose!

There is no view in the panoramic sense here, camp is enclosed on all sides, for the river twists out of sight both up and downstream and mountains slope all around me as if to enclose at the bottom of a pit. To the west I enjoy the extravagant faces and terraces of a brown-purple giant that reminds me of the intricate carving on Indian temples, indeed there could be all sorts of monkeys and maidens disporting in all their intricate glory upon those walls, but I really don't

think I have the strength to think about it. The sheer, silver-blue flanks of mountains behind catch the cloud-reflected light of a distant sun and I attune to the clatter of stones then see a lone, thin caribou walking in toward camp from upriver. I seriously consider his meat. The hunting season is two days away; killing him would be illegal. This is really stupid. Here I am, a full year alone in the mountains, no radio, no support flights and as independent as one can be, given the conditions of the day, and I am not allowed to kill this caribou. It is not the question of being caught, it is the tragedy that the world has come to this state: the antithesis of freedom. Perhaps this 'law' is necessary but only because the genuine validity of independence in wilderness has been destroyed in favour of the industrial expansion and leisure pursuits of the dependant urbanite! In days gone by an independent traveller would never have considered tracking in with a ton of gear, six hundred pounds would have been the limit and he would have lived, or died, off the land. Now I watch this tired looking caribou with his ribs showing, clop on over the cobbles into the forest and I ponder the effects of democracy at Bluefish Creek.

Overpowering lethargy keeps me here another day. I explore gently about, take a few landscape photographs, fish the truly blue waters of the creek without success and follow up recent Grizzly spoor leading into the distant and vast valley floor. After one more night's rest the body is ready to carry on. The southern river comes in a mile ahead and Canoe is tracked up a-ways before we can ferry across to work back to the Twitya. From here on the banks are non-existent and channels run in complete anarchy. Willows and alders conspire to push me into the river while snags and sweepers litter mud-bars everywhere, ferrying is fraught with danger. Branches of poplar logs lie upriver to spear any canoe not fast enough in crossing and as if I were not wet enough, a steady, drumming rain begins to fall. By lunchtime I am still in this maze and there's no end in sight. We better get a fire going and warm up somewhere, and soon. Canoe is pulled on to a rare flat where drift-piles litter the cobbles and from the centre of old root-stumps I scratch away dry twigs, dusty bark and dead grass. Little old spruce twigs are carefully collected to roof over and a match is struck. Yellow flame flows across and sputters in the cream stalks of grass, bluer heat burns the spruce, more twigs are added, my body protecting the infant fire that now curls upwards. Quickly, more sticks. Fire roars five feet into the spatting of the defeated downpour. I have created my own tiny micro-climate and I turn about in the heat and eat my Sunday bannock. It would be easy to be lost in the melancholy, it is just waiting over my shoulder, but I am wet and warm and full and have to laugh at my solitary drama. A perverse streak in my defiance? Anyway, let's jolly along and find a campsite, we'll be flooded out here. I leave the fire to drown in the rising mud-torrent and wade on into the next sweep.

Into gravel beds water surges around in question marks, eager for a quick escape, I look for my own. On a submerged snag my rubber boot is slit open, water freezes through and gravel knits into the woollen socks. My passageway remains completely undefined. After a long time we find a slow pool of backwater where a poplar log has fallen and an old porcupine climbs slowly

along to a higher, safer home. Canoe glides underneath and we head into a deep, still channel that gathers speed as log-jams block our way on either side. Log-jams always mean deeper water and the only way to get by here is a delicate scramble from log to log, always leaning back with a precarious hold on Canoe and the track-line snagging at every yard. We pass but I am forced to ferry right though there is nowhere to go. I live on hope. I try to paddle above the next muddy clump of bank but the river is having none of it. Canoe is whipped from shore, I try and put her in lower down but we are already broaching and the two log-jams are coming up. Long dead poles angle out to conduct the water into a V formation. I have no time to turn Canoe. There's not going to be enough room. I have visions of the logs holding her at either end, water rolling in on us. Canoe is seventeen feet, the gap must be seventeen two, for we are on the other side and fetch up above the porcupine pool.

To be safe I get out and work Canoe up a scraping back alley that takes an hour's shoving and heaving round the same distance. At least the main river is once more in sight; only shallow flows separate us. I try and cross but they are too shallow and Canoe has to be dragged back again. The only other way is up a turbid rapid that is thick with sweepers. It is at the end of a wearing day and I am becoming desperate but I see a campsite on the far, far shore. At the top of this channel a mess of logs has collected and one big ten inch poplar lies level on the water. I have to lift Canoe over and all I have to stand on is the slippery green bark of the tree; the water races deep on all sides. Further into midstream the log lies lower still, I can get Canoe's bow on top but to pull her over I really have to be ahead or she'll broach in the current and roll. Only by being back near the log-jam will I have the footing from which to work forward. I jump up and down on the tree, getting it to flex a little and each time I work Canoe back closer to the jam. We are now on the point of logs where the river splits fast. Canoe is over and from here a rapid ferry is required to the far left. From there we wade up to the top of a gravel bar, then left to another bar and repeat the process twice more until I can step out in the shallows and snub Canoe into the sand of camp. The tent is pitched in the lee of small alder and while there were times when I thought this day would never end supper routine slides along automatically and clouds cover a blue sky. Sleep is where I need to be.

It is not until morning when I wake that I remember a disturbance during the night. What was it? Unzipping the tent door I go to put on my boots when I notice a neat little tattoo along the leather – a mouse had been eating the nap and that's what had intruded on my dreams. The day's wading begins easily enough along reasonable waterways and under sunny skies but before lunch we're up against it. The river has become a single channel, vertical rock this side and dense alder on the right, under which I must struggle. The problem is that there is no bank. Grass covered margin shelves off into a questionable drop and alder grows to the very edge to make tracking impossible. On top of this the mosquitoes are hyperactive, I swear they haven't seen a white man before, such passion drives their insect souls! Nothing but a charitable outlook

on life can sustain one through such frenzied attacks. Even so a breaking point wells up and only subsides beneath a sense of the ridiculous. For here I am, one hand out on Canoe for support, the other clinging to some sturdy tree limb and deep silent water flowing swiftly beneath my brachiating antics. But I insist there is merit to this means of locomotion. As time and distance progress I swing along to a certain rhythm – the mosquitoes never miss a beat – and I begin to pride myself on this gibbon-like performance. There is always pleasure to be gained from perfecting method. Ahead a small gravel bar provides respite from the gibbons and mosquitoes but forces me into a new role. The river dances down some quite brutish looking scenery making my continuance along the right margin unlikely, to ferry left is not entirely a pleasant prospect for the river is very fast and there is nowhere to land on the opposite shore. Only a bare old tree reaches up and across the fastest lane and I think perhaps I should climb out on it and drop into Canoe, for at least I would gain a head start on proceedings.

Across the way it is still quite a jungle but at least there is a depth up which I can wade. Side-wash from the chutes endeavours and succeeds in making life awkward. The river comes around a big sweeping bend from the left at ninety degrees. I turn the inside corner, deep in mud. Oh no, surely I've had enough for one day – but for as far as the eye can see there is nothing but sweepers, all clogged with vegetation. To ferry back to the right is a horrible prospect and I am not sure it can be done because of those rocks below. Off through the overhanging trees however I spot a small beach and the prospect of setting camp for the day drives me to try – and win.

Back on the right again I clear the leafy cover to let in a little light, then go to scout ahead. It will be impossible to track up here too – but a portage might be done if I cut out this moose path. The trail, although enclosed by bush, follows the river and ends by a still backwater that would cross us over to the start of a five mile maze of flats and islands – another of the river's flood plains. Yet if I'm to cut out a portage, why not a tracking trail? It may even be less work, despite the huge trees down in the water. Maybe they can be used as walkways?

But let's get camp organised and a bannock underway first. After I can climb this mountain and find a better view of the way ahead. With supper and baking done I load up the camera and climb into the steep forest of spruce which is soon replaced by landslides of black volcanic rock full of razor-sharp edges that guard lethal, leg-breaking pot-holes. I climb on and clouds lower upon a still sunlit river flowing silver-brown through apple-green groves of poplar. To the east I look back on the twisting course of water – the Keele and the Mackenzie seem worlds away. (Distance, time, are entirely relative to the energy expended.) Within a black hole through a four-storey block of rock I shelter from a rising wind as rain lashes horizontally across the mountain's face. High above I see the great horse-shoe scar that crest the mountain from where all this rock must have fallen. For minutes I listen to the secret tales of rain carried by the wind

but I cannot see which route to take through the islands, though I may see one not to take, and that is better than the usual odds. Time to go and brew some coffee.

The trail is cut out over a two day spell and Canoe is tracked up to the splits on the third. If we get to the other side of this labyrinth in two days I'll not be complaining.

The weather holds good and in fact by early the following morning the river is back together in one piece and we're headed into some magnificent rockscape. Where three channels meander below steep wooded mountainside I come around a small buttress of rock to find above me two Dall ewes with their lambs, only a narrow channel of water separating us. Though the day has only begun I quietly sit, giving the sheep an occasional glance. There is a small mineral lick tucked away down the side of the buttress and though one ewe climbs through the trees to a high vantage point the other, who may well be the mother of both lambs, stays put and shows no sign of being perturbed. Once they have accepted my presence I begin to photograph cameos of the ewe and lambs in angular poses upon the jutting rock ten feet above the silky green water, forest reaching up beyond as an out-of-focus frieze. They keep me busy for an hour and then I leave them for the river ahead where my pathway lies between fantastic towering cliffs, golden brown and yellow in the morning sun under a blue, blue sky. I crick my neck from so much looking up but the payment is small compared to the reward high above: framed high against the blue by all this golden rock a Golden eagle soars on still, silent wings.

And it is raining by lunchtime! And has continued to do so till now. We have been working our way into some strange country and into what seems a solid-walled amphitheatre of mountains; does the river source itself here? The answer is hidden. I am just past a boiling little creek coming in from the northwest and camp is out on a gravel flat that bends the river from right to left, ahead, to the right, it looks very much like our first real canyon. Solid rock walls close tightly on the river's throat. But first things first – a fire and supper on the go – the canyon will be there tomorrow. Cloud covers the sky as I eat dinner near the coals of a big fire while the river talks hurriedly to itself and a westerly breeze bends the tapestry of poplar and spruce along the far shore. The asymmetrical grace of these living trees possesses a hypnotic quality and I try to capture something of this on film. But it is late and it is always good to tidy away the day, tighten the tarp on Canoe, stow my boots by the door and cocoon down for the night, life is good.

With breakfast stached away I am keen to investigate the canyon. Across the river, over on the left, sheer rock wall veers round to the right, whilst directly in front of me a big, bouldering rock rises from the gravel bar which shelves away into deep water. It won't be possible to wade around it but the water is slackish – I may manage to paddle by. Beyond, I climb down into a well defined shallows under the rising boulder faces of the canyon wall and wade up toward

where the canyon angles sharply left and a great, overhanging wall narrows the river to some fifty feet. Climbing a fissure in the rock I take a look from on top. It is nice to be out from the damp, cool shadows and to feel the rising sun. Blueberries are in profusion, casting their blue mist over the hillside and they make a welcome change from dried fruit. From a vantage point I sit and look down into the canyon. My fist response is once again – impossible! One would have to be crazy to think of getting a loaded canoe between this sheer-sided rock. But immediately I am pleasurably irritated by the challenge. It really does look impossible.

The river comes straight down as fast, but relatively flat water between rock walls – sheer on the right and rising to a hundred feet, while broken on the left with some big overhangs low over the surface of the river. In one or two places there are small strips of gravel bar along the left margin, but these are after the dog-leg bend below me. For the canyon twists to the left and on the inside of the leg there is a tiny beach where a sizeable caribou antler has been dropped. The water immediately beneath me, up against the right wall, cannot be seen due to the overhanging nature of the rock, but it is obvious that it will be deep and fast for it forms the outside of the bend. It follows that as I'll have to wade up in the initial shallows I have to get up as far as this big overhanging cliff then ferry over to that beach. From there, there is a crucial four or five yards of straight rock face – if the water is too deep to wade, I fail to advance. Past that, a little rapid comes down from a short tracking reach. Beyond are two more walls along which I may be able to paddle, and a third wall is such a severe overhang I should be able to get under it and hand-haul a way up – if I reach that far. It is ferrying across this corner which seems unlikely.

For the remaining of the morning I sit here, staring down into the brown-green currents, absent-mindedly plucking blueberries and straining my eyes to see any small weakness in the flowing strength. If I were to reach this overhang, the big one below me, and fail in the ferry, I must be careful not to become trapped against the far left wall – a narrow cave fractures a rock face – it would allow a canoe to enter, but you would never exit. Something to bear in mind. I don't think I'll learn more today; I shall have to be down in there to see exactly what's round the overhang. We'll take a go at it anyway. The afternoon is spent unsuccessfully fishing the creek mouth downriver.

It isn't the grandest of mornings to tackle stunts like this canyon but at least it is dry and those distant blue clouds may just vaporise into a blue sky. Optimism is everything. The first obstacle of the big rock is paddled around and I wade out into the shallows till they deepen and I am forced into the cliff-side. The overhang ahead forces the brunt of the current to speed by over on the left so we are not overly troubled yet. We need to get right under that towering pedestal if any ferry is going to succeed and the thirty yard journey requires some stealth. The rock here is only a few degrees off from sheer but there are smooth ledges and the occasional toe-hold,

fingers find cracks. I would never contemplate this lateral climb were Canoe not here, for only by bracing my weight out upon her bows do I progress at all. Then she has her own problems too, for an underwater boulder holds her hull fast, she is presently held on a two foot track-line, I cannot retreat from my tentative perch, an extended toe finally pushes her free then she is back to gunwale scraping and we come up against an altogether flawless slab of granite – not a finger hold. The overhang still mocks us from seven yards away. The gravel beach still lies upstream. However, I do have a better view of both the water and the cliff beyond the overhang. I can't see all that's going on but I suspect an upstream eddy where the river surges out from the base of the overhang. There is not enough clean flowing water out in the centre of the river – there has to be some backflow and if we could force through that first charging roll, keeping right into the wall, I'd bet anything we find ourselves in an eddy, and that would take us nearly level with the opposite beach.

With one foot tying me to the rock I ease the other gingerly into Canoe – she must not move out an inch. Fingers and friction keep us in as I kneel into her. Paddle steadies, out over the left gunwale. When we leave this wall we have to come out fighting – there's going to be some nasty fast water shooting across our bows. Deep, deep breaths. Time to go. The paddle is deep, far forward, Canoe rears into the hydrant gush, gunwale still touching rock, turn her, sharp right, get in there. We are on the other side of the overhang! Boils of static water, I hold on to the cliff and catch breath. Now up into the eddy – when we get to the top we have to come out racing, so build up plenty of speed – we'll have to chance the down current capsizing us – but if we angle the attack right we should make it. The might of the river punches into us but the paddle holds our course. We get swept back in the fastest water and arms flail the paddle, yards have to be made up. We're in slacker water now, we can fight this. Canoe's bows scrape up on gravel.

Close up, I see the caribou antler is indeed large. But how deep are these next five yards? Smooth rock rises above my left shoulder, I tuck Canoe in behind on my right, the beach shelves away and a three foot depth holds good. We are up into the fast little rapid and through to the next gravel bar. Now for the three slab faces. These all angle slightly towards the centre of the river at their top ends so that a small chute of water cuts sharply across Canoe's path. We not only have to paddle hard against the current but also have to run around this jutting corner so as to get back into slacker water. We're not through this canyon yet.

By keeping close in and plying the paddle the first two faces are won. The third is the deep overhang and proves the easiest, for once under the rock I claw a passage forward by small handholds above. From hereon it is a straight track along a shingle bar up to the next bend. This one turns the river right and left with the most beautiful whirlpool above the left turn. Miniature

craggy cliffs channel the water around upon itself and it goes dancing round in circles amidst the watching audience of the now sunlit forest and myself.

We move by on along the left wall where every so often it is broken to give way to the scrub forest above, but what's this? A squirrel swims frantically towards me, makes for the extended paddle and clings to it. In a flash he is up my arm and then on top of my head where after a brief reconnoitre of the topography he scrambles down my other arm and jumps back into the river to complete his dash to safety, a mere yard or two now. I watch him scurry up the rock-fall into the tussocks above. I wonder if a Marten made him jump into the river? Things are looking difficult up here, we had better break for lunch.

For several hundred yards now the river courses narrow between a definite overhang on the left and sheer grey cliffs on the right. At the top of this race I look down from above to see how the river travels a short straight into a rapid that smashes into the cliff wall beneath me to be turned right to where the opposing right wall of the race turns it down into the original reach. It is difficult to explain. I think it will be best to get Canoe in there and talk it through as I go. Frankly, I don't think it is going to be possible to get through this one, but the river repeatedly throws these gauntlets down and I'm forming a habit of picking them up.

For starters I ferry right to traverse three small bays of slack water, hitting fast currents as I work around their headlands but I'm into the last one and can see what's up ahead. It is dark down here, and cold. Because of the force of water breaking into the upper right limit of this reach, the main flow of the river diagonals down this stretch of canyon to lower left. This may allow me to paddle upriver along this right wall – using the slack wedge of water. With luck I'll then be able to ferry left – under the overhang – and into the opposite wedge of slack. Canoe is manoeuvred round the last headland and squeezed close into the rock – this 'slack' business is all relative – but it is a great game. Now then, have I read this puzzle right? The paddle is kept in constant play, there is a lot of side-wash, not too much current, but it's beginning. Get up as far as possible – every inch. Work that water. The point of the wedge has been reached, we're only holding our own in the powering downriver swell – time to go. Canoe rears into mid-river – paddle digs down – all our money is on this one. No sun shines. Good, we're under the rock – out of the swell. I catch on to a broken crevice and hold up for breath, the left wedge of slack before us.

From this viewpoint I can see the black corner of this left wall some sixty feet ahead. Past it the river races into the right wall, but on the upstream side of the resulting wash and commotion, there is a definite eddy. If I can creep up to this corner on the slack, turn Canoe into the current and ferry the full force of water in those thirty feet, then that eddy should wash me into a convenient spit of sand. If we've read this wrong, something soft and yielding is going to

collide with that rock face. Quite seriously I move Canoe up to the corner. Safe in the slack-stream I turn her to nearly parallel the current, her snout angling off by a degree so that the attacking water will slice about the hull yet give some lateral push too. Now. Our angle holds. Every ounce of strength strains the paddle back, less than seconds fly. I feel the stern begin to rise in the wave off the rock behind and the paddle sweeps in a powerful arc and the hull responds to come about parallel to the cliff. The side-wash lifts us high against the black, slick-shining, cold-smelling face but it pillows Canoe too and the paddle pulls us forward and we're into the eddy. I step out on to sand. I can't believe it – it looks impossible – cross that with over seven hundred pounds? I dig the camera out to record, at least, the canyon bend. Maybe when I am old and grey, living off my pension fund of memories, I'll not trust this one too well.

From hereon it is a conventional pull up the rapid, then because of cliffs, a ferry left. For five hundred yards there is difficult tracking over boulder bluffs but at the top, reefs cross the river and I have to ferry back to the right. I park Canoe in a still little backwater and climb up over the rock that is washed in the ebb and flow of its own tidal system. Ahead is one of those views that stop you dead – it's not worth a tourist's attention – but after battling up through these canyons and miles it satisfies and rewards completely. A double cascade of water spans the river, churning white waves pour some half dozen feet down to a second step and a further eight or ten foot drop. It is a boulder fall rather than carved rock so my first thought goes to a passage up it – or would that be taking my dislike of portages too far? A skilled kayaker could perhaps come down, depending on water levels, but though it is nice to muse over I'll leave that one to the experts and the sport buffs who believe the way to come down a river is to first fly to the top. I had better go and find a campsite which gives me a view of these falls.

Camp is not ideal. The only place to pitch the tent is on a steep hillside above Canoe where Grizzlies have been active recently – ploughing the ground. I suppose it's about time one showed up. The fire has to be away down on the gravel bar and wood is scarce. However the disadvantages are offset by looking over the reefs below and the various currents that form, and by plotting a way through it all. It is too early to prepare supper so I will take a closer look at these falls and beyond.

Basically the river is a very long, stretched 'S'. The reefs by camp form the bottom bend, the falls are mid-way and then the river turns right. To begin with a steep rapid runs alongside a grassy bank on the right whilst a great turbulence of fascinating water swells up and over the reefs on the left, but I'll be able to get by that via a short portage. Then by way of still bays I can paddle to the base of the waterfall where a ferry to the left is possible. Whether I want to be on the left side depends what lies above. I walk on. High up from the edge of the forest I look down on a veritable maze of channels – this is some exciting water – it reminds me of the Pembrokeshire coast. Great black tombs and turrets stop the river in its tracks to swirl it left and

right and drop it into lower terraces. It pours about a small peninsula of land on the opposite shore, down a rapid of back-angling waves then into this seething amphitheatre to flow left beneath me and left again to the turn into the falls. This hillside is all steep cliff and rising forest so a portage along here is unlikely, but before I make any firm plan a further scout might be in order.

It is well past suppertime when I return and I have much to digest beside food for there is a quite horrific portage ahead but the sight of that water will be no small recompense. I have never seen such fantastic rock. It isn't so much a canyon up there as a giant sized gulley. There was a Grizzly kill too – an old caribou. It's given me quite the appetite.

The day is perfect; not a cloud in the great blue sky. But it takes an age to carry everything over the first niggling fifty yards of slippery reef. Then it is tracking up the rapid and on around the bays, paddling the last section to below the roaring crescendo of the falls. An easy ferry left takes us to a small eddy behind a big boulder and the second portage of the day around the falls is completed by lunchtime so a comfortable chaise longue is found within the water-worn rock and I partake of fresh bannock in a most elegant and relaxed manner, the strains of water music filling the air of the green valley. I am almost tempted to take a bath in one of the warm boulder pools, it is so hot a day, but the worst portage is to come so we best be moving on.

Canoe follows me faithfully out above the falls, along deep shingle up into a secondary channel, away from the main charge of the river, but it is still frightful. A straight uphill fight. From a still pool above, the water clamours down over the boulder banks where the only way up is to lock ones body against the upstream face of a particular rock. I have tried to judge the best course to follow but halfway I am obliged to switch to the right tack. I turn my back on the bullying waves to take one small step at a time, backing up as I cross over. The top is reached with difficulty then there is an easy ferry across the pool into the mud-sand shore of the peninsula. Everything is unloaded, Canoe dragged up and I go on with the axe to cut a trail. The peninsula is a steep spine of land grown with tussocks, sporadic spruce and poplar lower down, the far side is even steeper. By the time all the packs and Canoe are carried over sufficient energy has been expended for one day – maybe we have advanced half a mile.

The peninsula encloses a wide gravel flat and shields it from the downstream noise. Forest encircles the upper perimeter and from somewhere a secret freshet of water emphasises the relative silence of the place. I go in search of it and find a gush of crystal emanating from a buttercup marsh that is hidden by the hedgerow of forest. The gravel pan absorbs the stream with an untroubled thirst. I fill the canteens and the tea pail. (My old black kettle from Broken Skull has finally succumbed to rust so it was filled with stones and buried in an earlier rapid.)

Supper cooks itself slowly and I drowse against the hot rock wall of the peninsula. My back aches and I am ready for an early bed.

From hereon it is all along the left margin and though there have been more impressive reaches my major problem this morning is circumnavigating a single brown-headed boulder just out from shore in the first rapid. For all its normality it very nearly proves my undoing. Water shoots out from behind it and even with my whole body braced on the upside, Canoe is a dead weight to get up an eighteen inch step of a constant wave. I have to move forward into deeper current, Canoe is pulling back from shoulder height. It appears to be an absolute stand-off. I mentally lock my arm and silently curse my legs to move, to play their part too. It takes moments for the message to bring forth a reaction, the body of water has no such mentality. There is a greater power than physics!

On along shelving, green-mossed rock the river laps quietly and Canoe nods up on her track-line to where the next canyon begins and cliffs rise where the river veers left then right to disappear into its constricting girdle of rock. We have to ferry right to a sand beach where the long portage will begin. I paddle Canoe up to the end corner of this left cliff but we are again in the slack wedge of faster water rushing across our bows so I have to align Canoe to face upstream for the ferry. But once more I suspect an eddy and slice her around the corner of rock and do indeed find that we can gain more yards yet, in fact to the first of the foot-high steps that horseshoe across the width of the river. Flat, seething boils rumble and suck on all sides and I play upon them as I ease Canoe towards the far beach and the strongest of all upstream eddies - a great aquamarine depth of water that does its best to throw me upriver and away from shore – but I eventually win, and am still in time for lunch.

The remainder of the day is taken up with portaging everything to the top of a steep and precarious path. From here a trail will have to be blazed over the next mile or two, though that is tomorrow's job, as it will take me a whole day. When tomorrow comes I find the tell-tale sign of an old Indian portage that can once again fulfil its age-old service. Another small find, on a plateau of partly burnt spruce, a not-so-old claim stake with a faded fluorescent, pink plastic ribbon tied around its claim number. I am not surprised that this place has caught some prospector's imagination. I wonder who were all the characters who trod this trail since the beginning of Man's journey? Have a thousand people seen this place, or is it nearer ten? The perpetual forest makes it unimportant. The first whole day of portaging sees everything carried past the half way mark to where a tumbling creek roars out from a deep cleft into a most spectacular reach of the canyon.

In the afternoon sun I sit out on a silken smooth boulder and overlook the magnificent curves worn into the solid rock and I study the movement of the water through this course of ages.

Above, the river comes charging from between walls of red to enter a small circus, banked for the most part by scree rising to rock face which in turn moves around to the polished, sensuous sculpture opposite. And through this carved and limb-like stone the river has won its right of entry and worn away a six foot wide hole through which it now plunges in eager anticipation of descent. This is so totally absorbing that I know it must be photographed in all the shadings of light which the next twelve hours might offer.

Back in camp I am scolded by the sharp warning whistles of Ground squirrels and though firewood is plentiful I need no warning about the danger of starting a fire, for the very land is tinder dry. It has been a hard sweaty day but it has won genuine progress and brought forth a little bit of history – this portage trail re-discovered, and the claim post – things I never would have known about had I flown in, quite apart from the very intimacy of each mile won. My eyes have learnt the keenest details of this trail, from where the red clump of moss directs me right, to the bushy twigged dwarf spruce that sign posts left. Moss and grasses, sticks and trees, they flow too along their own discreet contours and such a road travelled with a hundred and thirty pound pack straining the tump-line forces your eyes to the ground, and is never forgotten.

Through a dense undergrowth of alder Canoe is brought through last of all and set upon a quiet waterway where she is loaded. Half a dozen fine fat grayling sport in the lower stream and I wade down to hook two with a tiny Norwegian lure. Canoe is ferried and we track on a hundred yards to find camp and to cook our fish. A major section of the river has been put behind us and a new era would seem to be in the offing. Hopefully it is the last of the canyons – though from the map that may be a vain hope.

The morning is drab and I really would prefer to stay in bed. Come on, if we can just get round this big bend that turns the river from a southwest to a northwest valley we'll be on the last leg before branching off on the final creek. How many days to that big bend though? Cold grey water grips my legs. What a crazy, beautiful existence. A ferry left is made to avoid a sluicing rock formation and we move on to gravel banks. It starts to rain. Grey sky, black-grey mountains. The river winds right then left into a canyon, the air is cold. The track-line is coiled and I am back to wading. I wonder how far we will get? A mask of beaten silver water pours over the eyebrows of the canyon and I pause a moment to uplift my misery. Such art has its uses. Rain trickles down my clothes to merge with the river soaking up. At least the wading depth is holding. But I am beginning to feel trapped, the walls have no end in sight, there are no bars on which I can light a fire, no firewood. I am too cold. Rain without end. I can only go on. A glistening black tomb of rock, square and tall sits ten feet out into the river, a small indentation in the canyon wall cuts behind it. The river becomes deeper. There is only a slippery, invisible ledge below. On the outlet, two naked, wet smooth logs bar our exit. Canoe scrapes under the one, the second lies too low. Sitting on it I ease my way over towards the

black rock, my weight begins to sink the tree and Canoe glides quickly over. I shuffle back into the wall and drop off to carry on wading. If I don't stop soon, for fire and food, I could be in trouble. The canyon is turning right, the water is coming foam-flecked and cocoa coloured. A little beach, no longer than Canoe spills down to water level. Canoe is hauled up and tethered and too slowly I break off spruce twigs and gather sticks of alder. Fire at last. I dig out the bannock, covering Canoe up again under the tarpaulin. By the time new energy has been fed into the system the river is definitely on the rise, waves breaking over semi-submerged rock. If I stop any longer all momentum will be lost and I'll bet a pound to a penny we end up portaging. If only it would stop raining. For three hours I wait, hanging over the fire, afraid to go on, watching the rising water as Canoe lifts higher into the bank. Best I think to haul camp stuff out and secure Canoe for the night. It really does look a dubious bend, best scout it and see what tomorrow brings.

The tent is pitched amidst springy mounds of caribou moss beneath a long dead, stark and spiky spruce tree. Clothes are too wet to take inside, removed they flap from the gaunt branches in time with the damp breeze that does little to disperse a halo of determined mosquitoes. I see the whole small cameo of camp lending itself to some surrealistic painting, the wet clothes and the gaunt skeleton trunk suggesting some apt title. Inside, the contrast of comfortable old cords and a clean moleskin shirt is an utter luxury. I settle down to a few games of solo rummy then pass the further hours of rain with James Mitchener's Drifters. Gradually the steadily falling rain lightens its touch on the still leaky tent and the silent sun pours a golden filtered light from the high west. Time I think to check Canoe and get a supper cooking.

The same mosquitoes spiral their mysterious predatory dance, defying the wind. The fire blazes above the ooze of the sodden land. Food cooks and is consumed. The canyon shadow is felt, so too the muted sucking tones of rising brown water where it washes previously exposed wall. Canoe had better come up. With everything packed to the top and safely re-stowed it is time for bed and I sleep like the dead.

Ribbons of pale blue sky lie behind the streaming pennants of cloud trails. I get to work on cutting the portage trail. Tall, wide trees gather over, four Goshawks squabble an early morning family dispute and I pass beneath their heavy cursing cries. By the time the first pack is carried through their argument has subsided and I hear them not at all as I carry Canoe, and by then the trail has been learnt and it is time to leave it, a lay-by upon the river road to recede now into a storehouse of the mind.

A mind that concentrates solely on the water about our wading – and another portage before the sun has reached its zenith – around a pincer formation of bouldering rock that squeezes the river to hurry on. Steady steps climb the water hill again and the river expands into broadening

country under wider skies. I do believe we have left the canyon country behind. A high, loose scree bank shelves to deep water, the right margin is all overgrown. The afternoon wears on. Boulders disturb the river to create downstream gravel bars and I make camp. Grayling sacrifice their lives to help me on my way. A thunderstorm explodes briefly and harmlessly over distant southern mountains. I have worked hard today, had one or two scares as well, but we're getting there. The land owns us now as I own her. There is a mutual commitment to something unnamed but known. Land has no speech because words are unnecessary for its contemplation of absolutes.

Another camp, another home. I am always welcome, and now into the big bend till by afternoon the mountains head us north and by tea-time (were we to ever stop for tea) we come to the T junction and the river splits evenly left and right, the waters coming together as partners in a quick-step, clasping one another to dance with rapid grace. Canoe is berthed in a private, still pool on the right shoulder and along a scrub-grown cobble bench I search for level ground on which to spend the night. Against a bleached old log, washed up here in the spring no doubt, I build the campfire, prepare supper and sit nearby to watch the lazy encircling currents that write themselves upon the river's face. Across the water, beyond the ruins of small infant cliffs forming a forlorn gateway to the southwest river, a blue-silver mountain range stands below the gathering, still clouds of evening where touches of gold mingle with their steel blue. About to the northwest the river rides darkly and quiet. Pink hills raise eroded scree slopes to golden battlements. Somewhere along that line of mountain, due northwest of here, Mountain Lake will lie. For the first time I notice the poplar leaves are turning yellow. July is drawing to her close.

There is a definite frost touching the air and a noticeable change in the water temperature. We'll be heading three thousand feet by lunchtime. Past delicate pencil-slim waterfalls, red slab-sided cliffs and shallow horse-shoe tiered steps of water we move on and up till by mid-afternoon, and I am thinking it time to stop, a small unremarkable creek flows coldly blue from the far right shore. By all the mountains I do believe we should take that road. We are just coming to a left turn so we'll get round this first and then find a decent ferrying reach by which to cross over. This I think is going to be the last ferry we make on the Twitya. I wonder how many we've done? A clean backwater snye offers a safe berth for Canoe and a good sand bed for the night. Camp is set so I'll go and take a glance over this creek.

Its mouth lies under overhanging willow and shoots out in a vociferous little rapid, then the water levels to meander beneath fallen logs and around stony islands. Ahead, an old log-jam spans the stream – there's no sense in getting wet now but that is going to be a devil to shift. It will be deep in there too. There is a shade of blue to this water – the same as at Bluefish Creek. I cut back across the gravel bars and dry beds where alder trees grow, to the bench where camp is set. Grizzly tracks are noted along with horse tracks. The hunting outfitter way over on

Palmer Lake, down on the Mountain River, brings his horses this way from the Yukon. I wonder if the Mountain Lake outfitter will be up here? It would be good to see somebody I suppose. Well, the last night on this old river; that creek isn't going to be easy. We'll certainly have one heck of a portage to get up to the lake. This water is bound to give out miles before we reach there and I'd say there are ten miles to go. Half of that could be a carry.

Supper is eaten absent-mindedly to the ebb and flow of thoughts – casting my mind forward and backward to see again some gallant rapids and riffles, corners and canyons. Tomorrow will start the last leg of this hundred mile, two thousand, five hundred foot hill. Time to hit the sack.

You would think that I had built up some resistance to cold water by now – for these rivers never get much above freezing – but the creek is merciless. Canoe is tethered in an eddy and I am working thigh deep cutting away at the log-jam and freeing key logs. I am so cold I could cry – and nearly do. Canoe is finally dragged through the tangle of rotting timber and we course our way up the shallows and the bends into stiff gradients that are so shallow I worry over wearing Canoe's hull away. She must still weigh-in at seven hundred pounds but all too rarely does she actually float. This is back-breaking and the cold is a major conspirator of defeat. Boots are lacerated through and offer no protection, the soles are polished smooth and every step is dangerous. Dirty, gravely cliffs erode down on both sides of the small valley. Far up on the right a break in the high trees means there could be a junction to the creek, but we are not stopping for lunch, not stopping for anything, till we get there. With that settled the head goes down and I encourage a certain bovine dullness to disperse all the minutiae of observation and frustration – maybe a glaze comes over my eyes – but sooner than I ever could have believed we are at our lunch stop. It is beginning to rain and I am already applying a match to a few gathered sticks. That's a mile and a half this morning!

It is a weak little excuse for a fire but the rain does not last. The creek is indeed split here, about evenly, but as there is no wood for a camp we somehow must move on. There remains a bare sufficiency of water but the width and the gradient allow even this to be spread too thinly. Within half a mile the first possible campsite shows up and we stop. Everything is unloaded and tarped up out on the shale where scrub alder and willow bushes grow. From hereon it will be a portage – an eight mile portage? The country is opening out now for whilst the far right of the creek remains sheer black and grey cliff, this left margin rolls off into soft tussocks and flats – it looks like prime Grizzly habitat. I walk on up the creek to see the prospects for tomorrow. Through a maze of scrub and gravel beds the creek levels off but I find that by cutting a corner I can follow an established trail through what can only be described as English meadows. There is nothing of Canada here – not even a mosquito! Lazy, bee-buzzing, languorous Victorian picnics could have been enjoyed here and not have appeared at all bizarre. By following this strange path of atmospheres I come back to the stream where deep pools flash turquoise flanks

of Grayling. By the following evening we are camped just here and the first leg of the portage is complete. There is no race on, one day soon I'll reach Mountain Lake, but I do wonder under which particular mountain out of a whole line of peaks, will it lie? Surely not the furthest one? The valley is wider here and forest slopes up on either side in gentle undulations, about the creek the meadows remain. On checking tomorrow's trail a fresh bear print and a wolf track, strike me as out of place. Camp is idyllic: fresh blueberries on a honey-dripping bannock after supper, and hot coffee under the perfectly clear sky that fades slowly to northern pink, whilst overhead blue shifts to a darker shade that stars soon snag at will.

A keen frost covers the ground on my rising and the sun is not idling either; within minutes of its yellow, shadow-melting touch the frost is merely dew and day two of the portage begins. This takes us through the last of the meadow paths that run alongside the shallow creek where in one place a giant ice relic still lies, refusing to die, to live another winter through perhaps, for it hasn't long to go now. Up into a wide plain of great contrast that spreads flat beneath waving reeds and a profusion of bear-hiding bushes. The creek generally meanders and loses itself, and I lose all vestige of a trail. Six packs are carried up, Canoe is the seventh load; Grizzly sign is so fresh you can smell them – they must be sleeping out here somewhere. One of them has dug a small area over allowing me to level it off with my boot for a good tent pitch – wilderness is lessons in give and take.

The fishing here is better than last night and though I keep a wary eye open for bears coming out of this 'Alaska' plain, none show and three medium Grayling are eaten in peace. The prospect for tomorrow calls I think for a new approach, the trail has vanished and so too for the immediate future has the gradient, rather than try and carry all this lot along a trail of my own making it will be easier to start wading Canoe again. It will be a winding sort of roadway but we will at least be moving everything forward in one go and the risk of blindly turning some corner to stumble over a Grizzly, will be reduced. With that resolved I stumble into my bag and sleep like a log.

It is now lunchtime, progress has cost sweat, I expect no less but the usual form continues – it is raining. Not soft, circling pools, pattering concentric patterns, but a seething hiss of lacerating cloudburst from dense grey sky.

We are tucked away on a tight bend and quite closed in by willows. The creek is offering a new type of obstacle course where bends are so severe Canoe has to be lifted bodily over the inside gravel bar or bank, then her stern brought around after. The gradient is steepening too. I wait patiently for the rain to stop, it doesn't, I stop waiting instead. Within the hour the sun comes out and rainbows dazzle across the wet, electric green of the plain and the pink rock cheeks of the northern mountains. The climb sneaks up on us with back-breaking slowness – one step at a

time and three lurching pulls at every step, gravel grating in my boots, upon my nerves and against Canoe. I think of stopping but the camp prospect is not the best, let's look for a nicer patch. Aesthetic climbs above the miserly horizons of muscular considerations – one of these arty types don't you know – but the spirit is soon rewarded. The last hill is the worst – rock-studded steep shallows – but at the top we leave the 'Alaska' land behind to find ourselves transferred to a lush green, spruce-lined moose meadow of the lower Canadas. It is the end of this day's travelling.

I am up early, too early. Frost still holds the land and I wait and watch the drifted light of sun sink lower down the eastern mountains and over the rolling heads of hills till it touches the spire spruce tops and eventually it lies at my feet. I pull on cold, wet socks and damp breeches and lace up sodden rubber boots, I hope I might be doing this for the last time. Camp is packed back into Canoe. The rolling green sward holds good and we work our way out along the sometime three foot width of the canal. It is a little akin to driving a semi-trailer or Australian cattle train down Devon lanes. Canoe is laboriously worked and coaxed through too tight banks, at other times she is unceremoniously shifted – reverse-forward-reverse – around hair-pin bends. Long, four foot deep pools are common now, grass banks down on either side as we work our way to the upper Canada. The mountains are much closer, it is beginning to look as if my lake will be under the last one. Spruce forest returns an intimacy and finally fallen alder block all further floating up, the head of the valley is visible. It is time for lunch anyway.

A secret, upland grassy place. I lie back into the silent green and rest my eyes upon the vastness of the vacant blue above. Not even the stream can be heard, only two Golden eagles intrude thousands of feet away riding the quavering thermals above their eagle hills. Far, far below through all the labyrinthine way of the 'upper' and 'lower' Canadas and the 'Alaska' plain and the 'English' meadowlands, the valley of the Twitya winds a tortuous passage between pyramidal peaks. I must close my eyes, engrave upon my mind every scent and stillness of this moment. Not a sound of water mingles, not an insect, not a whisper of a breeze. Time itself is stilled.

A visiting Marten.

A Caribou in the ranges east of Broken Skull.

PART TWO
CHAPTER FOUR

MOUNTAIN LAKE

The head of the valley rises before and around me. Forest clothes the right flank, stunted trees struggle over the open moorland on my left. I have no idea which route I should follow but it will be more pleasant to amble through the shaded trails of the forest. There is a warmth and stillness amongst the timber which is spasmodically broken by families of ptarmigan who whirr up on vibrating wings from before my feet. I am on a regular, well-worn trail but I turn about often to check the reverse view so that I shall not become disorientated on my way back to Canoe. The few square yards of camp could quite easily become lost for a long time in this sort of country. One stream is crossed and I veer around a great sunken pond where soft earthen banks collapse beneath an unsuspecting forest. The land rises again and another stream falls through steps of shale and islands of scrub growth. Willow bushes crowd the spruce and reach across my shoulders, only a vague indentation marks the trail through this sea of green. Occasionally I see the footprints of Grizzlies who are somewhere ahead. Whiskey-jacks flit their ghost-like bodies silently away.

It is a stiff climb even without a pack and as the trail turns back into a steeper pitch between the rootstock steps of old spruce I wonder how I'll manoeuvre Canoe up here. Past the spruce trees a gravel path climbs to an open bank where a small copse of yellow-leaved poplar has parked itself on the southern flank of the hill top; I am expectant of the lake that must lie beyond, but there is nothing – save a small, still, aquamarine pool within a deep dimple of land. The trail too dips down before rising to a broad expanse of level scrub and I follow on, climbing through the bush till quite suddenly I am stopped as if by a physical blow. A runway scrapes a broad shale avenue down to the very shore of a pristine sub-alpine lake one thousand yards away. At the far end, over to my right, a twenty-foot high purple corrugated steel silo sits; five ramshackle wooden tent frames stand by. A new clean plywood hut completes the sorry testament to good taste and unobtrusive presence. It is not as though I expected nothing here, but why this ugliness, this complete lack of regard for the landscape? I walk on down the arrow-straight runway, my anger gradually cooling under the rippling influence of the lake, the whispering straw-gold reeds, the folding flanks of the hills, the rising crags and spectacular mountains that encircle me, I am all too easily absorbed back into the reality of the enduring nature. I had half hoped someone might have been here, but I am more than happy to possess this unpossessable land for now, for my first sight of this particular magnificence. I have earned it and value is

relative to labour. But it is not only this great scape of earth and sky and water I have won, I have won too this height of land, this divide of watersheds, from here on it is downhill. Yet another thirty miles of climbing would give me the divide of the Yukon and Mackenzie Rivers themselves. (It is a tempting thought, but that one is for some other day.) Suffice now this unknown, insignificant pass beneath the cloud-swept skies that seem close enough to touch. Sufficient for now to know that I have earned my place here, won my home for at least one winter in the nomadic sojourn of life upon this beautiful, mysterious planet.

The corrugated silo is locked, the plywood hut is open and empty. I cannot see anyone objecting to my using it as a store for my packs. Thunder clouds roll low over the southern hills and rain pours down. I shelter in the doorway and a weasel pokes his head from beneath the step to see who's making all the noise. I watch the sheets of rain and I watch the land, ascertaining its character. The forest remains behind me in the east, along the western flank of the Eagle hills, it lends a warmth and a welcome to an otherwise bleak aspect. A scene relieved only by the warmth of its colour and the distant grandeur of truly individual mountains to the northwest and southeast, mountains that satisfy completely the eye for line, for the aesthetic. Mere geology cannot possess such accidental perfection – nor we, such cooperative sympathies for the accidental.

On the first day of the portage three loads are carried up. The second day thunderstorms continue intermittently and shelter is not always available. The steep trail through the willows is muddy and slick, Grizzly sign is common, I am soaked. I can only hope that the bears' senses – more finely honed than mine – will see to our avoiding one another. Big Duluth packs form the base to each of my five loads and across each tumpline that strings taught about my forehead another pack of sorts sits in balance. Hands take up the slack and the body carries another hundred and twenty pounds upwards to journey's end. Early on the third morning Canoe's eighty awkward pounds are lifted and I surprise myself in portaging the one and a half mile hill with only one rest stop.

The weather remains kind and hot and the remainder of the day is given over to searching for a cabin site, for no time can be lost. But there is an added concern that hangs over me now: the tooth which was subject to my dentistry back at Trout Creek is again giving trouble and I am debating that if a plane flies in, should I seek a ride out to get it seen to? Of course I would then have to charter a return flight but this would allow me to pick up the surplus food left at the Keele. As things stand it is all rather unlikely and I am confident that given a moose in the cache and a decent cabin, I'll be able to survive an abscessing tooth if the worst should happen. But a week in Yellowknife would have its attractions. Canoe drifts along while I daydream.

Half way down the northeast shore the forest is less scattered and solid earth shelves gradually to the reed beds where Canoe is berthed. I step out onto the short grass and walk amongst the trees, scanning the wood for straight trunks, trees that can be felled unobtrusively. There will be enough but a building plot is another matter. I must build with an eye to good drainage and I want a cabin close to where the cache will be and then again I'll be wanting a view of the lake and the front wall should face due south. Finally, a couple of hundred yards back from the shore a rare level is chosen, the site is well sheltered from the north and northeast and two big trees close-by offer the best possibility going for a cache platform. Getting the cache built is the first priority. Once done I can move all my packs out from the hut and store them in safety. With the site decided I slip Canoe back in the water and head her down to explore the far north bays.

As we move out to the centre of the lake the mountains, which have become the 'Eagle Hills' show all their gullied courses above timberline and the long line of peaks string back to my route along the Twitya. My eye follows on to the southeast and the level plain over which I portaged which now appears from this lake level, to be the very lip of the world, for only in the far distance do the tops of the incredible mountains fold their ancient strata of many colours up to the touch of the fleeting cloud shadows. And through those invisible valleys that only the peaks suggest, the Twitya continues to run its contorted passage. Rolling moorland moves in from the south and west, a tapestry of hillsides in browns, greys, dull reds and yellows, mosses, lichens, shrubs and grasses thrown up from the lake margin as a first step to the many footed mountain in the west where private shadowed valleys rise to cold, eroded ridges. At the north shore I leave Canoe to climb a small level butt that overlooks the plain beyond. The sweep of valley floor is scarred by the action of the streams and a grey mist of distant poplar softens into the northwest horizon to form an unsteady base for the most perfect, most beautiful of mountains riding alone into the northern sky. A grey, austere individual of whom I could never tire. And far off over the plain a distant line of conifers, tiny upon the immense perspective, show where the upper reaches of the Mountain River will be flowing. It is all too much to take in at once, almost too good, too beautiful.

In the darkness of the plywood hut I wake to feel the hardness of the table beneath me. But what was that noise? Something scratching the wooden wall. There it is again. A heavy dragging sound. It sounds like a Grizzly. Slowly I lean forward toward the window and squash my nose to the glass but only grey blotches of shadow can be seen. The scratching grows louder – he's working his way along – that door will yield to his first probing paw. What should I do? Pretend I'm asleep? Offer him a cup of tea? I think I can see an enormous shoulder level with the window yet something isn't quite right. Snuffle, snuffle, shuffle, shuffle. It's walking over the logs stacked against the wall. Wait a minute this is no Grizzly, this is an anti-climax, this is a Porcupine! I go back to sleep quietly laughing.

At four thousand feet and north of the 64th latitude, cloud lies as a dense blanket across the frost-touched lake of these early August mornings. Indeed there seems only a narrow porous layer through which I can paddle Canoe – between cloud and water – from the hunters camp to my building site, a mile away. The silence of this morning is magnificent and the overhanging willow on the promontory is perfectly still; cloud enshrouds all other detail, only a filtered blue and pale pink light glows from beyond the mist to suggest a faded scene of old Chinese tranquillity. Gem-clad reeds and frosted necklaces of spiders silk bend before Canoe's snout as I paddle her into the landing. I step out on the wet, cold grass and walk into the cloud-still forest, the quiet suddenly shattered, yet caressed, by the call of loons. Their curling, peeling song emphasising, with no timidity of hesitation, the vastness and strength of our domain.

The two trees which will form the stand of my cache platform wait for the swede saw, but their ninety feet will not be wasted, and they may yet kill me instead. Both trees are densely clad in down-sweeping branches and both are about fifteen inches in diameter at head height. The cache platform will have to be at least fourteen feet off the ground, for a big Grizzly can reach twelve, but the trees themselves will dictate the actual height above that. Somehow I have to get a strong log tied from one tree to the other, to provide me with a firm footing, from which to fell the top sixty odd feet. I really haven't the foggiest idea how I'm going to do this.

To climb a big spruce tree is not at all easy. You have to use your head to break through all the dead fingers of branches that choke every space between living boughs, causing showers of scratchy debris to fall into your shirt and wedge about your belt. Hands grab hold of wrist-thick branches close into the trunk, then feet rest on the same as you move up. I don't enjoy heights and twenty feet is quite high enough from which to fracture your pelvis. But on this first trip I manage to secure a rope loosely to act as a simple pulley. I repeat the performance up the second tree. The span is perhaps sixteen feet, so a log is cut to exceed that length and one inch holes are augured through either end. The rope is knotted through and I start to ease this end through and around the catching branches. But with the log raised only twelve feet and still partly resting on the ground, it is obvious that it is too heavy for me. It is green wood after all. Back on the ground I axe the log into a rough beam thereby reducing its weight without affecting its strength, and then on a second attempt I get it hanging up there on a secured line. With many journeys up and down both ends of the log are tied into the trunk of each tree and rest on strong supporting branches. My constant passage has given me the advantage of a vertical trail up both trees and I now know every foot and hand-hold. All superfluous branches have been axed away. However to raise this one cross-beam, to have it pegged and roped into position, has taken the whole day and it is time to gather firewood and canoe back to the hunters camp to prepare supper.

Looking down on Mountain Lake. (photo: K. Poole)

The following day sees the second cross-beam in place and I am faced with an ultimatum – the next step is to fell the topmost sixty feet off both trees. Standing on the two level beams I trim off all the branches, but for a few hand-holds about me, then raising the 42 inch saw to shoulder height I start the kerf, playing the teeth over and into the sap-damp bark. I am in too precarious a position to cut any birds-mouth with a saw of this size but by careful sighting I half convince myself that the log will fall in the direction I wish. Constantly I check the play of the breeze. I am more afraid of this tree above me than any other thing in this land. I am under no illusions as to the risk I am running. Since I can cut no birds-mouth I consider it safer to saw on a dead level, believing in the natural bias of the tree, a bias that should drop it away from me. Ideally I should cut cleanly through, then scramble down out of the way and wait for some breeze to rock it off – preferably during the night – but with less than inches to go I watch the topmost spire swaying, I lose my nerve and race and scrape earthwards, running clear. Twenty-five feet of solid trunk stands firm whilst sixty feet of its upper storey rocks gently to and fro, on a two inch hinge of wood. I have not cut enough. It may never come down. Necessity sometimes compels

madness. The danger is real. I feel sick as I climb back up. Once again I ply the swede saw and pray. Without warning, sixty feet of tree jumps away from the saw. I am caught in the sudden upsurge of air as it rushes and roars downwards away from me, thudding into the yielding ground and sending vibrations back up the standing trunk. One down, one to go. But my nerves have had enough for one day. I'll exercise them again tomorrow.

The cache at Mountain Lake. (photo: K.Poole.)

With both trees felled evenly at twenty-five feet, I now have the two trunks tied and pegged together at about twenty feet via two rigid cross-beams, so now a 'V' is cut from the top of each stump and a third, larger cross-beam is hauled up to sit snugly in place as the ridge of an A-frame. None of this happens quickly or simply; a tool might be dropped or left on the ground, another length of rope needed, a wooden peg cut – whatever – journeys up and down are endless and at times I joke with myself at my being the proverbial monkey on a stick. At the end of the day I relax in paddling Canoe down the lake back to the hut, carrying with us the night's firewood so as not to reduce the scant supply of logs which the hunting outfitter has in his camp.

Over supper, in the lessening light, I hear the sound of moose feeding in the shallows down along the far west arm of the lake. Quickly I finish off the rest of my stew and run Canoe quietly through the weeds, turning her about the headland. The two loons paddle closer to us, unused as they are to seeing me about on the lake at this hour. Then with crucial slowness I steer a course a few degrees off from where I now see three giant bulls. Only in sweet silence do we move, the paddle never being retracted from the water, only the noise of trickling silver streams from the great palmated antlers disturb the evening. The three old gentlemen watch us then go back to their aquatic fodder and we move still closer. From twenty yards I steady the camera, optimistically shooting at one thirtieth of a second and slower when confronted by the prehistoric blackness of wet glistening flanks and silver-dribbling droop of monstrous nose. But I do not struggle with the light. Contentment is to sit here afloat and do nothing but absorb this murine presence. The hunting season has not begun and this trio know it. I wait, enjoying their weed-eating nocturnal lives, wary only that their bulky majesty may inadvertently upend Canoe, should I drift too close. Heads buried in blackness, black bodies merge with the bank behind, three heads rise and molten silver water streams from a multitude of tines, back into blackness. In another week I shall want one of your lives, I am even now building your burial platform. Let the temperature freeze and I shall seek your flesh. With a stealth-laden paddle I turn Canoe silently and leave the brotherhood.

Work continues on the cache with smaller logs being cut to build four A-frames. Each joint of the frame is pegged then the whole is lifted up into place where it is hung from the ridge beam and pegged under the two cross-beams, so as to brace the whole structure together. There could be a thousand pounds of meat, as well as the load of the platform itself, hanging up here, so I am keen to build in secondary support systems wherever possible. All joints have to be augured with a brace and bit and hand-cut dowels are driven securely home. The majority of this work is performed twenty-feet up on a still precarious perch, not till the axed floor poles are pegged down is there a semblance of security aloft and then I get on with roping the framework together as an added insurance. At this a Goshawk flies by and quickly returns, curious to find out what I am and what this elaborate nest is all about.

Generally the weather has remained sunny though occasional showers make the logs slick and slippery to work on. From my high vantage I would be quite content to watch the ever-changing lights and colours of the land, the yellows of the poplars and the whole mass of hillside are slowly deepening to shades of gold and ruby, whilst the blue sky is at one and the same time totally clear and dense.

One evening sitting over the fire with a last cup of coffee I look up suddenly at the approach of two people walking in from the runway trail. Two Germans introduce themselves and Verna and Roland become the first people I have spoken to in five months. I am interested in their story for they are over here on holiday and have chartered a helicopter to fly themselves and their kayaks from Mac' Pass, on the Divide, to the headwaters of the Twitya. They have just kayaked down the branch of the river that comes out above Bluefish Creek, from there they have followed in my footsteps, making use of some of my portage trails and have been about two weeks behind my schedule. With their inflatable kayaks they are keeping a strict timetable – for their supplies are limited – but they tell me two of their friends are already on the Mountain River, having flown in to a different starting point. If it is alright with me they will stay here the night then portage their remaining gear up the hill tomorrow and proceed on to Mountain River.

It is marvellous to talk to people again and a dram from the Glenfiddich seems to be in order. Isolation stimulates an appreciation of people – and of good whiskey! In the morning I go to continue work on the cache and they go back to the portage trail. By late afternoon we meet up again as they are kayaking down the lake, addresses are exchanged and promises are made to make contact. I send a pencilled note out with them to let the RCMP in Fort Norman know of my safe arrival here. Word will get back to Yellowknife from there. Across the grey-blue sheen of water, with storm clouds lowering from the northwest, we wave a distant goodbye and my solitude is once again placed in its enormous and thrilling perspective.

Only a few nights later I am nearing completion of the cache and have just canoed back to the hut, to start my supper, when I hear the drone of a far off plane, a sound that will always make one stop and listen. So I listen now and within minutes recognise the growing note of its engine and as it wings into profile I recognise the long-nosed Pilatus Porter and wonder if it is the same plane that flew me into Broken Skull? It brakes down on to the lake and I watch as flaps and rudders guide it expertly around and through the narrow channel into the shallow bay before me, till reversing with finesse the wide-winged craft nudges gently into shore. And indeed Warren who flew me into my fist adventure climbs down from the cockpit followed by Roy Boullion and Keith Hicklin – wildlife officers I last met on the Keele and the Mackenzie before that. They have been on a round of the hunting camps and as they were on their way to Palmer

Lake saw my smoke and decided to drop down and take a look. I put it to Roy about my hitching a ride out to visit my dentist, he is agreeable and I have five minutes to pack up the necessary. The hut is left tidy and secure with a note of explanation should the outfitter turn up during my absence.

I am not a good flyer, I have learnt from experience to sit still and not twist about looking at the incredible vistas bush flying opens up, but now as we fly over the river I shall be travelling next spring I am hard-pressed to remember my weak stomach. It looks as though I'll be in for a dangerous journey – canyons, rock-gardens and rapids – but then rivers always look worse from the air and the water levels are exceedingly low. I have told the others of the four Germans but though we keep a sharp eye we see not a sign of anyone, nor of any camp. Into the gathering clouds of the eastern night, fast and low over the plain of the Mackenzie Valley, how strange this rocketing, out-going journey when compared with my incoming of more than a year. I am playing safe with my health because the amenity to do so is at hand but there are deeper questions of right and wrong. The plane accomplishes the distance and I admire Warren's skill as we head toward the streaming gas flares, orange against the ink-blue sky over Norman Wells, but instead of achievement there is a void, an empty sagging pessimism in Man's ability to understand himself, or his needs. Should I have stayed to perhaps explore the fears of pain? I think maybe I have been a sensible coward – but then isn't that an oxymoron?

I know no one in the Wells and hotels are a hundred dollars a night. Roy offers me the key to their warehouse, I can throw my sleeping bag down there. I am left to my own devices and so walk on down the long gravel road that parallels the Mackenzie far below to the Mackenzie Valley Hotel. I could just eat a supper of sausages, chips, eggs, tomatoes, fresh bread and butter, a long glass of cold milk and – but there is no one about inside the hotel. I go into the kitchen at the back, call out and am met by a jovial fat chef. "You're not closed are you?" "Well yes we are, it is past eleven." At this I have to laugh for by my time further west and operating solely by the sun, I have clocked the hour as 8.30pm. But like good chefs anywhere he sympathises with an empty stomach and listens to my story as he makes me up a solid three inches of sandwich. On my leaving he calls to a group of hotel employees, who are just on their way downtown to the bar and secures me a lift. In turn I am invited to join them for a beer.

The Norman Wells Inn is a new structure built to cater for the needs of the influx of people drawn here by oil money. As I walk through the door I am hit by pulsating noise, the smell of tobacco, the smell of humanity and the sweet, over-ripe smell of cosmetics. Beer is in there too somewhere. A raucous beat emanates from over in the far corner where disco lighting flashes blotches of dark colour intersected by needles of white, all to a spasmodic pulse as thin-limbed, curly-headed boys prance with their electric guitars while a rather exotic black-haired girl twists about in a black lurex skin with a purple sash tight about her middle. So this is the great

frontier? A few questions and answers are passed back and forth across the table but any conversation is impossible. Chiefly I am amused by the contrast between lunchtime and suppertime. I sip my beer and watch the girl, on closing time I walk on home to my warehouse bed.

I book my Yellowknife flight early and kill time till 2pm in the small departure lounge. By noon, two tanned middle-aged fellows walk in and though their conversation is muted there is something about their appearance that makes me curious. After a little while I approach them, "Excuse me, would you by any chance have just kayaked the Mountain River?" "Ja, Ja".
Surprise spreads across their faces. I explain how I met their compatriots Roland and Verna, and we fall into deep and friendly discourse about the river and its rapids. We sit together on the plane.

So I say goodbye to my German friends as we come into Yellowknife and on descending to the tarmac I find myself bumping into Chris O'Brien who has been on board. Chris is a friend of some years standing and we meet up with a friend of his who drives us back to his apartment. It is time now for priorities: a hot shower, a cup of China tea, Debussy in the background, and talk. Several hours later I phone Kim and Louise and they come on over to take me back to their place for however long I need to stay. They themselves are leaving tomorrow for a week but it is good timing as they need a baby-sitter for Katie – a role I am quite content with.

Within days my dentist, Hassan Adam, has fitted me into his busy schedule and ever the thorough professional he gives me a complete check-up and approves of my decision to exit as timely and wise. Every evening of the week I am wined and dined on the strength of my travels and I am totally spoilt by friends old and new. Days race by, I really don't want to leave the luxury, the socializing, and I am concerned over the lateness of the year; a cabin isn't even begun, snow could be down on my return. Departure day closes in. I charter a flight with Martin Hartwell out of the Wells to take me back to Mountain Lake via the cabin on the Keele where I can pick up the food sacks which were left stached on the table.

Though the early September day is pristine Fall weather, there are difficulties. The Keele is very low and we have an awkward time both in landing and taking off. I find myself out on the pontoons in mid-river pumping every compartment dry and clambering aboard in the slipstream as we're heading up into the current to take off. I am soaked. Finally we are airborne and we chase along my route of last summer, along the much reduced, though still impressive Twitya, till we see snow on the tops of the mountains and we sweep down onto Mountain Lake by mid-afternoon. There is a stiff breeze blowing and it is much cooler than it was in town. Everything is unloaded on shore below the hut where all remains as I left it, then the plane taxis out again

and climbs up and away. The autumnal colours have disappeared in these last eight days and the land appears dismal. I suppose I had better cook something.

A plane comes back – no floats though – wheels. It lands bumpily along the runway. I get up from stirring a hash of oats presuming this will be the outfitter whose camp this is. A small man with a big belt-buckle comes towards me through the waist-high brush. I begin to introduce myself but I am not allowed to finish. The meeting is not at all pleasant for there is no reasoning with the fellow. I am warned to be a good day's hike away by weekend, when he will be back. This government licensed hunting outfitter is on very dangerous ground. He no more owns this land than I do – or for that matter, the government does. The situation is extremely provocative, and puzzling. He stalks back to his plane and leaves for his comfortable home and family in the Wells. I am left strung and seething and forget about supper, unable to placate my anger. After such a fantastic week out I was already at the bottom of an emotional pit, now I have fury poured in there too. I can only walk slowly down the runway, trying to draw strength from the land. In the morning I still seethe. I pack everything up and canoe all my belongings over to the cache site and spend the rest of the day establishing a fixed camp – damned if I'll move an inch from here. (Much later I was to learn that the real source of this trouble was the meddlesome tongue of a particular government official who apparently relishes in spreading bits of malicious gossip. Such people never have the wit to see the true measure of their immaturity.)

The cache is now completed and today I fell a great dying spruce that will yield up all four of the sill logs for the cabin foundation. I plan to build this ten feet by twelve and for speed I'll use upright logs as I did at Broken Skull, but unlike that cabin, I'll leave the bark on and these wall logs will only have to be 4'6" high. This will allow me to axe their opposite sides roughly parallel for a tighter jointing and the scales of the bark will aid in holding the moss chinking in place. The sill logs are approximately a foot deep, giving me 5'6", then a wall plate at the front will raise this to a little above six feet and provide a sufficient slope for the short roof of poles. From a dump at the Wells I have brought in an intact, six-paned, double glazed window and so I have every hope of this being the snuggest cabin yet.

It is into the second week of my return and still no hunters have come in but I am well on my way with the cabin. The four walls are all pegged together and both the window and the door are in place. There was a frost on the ground first thing but the sun is shining now and I am securing one of the roof purlins when a thrashing in the shrubbery, a little to the north, persuades me to slip down and go for the gun. I think a bull moose is coming into camp. Expectations run high – maybe I can drop him below the cache and make the perfect kill. Then I see him pre-occupied with a small spruce tree, giving it the full treatment, antlers whacking it back and forth, but there is no clear shot and he moves into heavier timber. I daren't wound him, I cannot afford the time to go hiking after an unhealthy moose – and have the job of

carrying him back. He's moving along the upper trail. I parallel along a lower one. He comes out ahead of me where the trails join and willows grow thickly to turn the compacted trail this way and that. I see him only briefly, but he is yards ahead, no more. This is crazy, a bull moose in full rut, he may turn and charge any moment but meat is uppermost in my mind. The willows give out to a scrubby little common, he turns and sees me clearly for the first time. I fire and miss and he runs off up a slight incline two hundred yards away. The 7mm magnum cracks the air again, he stops and turns sharply, I shoot once more and he drops dead.

Standing over him I see how enormous he really is. His death means a comfortable winter for me and food enough for my journey out in the spring, so I am pleased, but there is a tremendous sadness too – a reflection of life itself – joy and pain, and they both play their part, mysterious though it may be. I slit the carcass open to let it cool. Butchering a moose is no easy task, this one is my first and he has fallen badly with his head downhill. To skin around the hindquarters I am obliged to lift one of the legs, a job that takes both arms, then I let the hoof down on my head so as to leave both hands free to skin, the weight of the leg inexorably presses me into the ground and slowly the hide is drawn back. Skinning over the neck proves even more difficult for to turn the weight of the head is no casual endeavour. The width of the rack, point of antler to point of antler, measures five feet seven and a half inches. The body cavity is eventually uncovered and the knife cuts the holding membrane so that intestines and the whole pink impressiveness of mammalian functioning lie swimming beneath me. Somehow I have to remove this mass over the lip of the rib-cage without puncturing any part of the entrance or exit compartments of the system. First however I'll clean up my hands and arms – thank God it's keeping sunny – my back is killing me – and let's get some photos of all this. City folk have no idea where meat comes from, and this may provide data for a painting too.

By evening half a dozen overflowing packs and sacks of red meat have been hauled up into the cache half a mile away and I am ready to drop. A steak for supper now and I'll pick up the remainder tomorrow. It is one of those days where a helpmate would be worth her weight in gold. But satisfaction is keen – get the rest of the meat in, finish the roof, then I'll only have the log pile to see to. The snow will be down at this level before all that is finished. A fire is kindled in the little tin stove and a sirloin fills the cast-iron skillet. This winter is going to be good.

So today, just three weeks from arriving back from town, I take the tent down and move my sleeping bag into the finished cabin – and it's not before time either for the nights are below freezing and a dusting of snow often carpets the forest. All the sacks of food are brought in and piled up on a log bench along the north wall to the right of the stove, and my bed is on the left along the south wall under the window, with a small table solidly placed at its foot, providing enough workspace for my writing and the necessary cooking. Rifles hang on wooden pegs on

the wall behind the door. Within a very short space of time the new cabin is as warm and cosy as can be. And this log door I am rather proud of; for I have brought no steel hinges with me this time but with the upright logs of the door pegged together and braced, I've augured a one and a half inch hole in both ends of the hinge log and a big peg was then hammered home into the base hole and this slipped into a holding socket drilled into the sill log. The top hinge was another peg let down through a hole in the wall plate. You really couldn't have a simpler hinge and there is immense pleasure in the heavy, solid-fitting of the door into its log-jam; to grasp the stubby handle and push it open, or sit on the massive log sill looking out through the trees to the lake, and across to the hills and mountains beyond; this is total satisfaction reaching to a level of quiet excitement.

The cabin at Mountain Lake several years after occupation. (photo: K.Poole.)

Hunters are now ensconced at the camp down the lake. The plane comes and goes noisily, searching for trophy animals. Ice is forming amongst the reed beds. Four grizzled Americans with their British Columbian guide trail by from a long fruitless day of hunting. I call out 'Hello' but as heavily armed as they are I gain the distinct impression they have been warned off – as if I were some crazy eco-freak. But I only enquire f they are enjoying their holiday and

if they have met with any success. They edge closer and I find that one is from Las Vegas and two of them are from Texas. They are all impressed by the country and more or less admit that hunting is their excuse to be here – just as photography is mine.

I enjoy meeting these Americans and the guides too, but feel sorry for them that they cannot allow themselves more time to discover the essential nature of wilderness. The 'orgasm' of the kill allows only for taking, not giving, and it is in giving, in risking all, that the subtleties of the loving land are unfolded. But then that can be applied equally to the photographer or eco-tourist. To know land demands silence and a long time, the reward is ironic because we come to know ourselves.

The log pile is rising higher each day and the first layer of snow is now laid down on the forest floor. Great ice fields carpet out from the lake shore towards black, flat open water. Canoe is overturned for the winter. The plane has difficulty in taking off in the depth of snow, it has flown in and out three times today but now all is quiet and still. Low cloud crawls over the white flanks of the earthen limbs and I come in from splitting logs and stoke up the fire to put supper on. The great silence is normal, ears are attuned to it, not noise. Concentration is relaxed as breathing, and in the silent night I join Lawrence amongst the pages of his Seven Pillars with an easy camaraderie.

October 3rd, there has been another fall of snow during the night and the grey quiet of dawn is snagged by the staccato yelp of a wolf. I light the fire and put the coffee on. Breakfast is the usual ration of cold cooked oats, mixed and compacted with raisins, honey, dried apple and peanuts, it is not really a sit-down affair, and afterwards I pick up the camera, tuck it into my mackinaw, and step out into the freshly fallen snow. -15C by the feel of the air. I walk to where Canoe lies, up from the snow covered ice. Wolves are now quite audible, in fact a raucous hullabaloo is in progress. I focus the binoculars towards the hunters camp and count twelve animals milling about and snarling open-mouthed in what I take to be a conventional greeting ceremony between members of the pack, perhaps separated by days of hunting. But wolves would never be carrying on like that if the hunters were still here. I glass the camp carefully, all the tents have been taken down, shutters are up on the window of the plywood hut, and I breath a deep sigh of relief. Alone at last – just myself and this pack of wolves. This is a good start to the winter. The snarling continues and I watch them closely through the glasses, feeling the distance between as the nape hairs rise on my neck. Should I stalk closer for photographs? (And I know my vulnerability…) Let's see if the coffee is ready first.

The lake is now frozen and the wolves remain. The temperature drops to minus 40 under cloudless skies. Though the fire goes out overnight the cabin remains warm and the water bucket on the floor shows not a sliver of ice. Over long-johns and under-shirt I don wool

trousers and shirt and over that goes my habitual black sweatshirt followed by a mohair sweater and a wool Cowichan. Two pairs of wool socks on my feet over which I pull on duffel liners encased in turn by felt-lined sno-pacs. My Scottish wool hat is sufficient head protection and wool mitts under Indian-tan moosehide mitts cover my hands. The old Nikkormat is tucked beneath my Cowichan and binoculars are to hand; a belt-pack holds lunch and a flask. The air is absolutely still in the invigorating cold as snowshoes squeak over the compacted trail to the lake. Dark mauve sky fills all the empty spaces beyond the pure white mountains in the northwest. I track close into shore – one can never be too careful with ice.

Back into the southeast I turn to watch the great bloodied orb dawn over the Twitya valleys, huge pulsating day god. But the air remains aloof to its caress. I watch this particle of atomic dust on which I stand keep pace with the winding down of the universal clock, one more unrepeatable day to hold precious amongst the millions of days gone before and however many more to come, I walk on full of happiness.

Beyond the lake I move down into the breadth of valley where yesterday I glimpsed caribou in the far distance. They are now grazing the level plain but if I can see them, they can see me. I track away at a tangent, thinking of other things. Willow ptarmigan cluck at my approach and as I draw closer the clucking takes off into a rapid volley ascending to a perfect firing of lawnmower motors. And just here a fox has come by a buried sleeping bird to secure a late night snack. I stop to photograph the remaining birds, white on white snow and black bead of eye. Unexciting you might say but the pure curve of feathered form uninterrupted by colour, even texture, gives an ethereal perfection. Imagine, a fox snacking on ethereal perfection! I too have done so. But that my mind can transcend the meat offers a whole world of microscopic thoughts till toes complain in that independent way toes do have, when for too long they are kept still in cold, so I walk on tacking northwest.

The caribou are browsing towards me. Bulls, tall antlered, keeping their distance, cows, fat and glossy, thick-coated and sturdy as well-fed ponies are drawn closer by their feminine curiosity. I stand still again while wool-mittened fingers work the metal of the camera and I consciously remind myself to wind the film on slowly in this brittle cold. The cows are less than a hundred yards away; the mauve sky is turning to lighter shades of purple, pink and blue sky is overhead. Toes are complaining fiercely again and fingers join their rebellion. I put my moosehide mitts back on and start to walk slowly away but the cows run back to the bulls and the herd of twenty-five animals take flight, galloping across the valley to the southwest. Such a sight, and the rasping intake of air hurts the lungs to think about it. So close they seem as all sound floats freely in the thinness of the air and they stream up the thick snow of the far hill.

Across the white plain of silent snow my snowshoes cut a straight track and I look about to see that long tenuous thread, as a spun web that reaches miles back now to the meagre security of my small home set amidst this enormous land. Upon wind-drifted snow banks I cross a partly frozen stream and wind a way up to the top of a small hill, it is past noon. A coating of frost covers the shoulders and back of my Cowichan and I am sweating. Untying the snowshoes I toss the mooseskin mitts on the ground and sit down on them, digging out a frozen moosemeat sandwich from the pack. The black coffee is only lukewarm from the flask. Between bites I glass the land, the river is another mile from here, it will be a long trek down in the spring with Canoe. I shall have to leave before break-up and haul everything over on the snow, it will be easier, especially if I can establish a regular trail and keep it open through the winter.

The south-western slopes are already rising to intersect the sun, the caribou have drifted to high on a southeast flank, lunch is finished with a slab of chocolate cake. I had best start moving, it's getting chilly. We'll get down to the river on another day. Back along my spider's web trail I track home enjoying the movement, the cold, the warmth and the falling shades of cold blue and palest gold as the sun is hidden by a looming white ridge. Already in places the wind has blown sifted snow into my tracks and the caribou trails are nearly lost. I am keen to get home, to get a fire going and put supper on. There is a joint of roast moose in the Dutch oven, keeping cold on the floor and it won't take half an hour to cook up some rice and pearl barley. There should be enough ice-cream in the pot outside for dessert.

On to the lake I come out from the blue air of shadow world back to the quickly departing world of diluted sunshine. I press my moose-clad hands against my ear, my nose is cold too. There'll be a kettle boiling soon. A Marten has crossed my trail here. My snowshoe tracks make a wide detour around a pressure ridge that cracked ominously this morning and where overflow seeped up nearby. I find pleasure in cutting a clean flowing line of a trail, to walk with an eye for contour and curve, even in blizzard conditions it is amazing how long the sign of one's passing can remain. What is that though, at the far end of the lake? Something is not the same as it was. I won't get the glasses out now, let's get to Canoe first. In another quarter of an hour Canoe is reached and I sit on her snow-cleared hull tired and with a dull ache in my back from snowshoeing out the fresh trail. What isn't the same I can now see to be a great lazy wolf, asleep with his head flat upon his outstretched paws. Maybe I should give him a howl? I let loose on a long rising swell, endeavouring to cut it clean on the top note as they do. He looks up unconcerned. I wonder where the other wolves are? I give another howl. The wolf now rises and looks across, intently moving out at a slow walk around to the south of me. I watch him through the binoculars, he sometimes stops to watch me. By chance then a movement, or something, causes me to look back toward his original position and I see a second wolf now lying down. The first wolf continues to circle round in front. This is interesting. I give another couple of howls. Number two wolf gets up and I watch them both with out the glasses when my

attention is caught by a third wolf over on my left in the 9 o'clock position about three hundred yards away, close by the shore. Then with no given signal I watch in amazement as the three wolves turn to face me and in that great stealth of toe behind toe and lowered head, they walk silently toward me.

Now there are some people who say wolves will never attack humans and they endeavour to paint a picture of a supremely noble canine, but I think this does the wolf an injustice. He is a carnivore and a survivor. Surely it is his experience, a horrible one, which has taught him to stay clear of Man. Yet here and now I think I am seeing the turning back of whole pages of experience, to an earlier time. The light is too poor for photographs but I am full of excitement and I watch as these massive dogs continue forward. For a second I consider high-tailing it back to the cabin, a hundred and fifty yards behind me, but they are now only three hundred yards away. To be hunted by wolves – indeed this is an all too rare a privilege, too rare a perspective altogether, but I am an unworthy prey. I wonder how many more might be padding softly through the trees? It is wonderful how the mind does work at such times. What would the tabloid journalists make of this! I stand and give a long wavering howl. The three wolves stop. I wonder if my other howls had conveyed some rude wolf word and they were coming over to put things straight? They look at each other in puzzlement. I am definitely off-key – very human. They join up, turn about and trot away to the far shore. I go on to the cabin thinking that if this should ever happen to me again, I'll keep my mouth shut.

Night closes in at this time of the year by about 4pm, the shortest days will end by 2.30, depending to some extent on cloud cover. With supper over I am writing or reading by lantern-light, sitting at the table or lying on my bunk. Winter is really the most luxurious time of the year.

By early November the last logs are brought in and the first of the caribou are passing through on their way to lower valleys, yet tonight by the light of a full moon and a pale Aurora, I am enthralled by a gathering of wolves out on the sparkling lake. The temperature is a mild -20C and I stand beyond the open doorway listening to their songs and watching their dark blue on blue forms weave amongst the fairy tale shadows of the moonlit woods. How many wolves are here I do not know but certainly more than twelve, they could number twenty. Against the silver of the lake I watch one animal walk – the mouth opens and I hear the beginning of the first high chord – the wolf is motionless and the awesome sound weeps down into the ice-cold depths. Another wolf takes up the note and then another, deep bass and mezzo-soprano perhaps, a regular concert is in progress. After a while I go inside, the cabin is over-warm so I leave the door wide open and settle down to write, occasionally the howling comes closer. I hear a wolf trekking through the bushes nearby and it is only on hearing a distinctive sniff in the doorway that I look up to see a medium sized wolf walk from the pool of lantern light back into the moon

light. I get up to watch him and he paws the snow away beneath one of the cache trees to dig up a blood-soaked sack I had forgotten about. Unconcerned he proceeds to tear it up. I close the door on him and blow out the lantern. It is time for bed.

Sleep comes through the soft footfalls of wolves padding by not eighteen inches away on the other side of my palisade walls. Slowly their singing diminishes and by the first grey light of dawn I am roused from a dead sleep. All is quiet, I wonder if they are still here? Dressed, I push the door open to see what the day promises, the hinges groan loudly in the cold and all of a sudden the noise is taken up into a wild melody of invisible voices that can be no further off than thirty yards. I wonder if this is a wolf joke – they seem to have been waiting for me.

The fire is lit and I proceed through the usual breakfast routine, but I am thoughtful. In fact a siege mentality is taking over. These wolves have to be in the centre of the wood where I plan to fell the last of the dead timber, do I stay cowering in here all day or walk into their midst with only saw and axe? Breakfast is over. Come on, it might be interesting. You'd never live with yourself if you turned this one down. I strap on snowshoes, pick up the Swede saw and shoulder the five pound Norfolk axe. The medley of wolf music continues loudly but I see no wolf. I move towards them and the singing moves back, keeping its distance. I reach the old spruce while a semi-circle of sporadic howling comes from behind younger trees. I am nervous but kneel into the snow and begin the cut. As the Swede saw whispers back and forth through the story of good years and bad, back to the infant sapling itself, the wolves disperse to their day, not waiting to witness the fall of this ancient one. By the time the lofty trunk sucks through the air to a snow-bedded grave there is no sound but the clip-chop of the axe cutting away the dead, lichen bearded branches.

But for a brief encounter with four wolves along the lake shore, I have not seen nor heard any wolf activity through the remainder of November. The weather is cold, in the minus thirties and there are days of biting, driven snow; caribou are drifting through the country every day in herds of twenty to a hundred animals. The most I have counted on the lake at one time has been two hundred and fifty. Waking on these mornings, the first sound to reach me is the distant knocking of bull antlers far down the lake. I should try again for some close-up photographs. At least today there is a little cloud cover to warm things up, though some blue sky is showing. The sun appears only for an hour before it is hidden behind the mountains.

As I leave the cabin I see a string of caribou coming down the south arm of the lake whereas up till now they have always moved north to south and the contours of the land make it difficult for me to get ahead of them unseen. So I work through the forest to the east, cross over the southeast arm and hide beneath the bank of the promontory – where the two arms meet. Squatted down on my snowshoes back into the snow-bank, I wait for the caribou to co-operate.

There is a small protrusion of snow-drifted island where a few thin-stemmed golden grasses bend away from me and a broken willow rises to frame my favourite mountain in the northwest; within fifty feet the first of the cow caribou appears from behind the peninsula. She halts and I take her photograph, once, twice. Three more cows come up. They hear the noisy shutter and stare wide-eyed, but I do not move. They can relate neither my form or the clunk of the shutter with any known threat and they relax a little, mingling about in an ever-changing cameo for me to record till I run out of film. They then edge away nervously as I move elbows and hands, changing the film. More cows and a bull walk by further out from shore. From the other side of the peninsula I hear the clashing of antlers where two bulls are sparring.

The nearer cows watch me from behind the broken willow as, still keeping a low profile, I shuffle along under the bank to round the peninsula and there, fifty yards off, two bulls have their heads locked in a pushing match and quite oblivious to the cows nervous stance. The light and form are perfect and I frame them vertically. This is fantastic. Bull muscles tensed to the task, then to release one another they stand back to take stock and catch their breath before again locking heads, low down, to push. Not till the film is on the thirtieth frame do they realise an intruder is watching, for by now a young cow has come close to me and ascertained an unpleasant smell. Legs rigid, nose high, ears flattened and short white tail erect in alarm, she is the very epitome of a danger signal. Her posture triggers alarm throughout the scattered herd. It is enough. The race begins and thirty animals sweep into single flight down the lake stirring remnant herds to join them in their gallop till the expanse is cleared of single dots and antlered groups, which swelling to a distant, whispering stream of flowing dark brown bodies, curves off the arena to become lost in the folds of the furthest hill. I tuck the camera under my mackinaw and walk on home.

Early December is warm and caribou are seen every day. I go to the lake each morning to top up the water bucket with clean snow and sometimes a small band of animals will come close in curiosity, at other times they scatter. As I ladle the snow I break through into several inches of overflow that lies on top of the ice. It hasn't gone below minus 10C this week and a lot of snow has fallen. Trails are wiped out and I spend more time indoors. But the smaller, local life is beginning to accept my presence and offers much entertainment and photographic opportunity.

Whiskey-jacks feed from my hand but three Martens who live in the vicinity are still coming to terms; this is not easy for they are not on terms with one another. The big male has a pale, white-fawn head and a distinctive yellow V on his throat, which is in distinct contrast to his glossy, rich-brown body. He calls by only on rare occasions. Then there is the female – I presume – for she is smaller and though I guess the cabin lies within her territory and she offers a semblance of fight whenever the larger Marten appears, she will always back off, swearing and cursing for all to hear. The third Marten who calls by is the smallest of the three, perhaps

this is his first winter out on his own and he is seeking a territory to claim. He is the darkest brown of them all and shows no lighter throat markings. He is also terribly nervous, for either of the other two will chase him up should they so much as find his scent.

Quite often in the small hours of the morning I wake to the sound of scratching on the roof as a Marten tries to find a way in, its sharp nose picking up odours of food. So far, photographs of the female are snapped while she pokes her head out from the log pile, but this is at a few yards distance and for the small size of the animal I feel a good head shot should be taken at a few feet or less. So this morning when she calls there's meat already nailed to a log just feet away from the cabin door. She is suspicious. Martens always like to take their food back to some safe hole, or up a tree, to feed. But now if she wants to eat she is obliged to gnaw away at the frozen meat in full view of the camera lens which protrudes through the narrow gap of the cabin door. After ten minutes of jumping up and down she has worked a chunk loose and runs off to eat under the protection of the log pile, out of sight around the corner of the cabin. While she is gone I bring the log and remaining meat closer still and on her return I am down to shooting macro photos of her head as she chews the frozen meat to a malleable pulp under her swearing and cursing tongue. These photos will be perfect for painting studies. Lunch hour pulls me away to conserve film and to leave her to her meal which I now unfasten and throw under the logs where she can dine at ease.

She is back by mid-afternoon as I come in from a short walk and hangs around the door. I have been trimming a joint of its outer meat – meat that had frozen and thawed a few times before winter set in, so this quarter inch layer is darker and I trim it off to be on the safe side. The merit of this waste is that I have the fattest and healthiest Whiskey-jacks, plus the possibility of getting this Miss Marten to feed from my hand.

A length of string is tied about a sturdy cut of blood meat and thrown out on the snow while I wait patiently in the doorway, one foot resting on the step, my knee forming a higher step. As she comes around the corner – still growling fiercely – I jiggle the string and bring her in closer to the moving meat. Snatch – a savage snap. She scurries away with her prize, the string cut through. Ok, that's one to you, but let me get a tougher piece of twine. In five minutes she is back again and this time the twine holds and she is already placing a paw on the step as she climbs after the bait that drags over my boot up on to my knee. She follows.

There is something quite wonderful being in contact with a wild animal. Not to stroke or hold it, but just to feel its weight, perhaps for a fleeting second to sense its problems, and wonder why such beauty. Smell the fur. The claws dig into my wool trousers, my right hand rests on the table where strips of meat wait. With minimal movement I have one before her nose. She grabs it with razor teeth and jumps backwards through the door. I stay quite still. We can forget the

string now. Her head comes back on to the step and she sees the red finger of meat I hold against my belt. For a second I keep her waiting on my knee, then feed the meat to her. Teeth close two inches from my fingers. Her curses are a little less vehement, but back up my leg, front paws resting on my stomach she stretches up for piece after piece until I wonder where she is putting it all. Then the last strip disappears off the table and now I really do have to saw some logs before suppertime.

By the run-up to Christmas temperatures have settled into the thirties and I am about on the high hills photographing the grey-white land sleeping beneath scudding navy-blue skies. A band of caribou cease feeding as I climb over a fold of hillside but calmly they file past allowing me to take a number of close photographs. The sun is quite beyond all but the highest slopes so it is early afternoon when I descend to lake level where cloud joins me as snow flakes fly along the length of the valley. My old trail is barely discernible in this virtual white-out light but as I reach the reed bed, half way along the home shore I haul up to watch a small bouncing dot far off at the southernmost end of the lake. It seems to be running directly toward me. It is too big for a wolverine and fast too, though speed is difficult to relate. No, it's a wolf, has to be. This might be interesting. I lie down in the snow, digging my elbows in to brace the camera for the last of the light. I wonder how close he will come? Probably thinks I'm a crippled caribou. With a certain distance covered, the dot begins to take on form with the distinctive motion of a dog powering through snow. He's alone anyway. I snap off a few distant shots. Now how many people can say they have had a wild wolf come charging up to them? Four hundred yards now. Three hundred. Look at that fur rippling. One hundred. The wind is in my favour – coming toward me. Two more photographs. Oh dear, forty yards I reckon. He pulls up. All that running and it's a case of mistaken identity. Well, I was hoping for better luck too. He turns away to stalk around me, most unsure of himself and he trots off for a yard. Afraid of losing him altogether I stand to let him see what I am and so allow him the experience for his possible safety in the future. I let off a howl into the sleeting snow but there is no response other than a slight tilt of the head. Then he turns tail and runs off into the centre of the lake where she promptly squats to pee, looks back once, then lopes off to the far end of the southwest inlet. The wind sifts the snow granules into my trail as skirts of shifting white play across the huge theatre floor. I feel lonely and call out in her tongue, only for the cry to be snapped up by the wind and carried God knows where. Good hunting girl.

Christmas is a feast and I celebrate to the full for I have a lot to be thankful for. An enormous prime roast has been cooked to perfection, (even if I do say so myself) and though I have no roast potatoes or Yorkshire pudding I manage an extra tasty rice and bean feast as a side dish and follow it up with a canned Christmas pudding which friends Mark and Eireen Williams stowed in my pack back in Yellowknife; this is eaten with freshly made snow ice-cream and I am then about fit to bust. But perhaps best of all for the whole octave, I disregard the rationing

on my reading and work my way easily through Turgenev's poignant portrayal of 'Home of the Gentry', Peter Matheisson's precise and beautiful book, 'The Tree where Man was born' and the new year is seen in with the seat-edge, true-life story of 'Berlin Tunnel 21' by Donald Lindquist.

The temperature does little to attract me outside but routine holds good and my afternoon stroll is never missed. It is -43C today. Caribou are very definitely becoming fewer in number yet as I reach the lake a bunch of forty trot on down from the south to see what I am about. They are such crazy animals. Noses are raised to catch any drift of scent as they edge closer and closer, testing the communal nerve till it snaps and in a sudden thundering, leg-reaching gallop they pour, close-by, across my path to race in a sweeping cavalry charge till a leader finds a trail up onto the hills and they all stream up and off the lake to where they can look down on my walking form heading into the north.

An hour or so later having seen not a track or sign of anyone further down the valley, I am walking back along the lake trail when these same caribou work their way down the hillside to confront me once more. After milling around, seemingly unsure of themselves, they charge off into the south passing very close in a surging tide of hooves that sound like surf upon an endless shingle shore. Beneath a haze of drifting lilac cloud, the rising snow floats upon a thin current of air to hang silent and silver above the lake slowly moving into the southeast where it is suspended upon the white lip of the world. The caribou crowd has disappeared and the hush of the earth comes upon the violet, frost-glinting wings of night as a full moon slyly stalks above the craggy heads of the Eagle Hills. For a few moments I lie on the compacted trail watching the upside-down view with added intensity. If only you could hear the silence of this silent light.

It is Saturday, baking day. Mine is a tiny stove, twelve by twelve by twenty-four inches with a chimney sticking out of the top. All in all there is not much room for baking a big, week-lasting loaf and week-lasting fruit cake, but within a day or two of being here I fixed up the best little oven one could wish for. A pile of ten gallon fuel drums had been dumped on the lake shore, (some still have fuel in them) so I took an old empty one, applied my hand axe to open it, then cut neatly with a hack-saw blade along its two-third mark. The smaller third is useful as a stand-up bath or for washing my hair or clothes, while the larger part is my oven. Scrap iron found on the ground from some earlier hunters camp keeps the Dutch oven above the direct heat of the stove and the open drum sits over it, all forming a most effective heat trap. Loaves rise perfectly. The only trick is to catch the baking at the right point, that is to whip the loaf over upon itself so that the bottom and top get brown. But the real point in telling you this is that when baking is over it is lunchtime and then whatever the weather I have to get outside for a breather, for the cabin is like a sauna. This morning however I heard wolves howling at the

north end of the lake and am now wondering if to take my usual jog down the trail. If the wolves are close-by they may well take my running as an invitation to pursuit. Maybe if I just go slowly and instead of leaving the camera under my mackinaw, by Canoe, I'll keep both with me and lope along for four hundred yards. In this temperature and on snowshoes, that is enough exercise for my lungs.

I am out of breath down by the reed beds and turn about into the wind and rags of blowing snow. Way down on the southeast shore a small band of caribou are heading through the mist of a rising blizzard. They will come to feed here. A few reeds still protrude through the great depth of snow and buried reed mats cause an undulating snow dune with occasional deeper snow hollows. I quickly lie down into one to wait. Snow drifts across the lens and the fuzzy grey bodies work their way closer – this may get me my best shots yet.

From right behind me, hope is dashed. A short chorus of wolf song sets the caribou on edge, they mill about, ready to run. It sounds like four or five wolves behind a snow ridge seventy yards back. I wait, still and quiet, in the falling snow. The caribou canter, gathering into a gallop down the southern inlet. So that's that. I roll over in the snow to get up on my left elbow, seven yards away the most beautiful wolf appears to loom over me. Long white fur streaks the gold and tawny coat which merges perfectly with the background of the reed bed, long black guard hairs trap the fleeting snow flakes. He stares hard down the lake following the trail of the caribou. Only in passing does he deign to glance in my direction and then as if to say, "And you can stay where you are". I have taken five photographs, though the sheer magnificence of the animal is overwhelming; the beauty of a wild free wolf has perhaps no equal. There is not a trace of fear, for me or for him, we seem to know each other well. How long was he standing there behind me? He moves on out into the centre of the lake, picking up my trail of yesterday to follow the easy footing up the opposite hillside. I get up and start walking toward Canoe, keeping the wolf in view – and now the caribou too. Four of them are working their way up along the left shoulder, the wolf being far over on the right of the same hillside. Keep on those trails and your paths will intersect. But the caribou disappear into a hidden fold of the land and the wolf, now on the horizon, drops from view. Not two minutes lapse and the caribou come streaking out across the hill – five seconds maybe – all I see is a floating dot that flies over, not through the snow, after the caribou. It is quite unbelievable. No dog can travel that fast. I was up there yesterday, there is two feet of soft snow and my 140lbs on snowshoes had a slow, sweated time of it. The size of that wolf – he has to be 120lbs. Look at him move. Falling snow and the lowering purple mantle of twilight lends a perfect, misted veil upon this moment of life. The caribou vanish over the distant ridge, the wolf has closed the distance and keeps his speed, and he too is swallowed up into the background drama of wild skies and silent falling snow. I walk on home accompanied by the remaining three wolves who keep within the screen of the forest. Sometimes they howl and I reply. Why did they not all take up the hunt?

The wolves must have travelled on and I have seen no caribou in the last five days. More snow has fallen and the wood about the cabin is quite still, snow-weighted, and enclosed. I am standing at the table preparing the evening stew when a slight movement beyond the window attracts my attention. I look again – there is nothing to see – but something I know, did move. The stew pot is left on the corner of the stove and I dress for outside, picking the camera off the floor as I go out to strap on my snowshoes.

Fifteen yards from the cabin I am proved right – a wolf track. He's been lying down in this snow bowl under the protective cover of the long, low spruce boughs, and he's been feeding off the old moose bone I put out last week. I turn back to the trail and see him, thin and scraggy grey, the leg bone between his jaws. I just have time to photograph his retreat down the aisle of snow-drooping trees. Snowshoes squeal in the cold as I follow him up into the centre of the wood – you never know, I may get another picture. His tracks are not large as I follow him round the maze of timber and willow thickets, but he is well capable of leading me on a wild goose chase. At the foot of the small two hundred foot hill behind the cabin I find the dropped bone and his tracks continue along the trail I have established up the face of the hill. Once at the top I stop for breath and to admire once again one of the most spectacular views in these mountains, when down below, to the north, the wolf trots away into the forest. Well Fred, I'll have to put some more moose meat out for you, you look a bit thin to me.

Days have passed. For an obviously under-nourished animal I am amazed at his caution. The self-control of this wolf has to be admired. My supply of meat is in surplus and I have dried ample supplies for pemmican to see me through spring and summer, so throwing a few joints down from the cache is no sacrifice on my part, the moose is dead. We all die to let others live. Only hanging desperately on to life, beyond all natural laws, do we lose sight of the all encompassing, created Life. In one sense the wolf and I are one, indivisible in the blood of the moose as all men might be made one in the sacrificial blood of the Lamb. This is not the tooth and claw jungle of Spencer; wilderness is a lecture on the subtleties of love, if one has the wit, and I love this wolf. But he is as patient as the land; mistrust is in his bones; man is a faithless creature. And yes, I want something back. I could have taken the meat half a mile away, instead I leave it in sight of my window from where, with luck, I'll engrave his image on my silver emulsion.

It is night time, moonless, cloudless, star-bright and cold. I listen to the ashes of the fire slowly falling apart, their energies deserting to stray and foreign molecules. Sleep might be around this next corner of thoughts, so it does not register at first – the scraping – what on earth is it? Is it outside or inside? Of course, it is the meat – teeth on frozen meat! Quietly I move to look out of the window, which is only half way along at the level of my bed, but already from amongst the

star-blue shadows, a lean darker form rigidly watches the window, has heard my movement, seen the inner shadows, and so I see him trot away down the trail and disappear. I lie back marvelling at such hearing.

In the morning I find he has not returned to his meal. Two days pass. I realise photographing Fred is most unlikely so the meat is left for the Martens and the Whiskey-jacks. It is around midnight though when I hear him, teeth grating away. I cannot resist looking out – but so slowly. Did you ever play 'What's the time Mr Wolf' as a child? Ever played it for real? When the gnawing stops, I stop, when it continues, I move an inch forward. Finally my face is at the side of the window and the dark shadow of the wolf consumes a feast. The night is very dark and I strain to shape the form of black on grey. The joint is smaller now and Fred picks it up and walks away. Good, he'll be staying around.

January ends with a cold snap and all animals, with the exception of Fred, appear to have forsaken our upland pass. We rarely see one another but are about by day and night upon each others trails. I haven't entirely given up hope of taking his picture and to this end decide that an eighty pound moose hindquarter, which will not be eaten by myself – even if I do nothing but eat from now till break-up – can be spared, so it gives me no small satisfaction to haul it out of the cache into the snow where it buries itself with a great thud. I reckon this will be heavy enough to keep Fred feeding close to the cabin, and as mornings and evenings are extending the daylight hours, indeed the sun was back in the middle of the month, I may yet manage some useful pictures.

As always I look out of the window on waking and check the meat lying some twenty yards off, in a direction where I would only need to open the cabin door a crack to line up the camera. But I suppose I have been terribly naïve. Fred has not shown for three days and here I was expecting him to oblige me by snacking bright and early, precisely where I chose. Oh yes, he's been back alright and it looks as though a snowmobile has run through the country – a deep three foot wide track leads a way down to the willow bushes by the lakeshore. Dragging that weight through this depth of snow took some doing. Quietly I leave the cabin then I see the fleet grey body of Fred move off into the trees a hundred yards away. Unceremoniously I walk down to the haunch, that is now dug deep into the snow by its own weight, work it loose and throw it on my shoulder and take it back to be sighted up with the cabin door. This time I'll tie it to a tree. There is no such thing as a free lunch Fred!

Fred of course climbs the hill and vanishes for the day and I have plenty of other chores to do. February weather is definitely picking up and I wonder if we are in for an early spring. Maybe I should be thinking of packing up one of these days – well by March anyway I'll be making tracks down to the river. A day is spent in breaking trail through deep snow down the valley. It

is a laboriously slow job and two of the four miles to the river are tracked out. I don't know if I'll be able to pull Canoe over this stuff – but I suppose there is time enough to worry over those problems.

The game with Fred continues, becoming more tantalising. More often than not I wake to the sound of his rasping teeth on the frozen meat. He is content to feed where I have tied it and never attempts to bite through the rope. But though I try repeatedly, Fred is sensitive to my most silent movements inside the cabin, and often he is loping away even by the time I look through the window. By month's end I call it quits and turn my attentions to packing sacks of food and equipment that will no longer be needed. Moose are coming back into the country and though two walked by the cabin yesterday and allowed me some excellent shots, the majority pass up along timberline.

A lunch is packed for the day, the sun is shining and snow crystals dazzle in a luxurious, but sweaty, -5C. I spotted five big bulls feeding high on the slopes of the Eagle Hills first thing so it maybe worthwhile to take a closer look. I follow on Fred's trail through the tall spruce back into the willow thicket that borders a deep snow-full gulley, which in spring will be a minor torrent. Across this the climb is a steep one up to the top of the little hill where only a few ancient and twisted spruce grow to overlook the expanse of the lake below. It is a quite wonderful panorama, from the distant, grey stubble shadows of the snow-bound forest cloaking the Twitya valleys along my trail of last summer – such a long, long way down – to the pristine snow-girt ridges that hang above me. Had this valley more timber I could live here forever and never cease to find new places to walk and explore. But my time here is coming to an end and as I take in the view north, toward the valley of the Mountain River – the river that some reckon is the finest and roughest in all of the Mackenzies – I think I should soon be on the other side, to get on its north shore before break-up. However, we have some moose to track today…

I break trail through scattered groves of spruce, zigzagging ever upward. It is slow going. As I cross an open span of snow a strange roar echoes through the forest to float upon the air. Where did that come from? I stop, listening. And again the bellow rings across but I now locate the source. A bull moose stands facing me a thousand yards off. All I can see is his chest and massive head, now released of its weight of antlers. He stands in deep snow and doesn't give a too welcoming appearance. I give him a return bellow, a noise off the roof of the mouth and down the nose – the resonance is right but I lack the power. He doesn't seem to appreciate that and stays put as four other bulls move quickly by on a higher trail. I walk up toward him but he is soon lost to sight via the weaving trail and I am forced to follow – until quicker progress can be made when I hit the already semi-compacted snow of the moose path itself. Yet though I climb high and far, they have gone beyond my desire to tag along. By a deceased giant of the

forest, all gaunt and grey and rotting, I sit and have lunch. A woodpecker drills below, emphasising the purity of silence.

March stays warm, urging me to move. I see the first eagle back into the country and chickadees and Whiskey-jacks are much more chirpy. Packing begins in earnest. Canoe is hauled to the front door and over a couple of days everything is packed in. The trail down to the river is virtually complete. But on the twelfth, I attempt to shift Canoe and find that moving a five hundred pound load over snow is very much more difficult than moving nine hundred pounds over ice. Though I get her down to the lake trail, to begin the first four miles of our exit, within an hour I am forced to see the error of my ways. It is not possible. Everything is packed back into the cabin – which had already been barred and shuttered – and I shall have to take small loads using the toboggan. It is an unsettling anti-climax and by evening, sunshine has given way to snow. The trail is blown over and filled in. A week passes. The cache is now cleared out and all remaining meat scattered for the locals. Fred hasn't shown up for a while but feeling generous I cut the haunch free for him to take at his leisure. It is still warm, -10 to -15C at night and some days have reached zero and signs of overflow have appeared on the lake. I daren't delay too long for I'll have to be over on that more sheltered and wooded north shore of the river to await break-up.

I pack the first load onto the little toboggan and rig a waist harness. We start off early in the crisp yellow air of dawn and begin the pull. The hundred pounds slide easily along in my snowshoe trail that remains a visible camber stretching far down the length of the lake to where it disappears in a depression of frozen marsh. The lake section is the shortest and easiest reach of the four mile route. At the marsh, the ground is irregular even under the depth of a winter's snowfall. At times, all sign of the old trail has been blotted out but the trick is to look far ahead and a barely perceptible track winds on and over and around. Look at your feet though and it is quite invisible. Step off the unseen but compacted path and you sink three feet down; this snow will still be a solid wall long into the beginnings of spring. But the trail is not the only thing to be detected, I delight in the perfect texture of the wind-blown, sun-glinting, snow-sculptured contours, so human, so feminine, instilling both humour and amazement, and wonder at this artist for his sense of irony and touches of sheer fun.

And the sleigh rushes on to catch my shoes going downhill and then I climb another step where we head due north under the abrupt slope of the hills where moose tracks wander; on to the high point overlooking my established trail and from where, for the first time, one sees the full extent of the ground still to be covered, my half-way mark. Downhill now to the deep drifted snow of the flat and snowshoes crunch three feet down at every step and at every step the effort is made to lift the leg free of the trench and move forward till the virgin plain is divided by a shadow-

deep, silver line thrown across it, anchoring my mind to the safety of home yet extending my horizon to a now unbroken pathway into the future.

The creek that drains this land remains open shallow water amongst a route of deep, snow holes till, at its delta here, overflow has built up over the ice all winter to form a large lake of blue, frail, crystalline layers which do not support my weight. I am forced to cross a snow-bridge and ride the ridge of little hills over to the west. This make for appallingly slow progress. The going is all up and down steep banks of deep snow. On top of the last small rise I look down to the frozen river a half mile away, an open creek runs in between. Passage will need some scouting so as it is lunchtime I'll make the ground-cache here, it is as safe a place as any. So the packs of equipment and clothing are wrapped up in the big tarpaulin and I lean back into them, all too ready for lunch and a rest.

It takes five days at the rate of one toboggan load a day to transport all the food and belongings to the last hill top. The weather holds fine and on the sixth day I pack up Canoe with my sleeping bag and the last few utensils of camping gear. The cabin door is swung shut and I rope it up as a small deterrent to passing Grizzlies who no doubt will be calling this spring. I am full of sadness at leaving for this little log hut has provided me with the warmest and most comfortable accommodation during this winter, perhaps the harshest of my three bush winters. I swing Canoe on to the trail and don't look back.

The snowshoe track is now well compacted and for the most part Canoe rides the four miles easily and we arrive at the ground-cache before noon. I take her on down the last steep slope and soon find safe bridges across the partly open creeks. The valley is broad, running northwest to east. Groves of willow weave a patchwork of grey haze against the blinding white floor. I cut a straight track across the four hundred yard wide river bed and beyond a sheltering bar of alder, which offers an abundance of firewood, I choose my campsite against a south-facing snow-bank between two spruce trees; a site that will be even more sheltered once I dig back into the compacted snow. All the other loads are brought across and a hurried camp is set up. The sun is falling quickly and the temperature dropping – but then it has been a brilliantly clear day with no cloud in the sky. Apricot and lavender shades converge upriver and over an open fire I watch the squinting remnant of sun hide itself behind the brutal outline of my favourite mountain. Supper of pemmican, barley and oats bubbles in the pan and I sit down to eat with a growing sense of relief and release, something I cannot quite explain, and I do not linger on the thought. Cold is converging from all sides and bed is the only place to be.

Mountain Lake. (photo: J.Blunt.)

PART TWO
CHAPTER FIVE

FREEDOM

March 26th. The temperature falls throughout the night. Sleep engages in a bitter fight with the cold. In the end my lazy streak wins to submerge the ever present chill beneath a temporary blanket of unconsciousness. Yet it is no victory. I wake more tired in the dawn light and my tongue finds an unusual looseness of the gold bridgework my dentist engineered for me a few years back. I must say it is disconcerting to wake up and have your teeth drop out! I raise myself to look at the thermometer in the corner of the tent and as I do a shower of frost cobwebs fall from the roof – it is -45C. Sleeping out at these temperatures is pretty unkind on the kidneys too – you'll never want to lie-in on these sort of mornings. The problem though is, my boots are frozen solid. I scrabble for my moccasins – Indian-tanned – as supple still as when it left the moose's back. Quickly I climb out into the immaculate blue-white world – with relief.

Spruce twigs left by the ashes of last night's fire are alight in seconds, flames curling up through big dead branches already. Snow is packed into the pot and placed to one side to catch the heat and my boots are set back on the other. Well this is great, a month of moderate temperatures then a forty-fiver for my first night out. Difficult to talk to myself with these teeth gone, I'd better put the bridge safe in my camera bag. Funny how one's mentality changes; living out here is so much more real than back at the cabin. My whole relationship to the world has altered. No longer cabin-bound and safe it is as though one more small step has been taken to reality – a step toward a super-natural. I can offer no proofs, but it is here somewhere, a definite odour long since lost amongst the streets of pseudo-civilisations – order beyond the mind of man. What wonderful cold, compressing tired perspectives that give us this technocrat, this man-god. Feel this brittle air in your nostrils, breathe it carefully down, drink it; know your susceptibility crouched about your oil-fired central heating as I know mine. Life there is not real, it is fashioned to the tunes of heresies. Like a rare animal seeking the comfort of its own solitude, and made forlorn by the uncaring crassness of all below, Truth haunts these high places where man yet finds the measure of his weakness. Strength and bravery are found in the city, it is weakness, frailty and an overwhelming dependence that is found here. But you cannot understand without risking all, not that I have, it is frightening, but the mist is beginning to clear and what I see is a beauty more thrilling than can be described and a warmth greater than any cold.

Far upriver the mountain shadows recede before the advance of snow-shining sunlight. The sun itself remains hidden behind the great peak that marks the close of the Eagle Hills in the southeast. Camp lies beneath a cold blue pall of dead, cold air. Smoke rises from the fire in a straight column, losing itself in the void. My breakfast ration of compacted oats etc, is frozen solid, so that will have to be delayed, but for now a mug of coffee will suffice. There are lots of jobs to be seen to – but where to start? I dig out the snow-bank between the two spruce trees and cut a sixteen foot pole to rig between them. A tarpaulin is then strung across and tied down at the back to form a shelter over the tent. The rear will be solid snow and the side walls can be filled with snow blocks. Before I finish that though I need to break a straighter trail to the alder wood and get a wood pile started here.

The fire is left, continuing to eat its way into the snow and toward ground that has been covered since last September, and sunlight continues on its pathway down the broad expanse of frozen river. The sky is a deep and brilliant blue. White Willow ptarmigan with black eyes scuffle their broad, feather-footed way into the alder and willow thickets before me as I reach out to break armfuls of dead wood. Several loads are carried back to camp and I see that breakfast has thawed a little, so I settle to that and another coffee before going on to dig more of the snow-bank.

By noon the temperature is -22C and there is still no cloud in the sky, the prospects for tonight look decidedly chilly but by suppertime the tarp' is rigged up and the tent sits level beneath with partly built snow walls on either side. My efforts may gain me a degree of temperature. Around 5.30 local time, the sun has dropped back into the blackness of rock and the thermometer records a steady plummet. Supper cooks in the cast-iron pot and I've dug out a small hollow in front of the fire in which I can sit back and bask. It is still nippy about the ears but camp is already a great improvement on this morning. 'Home' is being established and 'strangeness' is dissipating along with the heat of the day.

Certainly I have thoughts of continuing through the canyons beyond but these are now tempered by the experience of the four mile portage from the cabin. I'll have to hike on down tomorrow and see what's in store. Supper is eaten followed by a slab of bannock with honey and a last cup of coffee. The evening star is already out and others blink brightly in the velvet of evening light. Minus thirty-five and dropping. Everything is left ready for immediate action – and fire – in the morning. The remnant of hot water in my coffee mug is used to brush my teeth – yet even so the water freezes on the toothbrush. The worst part is taking off my mackinaw and Cowichan to wash but at least the towel is fire-warmed to dry by. Ablutions complete, nothing else to do but go to bed.

Minus forty-five again. Frost cobwebs hang from the interior of the tent. Familiarity breeds contempt but the kidneys obviously need more time to become contemptuous – clamouring for their rights. I don't waste time with frozen boots. The penetrating blue cold shadow of early morning welcomes me out and ptarmigan cackle as they start their lawn-mowers and motor bikes. Let's get this fire started.

After breakfast I move on ahead of the sun-line into the still shadow world of downriver. The snow is deep and its crust doesn't bear my weight. Progress is tiring. The broad river valley begins to narrow almost immediately, the mountain across the way sweeps down to form the right bank whilst a small outcrop of wind-blown, fossil-encrusted rock juts out on the left margin forcing me to break trail along the river ice. And in a wide sweep to the left the river turns into a curving, small amphitheatre that turns again veering right where a tiny but spectacular canyon almost encloses the river as it angles right. How on earth am I going to canoe round into that? It can't be more than twenty feet wide – though it looks more like six from here. Maybe I can establish a trail through and sleigh everything by before break-up. Oh yes, a wolf has been along here. I wonder if it was Fred?

The canyon closes in on either side. Deep, wind-blown banks of snow force me into the centre and I backtrack the thin line of the wolf's trail. In the dead still air I hear all too clearly the gurgle of running water. This canyon could be deep. I am nervous. Perhaps I should get up top. From the left wall I look down into the canyon and a line of three, small black eyes show me good enough reason to keep out. Wind swept snow courses up on all sides of the open water, the wolf too has walked high along the drift. I could never do that with either canoe or toboggan. Looks like I'll be staying put till break-up. I only hope the ice goes out quickly, for I need to be out on the main river before the full flood or there could be problems.

Back at camp there are still things to be organised but a strange soreness in my eyes slows everything down and gradually becomes worse as the day progresses. Maybe it is the wood-smoke after a smoke-free winter? But then it has never had this effect before. I try to ignore it. By bedtime the pain is excessive, especially on closing my eyes. It feels as if the grit of a fine sandpaper had been stuck under my eyelids. The night temperature stays up at -40C. I sleep better but on waking I forget all about my eyes and in blinking them open nearly cry out with the pain. This is crazy and certainly nothing to do with wood-smoke. Slowly it crawls into my brain that this can only be a mild bout of snow-blindness. Mild, for I can indeed see, though the surface of the eye must be damaged.

With breakfast over I huddle about the fire waiting for the sun to rise from behind the pyramid mountain. Each morning it comes a degree higher than the day before and I guess where it might be at month's end. Considering what an interesting photograph it will make on the

morning it shows over the very point of the mountain top. Fingers are warmed around my mug of coffee as I muse, though ears and nose are nipped by the cold and toes are not over-warm. I watch the slow advance of sunlight upriver and ptarmigan all the while complete their regular morning tattoo: k-veck k-veck k-veck and trailing off into a rapidity too fast to jot down. With the sun up and the temperature rising a few degrees I search the packs in Canoe for the Smith goggles – they have proved excellent in the past and why I never used them on the days of the portage I can't think. But search as I might they cannot be found and I wonder if they were inadvertently packed back to Yellowknife last September? So the remainder of the morning is spent in experimenting with various sorts of eyeshades, but in the end a strip of mosquito netting offers the most practical solution. Folded up it can be seen through easily and cuts out all the brilliant glare off the snow, yet it can be slipped out of the way should I need to observe anything closely. Even so, the semi-blindness continues for over a week.

By now camp is well established and reasonably comfortable though the sparkling clear days and nights of -40 have given way to a far worse type of cold. The skies are thick with snow and I lie in the tent watching a wall of blizzarding flakes fly past in unbelievable quantity. Visibility is down to seventy feet. The alder can barely be discerned. It is exciting this fury but keeping the trails open to wood and my meagre water hole, and keeping the fire pit from filling up, is quite impossible.

Blizzards for three days now and conditions were so bad yesterday I had no hot food other than coffee. Huge drifts have quite changed the landscape and the tarpaulin above the tent sags with a great weight of snow which must be cleared. Fortunately I have left a few books in reserve and Anna Karenina keeps me company through the worst of it. At other times I play Patience or Rummy. To go a walk in this is plain silly. Four hundred yards and back for water, where the river runs open between deep bulbous snow banks is quite far enough to convince one of the physical threat of this wind. Down from the Yukon Divide it races uninterrupted along the river, a huge bowling body blow. Patience, wait. Howling, screaming wind and slamming snow. How long is it since I saw anyone – seven months? Blizzards turn you in upon yourself. For the most part I exist within the twenty-six square feet of the tent. It is too cold and too much snow blows in to have the door open. I hate staying in bed all day, even though it is warmer than kneeling to play cards, or to write. Reading is difficult for fingers cannot wear gloves and turn pages. Under these circumstances any book loses its attraction. There are boring moments but there is fun in the ridiculousness of it all. Blizzards have a wonderful ability to put us in our place.

It has been sometime since I added to this log. The weather has been abysmal for the whole month – blizzards interrupted every fourth or fifth day by a less windy one but generally the temperatures have been in the minus twenties and thirties. Only today, the 27th April is there a definite spring feel to the air. Two days ago it was quite exciting for the first Grizzly showed

up. There was a thin sleet in the wind that was yelling pell-mell down the river ice, I was out gathering wood when I looked up and saw this dark, shaggy bear ambling along into the teeth of the gale. He was an incredible size and drawing about level with me with only the willow bushes and two hundred yards between us. Crouching low into my snowshoes I scuffled back to the tent for the camera. Back at the river he was now upwind and hadn't seen me at all, he was also too far away for a good picture. The cold was desperate and I was fearful of his size, annoyed too by his retreating hulk. I screamed out into the hurtling air but he only caught perhaps an echo. Stopping, he turned slightly to smell the currents, allowing me a couple of reasonable photographs, then he went on. A lonely king, supreme and regal in his lonely kingdom. Shivering and frozen out on the river I was utterly compelled to watch until half a mile on he splashed down into open water, waded across and up into the forest to disappear. So the Grizzlies are awake and life is heightened just a little more to improve the flavour of existence.

I am reading in the tent when a noise close behind brings me out with the camera at the ready and I confront a moose thirty feet away. He continues down the steep snow-bank circling away as he reaches the flat, allowing for some excellent close-up shots of a moose in action. Later, after lunch the same moose, in league with another allows me to trail them at a distance of some sixty yards for a mile or more through the forest. But my progress is slow and is only made possible at all by my following directly in the trail they have broken. Often they turn about and give every appearance of waiting for the slow-coach to catch up. At the end of our walk together I return to camp with another roll of film completed and then get busy with supper.

The water hole that was is now a definite and deeper stream between broken ice banks where ptarmigan feed on the swarms of insects hatching from beneath the ice. The river valley is full of ptarmigan quick-stepping about pecking up an incredible feast. With the sun beating down this morning I am tempted to go for a paddle, an intense experience to say the least, but very soothing. Sitting on my mackinaw on the edge of the ice-shelf watching a Dipper search the stones and the flow of crystal, gold-brown water, I am astonished by the encroaching noise of low-level jet engines. I swing about to see them but instead witness the power dive of a Golden eagle upon a hapless ptarmigan, yards from where I sit. The screaming shout of feathers in the slipstream is amazing and I wonder how he can pull up from such speed. But whether the eagle is young and inexperienced or the ptarmigan a canny, old one, the mini drama ends in mild comedy. The eagle breaks on outstretched wings and talons, the ptarmigan appears to side-step the crashing blow and the eagle is left powerless on the soft snow. No doubt feeling it isn't his day.

By now I have a well established trail to the top of the great hump of rock that sits some four hundred feet high behind camp, but whilst the snow has been very deep along the forest trails, it

has been blown away or thawed on the heat-holding rock of the summit. The views here are stupendous and vast: jagged, snow-streaked mountains sit all around, range upon range woven together by valleys half seen, and expanses of plain. Moose paths trail haphazardly along nearby slopes whilst far off into the south, down the length of the Mountain Lake pass, I can easily make out the wind-compacted trail of the March portage. Little puffs of cumulus sweep overhead in the blue and round and round this high hummock island of rock a male ptarmigan chases, in a pure poem of flight, a female of his kind. The sheer joy of being a fat white ptarmigan capable of this incredible speed between tall trees and clipping the rocky outcrops with balletic precision, is quite infectious and I watch entranced. As around and around on their wing-whistling circuit they continue, forever keeping the regulation distance between them whilst every appearance presents a most earnest pursuit. From them I turn to focus my attention, and lens, on a recently returned shrike which perches on a dead stub of spruce.

Marten tracks and the humour of snow.

Down into the east the small river has begun to wound the ice dangerously within the twisting bends of the canyon, and through the binoculars I make out where the river broadens and then a mile on where there seems to be an impossibly narrow neck of another canyon. The snow is too deep to allow tracking down and back in the day but I reckon within a week I should be able to

take a closer look. Running this first canyon is going to be a questionable risk. Around into the west I look down on the tentative line of snow-banks that mark the passage of water amidst the breadth of the river valley, occasionally a twist or spear of black water slashes the white landscape. On either side the grey-blue stubble of forest might even seem to be touched with a shade of green as it sweeps up in a straggly array of fingers to stroke the gaunt hollows and cheeks of the waiting land. But there amongst the willows on the far shore – they can't be – yes, they are, the caribou are back. The first of May and they're back after nearly four months. This really is a good day.

In the balmy grey light of dawn I rise to the stuttering of ptarmigan now concluding the peak of their breeding cycle, and I walk out on to earth, not snow. The sun rises quickly to continue with its work and I set to and put the coffee on. The smells of the damp earth and rising sap merge with the small noises of the morning, the trickle of run-off streams and the breaking of overnight puddle ice. My tame Whiskey-jack comes to feed off the same spoon I eat my breakfast from and the little chipmunk hops about my still feet to pick up the tiniest crumbs with his fastidious, perfect paws.

I wonder where I should go today? Not that I am keen on leaving camp for I have already been disturbed by one Grizzly who came close whilst I was lying down reading after lunch, and two more Grizzlies have been rummaging round the derelict and long deserted hunters camp across the river. Their sense of smell is something else. But I really should go and see if any more ice has broken up in the canyon.

I am out on the river, by the fossil outcrop when I turn to look back upstream. A Grizzly is coming out from the valley creek out on to the ice. So far all my encounters have been fleeting or distinctly to my advantage, this one feels different. The bear appears to be heading across to camp. I'd better get back. The alder and willow continue to parallel the river but there is a band of clear ground running between the wood and the forest hillside on the right, by walking along here I hope to see the bear first and to have it see me before we are too close. Just so long it stays out of camp.

I see her then back in the willows moving toward me. She is small, blonde and overwhelmingly beautiful – if I may say that about a bear? I am nervous but not afraid. She is too magnificent to fear. She is coming on more slowly now – curious. The willows give out and she climbs the slight bank to come out on my level. I have photographs already. Maybe she'll come right up to me? C'mon girl, I won't hurt you. Who's beautiful then. Hardly original but tone is everything, soft and low and steady. Nothing fast, nothing sudden. She doesn't seem to be the sort of character to give trouble – her whole stance is one of curiosity. We are both nervous of each other but time is on our side. She moves round to the east keeping at fifteen yards. OK girl,

that's fine, a better light for you. What a coat. She is as round as a ball whichever way you look at her. Please let there be enough film on this roll. Oh dear, she has my scent now – nose up – look at those claws! She turns quickly retreating down the bank to stand on her hind legs sniffing the air currents and curling her lip. C'mon girl, you're alright, c'mon then. She's coming back in, circling closer, a little to the north, my left. She really doesn't like my smell but she comes back to fifteen yards. I still stand in my original place framing new pictures and shooting, talking to her constantly. No, that's it, she wheels about and charges up the slope into the timber, wheezing and lunging her rolling weight and rippling glossy coat about her – her own self-contained engine house of heat and muscle, enclosing such intelligence and beauty.

More caribou have drifted through in scattered bands, one or two calves in tow. Melt-water has swollen the river to a turbid, ice-rising maelstrom and I wait patiently for the run-off to subside, hoping I may be allowed a couple of weeks between the ice going out and the real flood. Packing-up is in progress and daily checks are made on the canyon below. I feel like a high-strung race horse before an important classic; parts of this canyon course can bring me out in a cold sweat.

The canyon has been checked for the last time this morning and the distance beyond has been walked, though in parts wide ice-fields preclude me from seeing the whole course of the river. Before the entrance to the second canyon there appears to be a rotting ice beach on to which I should be able to berth Canoe. It is imperative I get moving and out of the mountains – over a hundred miles – before the flood. This evening I climb Hump Rock for the last time to look over my wintering ground and to scan again all the twists and bends of the ice-bordered river. It really does look like an open passage. The sun shines high over the western mountains and I look down on Canoe, now all packed and ready for the off, then across the river on top of a small bluff, I pick out a form, other than vegetation, and the binoculars depict a small grey wolf. It has to be Fred. What a strange coincidence he should turn up tonight. I howl out to him on the still air but his only response is to rise and look up and then settle down again to watch over the river valley. For an hour I sit and watch the land in his company then I descend through the trees to my bed. Maybe it isn't Fred at all. But that I know is a reaction of old – a town reaction – there is more to life here than rationalisations; a magic, a spirituality, that seems somehow to disallow coincidence. The land is greater by far than our tinkering minds and Fred, I think, has come to say his goodbye, his silent thanks. I can now discern his silhouette against the avalanched flanks of the Eagle Hills and I close up the tent for the night.

Well it's been a long time since we last got talking together Canoe. I sure hope you're up to this trip because I'm going to need all the help I can get. Final details are seen to, the weather is perfect, it is eleven o'clock, let's get going and see if the rest of the world is still out there.

Quickly we are taken out to the narrows and around left into the rock-walled amphitheatre, twisting right, down a shallow, fast riffle to the waves of the bend rapid that turns us left between the narrow cliffs of the canyon. A big submerged rock on the left, another on the right, I keep centre. We've turned the entrance well. Into the straight, plenty of small boulders to avoid but the current is slower. The right bend is coming up, shelves of rock chute the water, angling it across the main current, passageway leaves no room for error. There is a lot of white water and noise but we're down and hanging round, bracing on the right as I nearly miss the turn to hit the left wall. Nervous tension is high, it's a long time since I was going downriver. The worst is to come and I'm not sure if my plan is possible. A straight run gives me time to catch my breath and relax a little. Now then, move over to the right, the river angles to the left to pour down over a complex pattern of boulders, the straightest route through them is on the right. Canoe's snout pushes between the two marker rocks and with only a bit of an argument with shallow stones, we slip on down the rest of the way. I'm glad that's over with. Ice coming up! Oh no. It's thicker than I thought. Keep left. Great slabs of ice overhang the speeding water and I feel the chill. The river narrows; no, we're OK, it's opening up again. That's right, the wall will be coming up. A shallow riffle takes the river down against a low vertical face and turns it sharp right. Canoe manages to do the same. More ice closes in at head height as we fly down a narrow corridor. I don't like the look of this. Blue, green-white slabs, six feet deep hanging out over the water, the river flows straight, the broken ice passage doesn't, the gap narrows, fear grows. We can't be going under it. All I can see in front is the solid killing wall of quiet transparent green. Water boils over a boulder protruding in the right corner – this might be the end – the last second opens it up on the left – our exit – but too late – the current keeps on going straight on. Canoe's snout crushes between the boulder and the ice wall. With every ounce I brake back on the paddle. No time to think. Back-paddle on the right, we begin to come around as water rears up behind, then we are broaching, broadside to the flow; I don't care, this is our only chance, the paddle continues to sweep, the gap is seventeen feet three inches, (Canoe is seventeen) I slam her off the wall with the paddle tip and we come through, tail-ending it into slower water. Too close that one. Shallow water now, let's quit while we have the option. I jump out and hold Canoe up against the foot high ledge of ice. My wrist is badly sprained – must have been bracing off that wall. All I have to do now is lift four hundred pounds of Canoe up on to this ledge. I can't unpack because there is nowhere to tie her up, and I can't let go. The fourth attempt nearly breaks my back but I have won and we sit for awhile – out on the ice in the scorching sun.

Boom! I nearly die of shock. The thunderous roar is deafening and spray flies through the air. Thirty, forty feet of six foot thick shelf-ice breaks off over the corner where I got hung up. Water is already damming up behind. Let's get to those stones and up the bank. How many minutes more would have put me under those ice-cold tons? Another clinical coincidence.

I watch from relative safety as the river wells up, weakening more ice in its rising tide. Water spills through a narrow fault line and within minutes a full bore is spurting through and ice blocks as big as chicken sheds are rolled over and over. This is quite the show, pity I'm the only one to enjoy it. It must be lunchtime. I'll find a campsite up here and spend the next couple of days scouting ahead. This wrist is starting to swell. It is difficult to concentrate on establishing a camp, the antics of ice and water in combat are compulsive and compelling entertainment and only slowly do things get organised. However, I do have time to take a look at the second canyon before supper.

Half a mile on the land closes on either side to some twenty feet above the river level and I look down into a tortuous fracture of the rock, and to solid ice. Anyone inadvertently coming down here would be sucked under and taken apart with horrible ease. The land above is wild tussock moor and bog backed by the ever present forest of spruce. The canyon snakes its short way – sometimes only ten feet wide – out into a wider riffle below rising rock walls that turn the river sharp right through a rapid bend, then left into another hairpin. Beyond the next headland there is more unbroken ice spanning the canyon which now enters a deeper and wider trench. I think that gives me enough to think about for tonight, best be heading back and mull this over on a full stomach.

Supper preparations are slowed down to a one-handed operation. My left wrist is visibly swollen. Holding it to my ear and moving my hand, I can definitely hear things scraping around inside. I dig out the First-Aid box and wrap my wrist in an elastic bandage. More ice shelves break off into the river and I sit and enjoy the spectacle over the usual pemmican goulash.

So what am I going to do? I can't continue canoeing and those ice bridges may take another week or more before they go out. It must be ten miles to the main river and maybe four miles in this canyon reach. It is beginning to look as though I'm talking myself into a four mile portage – with a broken wrist to boot! The packs may not be a problem but lifting Canoe could be. I suppose I had better scout it out and see what trail we have. I should manage a mile a day – that's three full loads plus Canoe – seven miles of walking for each mile advanced.

Sleep is hard to come by, the noise of the water surging along new pathways as ice redirects the course, and thoughts of what lies ahead, all make for an overactive mind.

I wake to another pristine day and prepare for a long trek to scout out a portage trail. The problem really is the lack of a helicopter. To track the quickest route through this canyon land and steep forest slope, I need an overview. As it is I have to try and assess the whole nature of the land, working to contours, not just cutting corners. Today however will be occupied with

checking my base line, the canyon. Once that is mapped in my head I might be able to see where best to make for up country.

A local squirrel.

Reaching yesterday's point of return I walk on along a steep slope that rims the wider straight of the canyon. A porcupine leads the way for a few yards then scampers up a fallen spruce which is wedged amongst its fellows. The game trail leads to a small promontory that commands an impressive prospect of the river. Sheer weed-lined cliffs fall off on the opposite side and a pencil thin waterfall pours over the mossy lip to caress lower rock in its veiling spray. Rapids boil below and turn the river left into further stone-studded streams. The deep

defile through the land obviously turns the river repeatedly and I move down and across to climb to a higher vantage point. Beneath me is a wild curtain of streaming lace, the whole area is daunting, the thought of packing a canoe through here seems a little mad. Cliff faces rise higher still and the steepness of the forest and open slopes are cut through by deep gullies that drain the land of its melt-water. I climb on and down into sun-dappled dells where tinkling waterfalls pour through tapestries of alder branches and ice, still held in the shadow caves of rootstock worlds. I drink and climb up again between friendly forest giants that lead me up to the heat of the open moor.

Below a copse of young spruce I ford a bejewelled stream that dances through green reeds and roots where a green and golden moose skull lies. Up a small hill I walk through the trees to the edge of the canyon – far below the river tumbles whilst before me a massive gateway of golden rock frames the continuing white course of water under the royal blue sky. Barren trails of pink and copper rock spear up the mountainside and green forest clothes the gullies. In the cliff faces I detect sheens of gold and silver, purple and bronze. Heat hazes rise off the walls fashioning a geological mosaic. I am winded by the scenic beauty. Had I canoed through the canyon, I would never have seen this. It is an incredible landscape cameo. This portage will have its advantages after all – and what better place to stop for lunch? (To keep the earthly balance a skirmishing band of mosquitoes prance around in attendance.)

It is time to head back. I haven't gone as far as I should but there is too much Grizzly sign to leave camp for overlong. We'll work our way up to this point and scout on from here. It will take three days to pack this far. I track home by way of different, shorter paths, occasionally blazing a dead tree and snapping willow branches to mark the way and looking back often to fix the lie of the land in my mind's eye.

Everything remains safe on my return and with supper cooked and put away I am relaxing by the fire watching the river when over on the far side and downstream, twenty caribou clatter out on to the shingle to swim the first channel to a large central island. Since their return I have had little success with any close-up pictures but the wind is now perfect. In a crouch I move down the trail utilising the intermittent screen of small bushy spruce. All the caribou are browsing out on the sparse island. I reach the furthermost tree and push myself into its ground spreading branches – and wait.

Caribou are fickle. The mature bulls move back to the far side of the island, as if to wade off the way they have come; the cows and calves look on, reluctant to follow; some continue feeding. Minutes go by and the bulls come back to browse. They have all the time in the world, but the sun is descending steadily and my light is fading. Come on with you, get over here. With appalling hesitation the bulls stand about in the shallows. Now then, they're coming. Cows

leave their browse to follow. Five magnificent bulls, one beautiful chestnut-coated one in the lead, wade the river and stand at the bottom of the ramp – fifty yards away. I focus on the two in front as they walk slowly toward my tree. Thirty yards, they are now vaguely aware of the camera shutter but continue up, cows and other bulls behind. Perfect – full frame! The lead bull caribou fills the frame and stops, watching me carefully. Thirty feet. This is the sort of intimate photography I love. I can smell them and hear their every breath. The detail is of the quality I need for my painting. But the bull knows only that he has lead his group into danger and snorts and wheels about and all twenty animals race up the steeper bank and out on to the moor. The last of the light flies over me, enshrouding the river in its empty cooling cloud and I am allowed to stretch my muscles from an hour's cramp. Time for bed. We'll start the big carry tomorrow.

A chipmunk posing.

Four days have passed and I am now encamped above the rock gate gorge. Canoe looks very out of place so far above water level. The trail ahead has been surveyed and though the canyon country continues, the river looks possible and I am left with only a hazardous descent down

through a trackless, near vertical thicket of poplar and clinging spruce. Canoe will have to be let down on a rope. Tonight however I have a bannock to bake and my compacted muesli breakfast to cook up for the next eight days. My wrist has stood up reasonably well to the carrying but I wonder how it will cope with the paddling ahead. It is still painful.

I turn the bannock over in the skillet, a little breeze fans the coals, the soughing in the spruce tops emphasises the utter quiet; life is perfect right now. With the cooking done I bring out the relic of my moose, whose flesh continues to keep me alive. Back in the winter I kept looking at the enormous palmated antlers and found within the one the form of a beautiful bowl, were it cut a certain way. So rather than allow him to be forgotten, and his crown consumed by mice and porcupines, I decided to take a part myself to keep, always to remind me of his past glory and his sacrifice. The antlered bowl has now been fashioned and is certainly an added burden on the portage, but it is more than worth it, and at odd moments like these I retrieve it from the pack and polish it a little more on the inner face with fine emery paper. It is a thing of veined and ivory beauty. A chipmunk watches me from a gnarled root of an old spruce and I throw him a big chunk off the fresh bannock. Give and take I suppose, though I can see no animal carving ornaments from my bones.

Once again the fierce sun rises in the fierce blue and by mid-morning, sweaty and dirty I have everything back at river level. Canoe is loaded and we fly off into the kicking little white-caps of the lower canyon rapid. I wonder what's in store? After a couple of sharp bends that I've already scouted from above, we are into uncharted waters. A long straight leads us between high, black slag sided cliffs that peter out to islands of poplar and a fast switchback course. Snow lingers on all the north slopes and I am left to drive a runaway canoe round a maze of flooding channels where ice-fields sit in wait, brooding when to drop. Always the question is which channel? No sooner down one lane than three more options are open and a wrong choice might be catastrophic. Sweepers are ever present, both fishing for you from shore and spearing out from a multitude of minor log-jams. I snatch quick glances at the land – estimating its form to fit the drainage to come. The winding, snaking course stretches time, it feels like hours I've been battling, we must have come ten miles? But only in the mid-afternoon, by which time exhaustion is close, does Canoe speed out from the labyrinthine way between cavernous walls of ice and I realise we are on the Mountain River proper, and the flood is up. Scenically this is superb. Across on the north shore I berth Canoe on a sand beach and bail out.

The wide span of river wends a straight pathway into the east and small poplar islands fade into the distance whilst beckoning valleys call from amongst dark irregular mountains. A massive corroded wall of red rock backdrops the forest along the south shore. White flanked peaks rise behind. Wild and alluring. Who could resist this siren call to travel the river? Grizzly tracks line the beach and camp is set within a small rustling copse of poplar. I relax walking the shingle

bars and studying all the surrounding mountains, then return to prepare supper. We are now back to real river travel and I don't stint on the rations. In a few days we could be out on the Mackenzie. Blue smoke filters against the screen of budding willow and I sit out on the bar watching the ice-field upriver spawn mini icebergs. Small trees get floated down and are hung up on riffles, though even as I watch they are freed by the rising brown water.

Overnight the river has risen twelve inches. Though I am uneasy with the unleashing flood I do not consider delaying the journey. The Twitya was in flood for a month and if I have missed the lull at least the high water should carry me over the rocks in safety. I pack up and we head off into the unknown. The river is broad, covering acres normally quite dry. Riffles are many but often they are obscured by the mud-dense, heavy water. Navigation is constant, watching ice blocks on the beam, getting ahead of them lest they grind up on a shallows and bar my way. Logs are an occasional hazard. Down the straight we speed, along the inner alleys and turns of this mountain-strung avenue. Mile after mile is travelled before the distant land moves in to change our course from the north-northeast back to the east around a twelve mile horseshoe of a bend. And all the time the gradient is becoming steeper and the water faster. On one small twist, huge boulders raise their black, sharp shoulders down a churning pitch of rapid but Canoe gallops by along the left in an unobstructed torrent. I have a map of the river firmly in my head and know that after a widening reach through more open country, the mountains beyond will drop the river into a constricted, sinuous trail of momentous velocity. It will be time soon to be pulling up.

The sun is in its descent as we round one more bend to be confronted by, in the near distance, a towering wall of purple terraced rock. By all the geology it seems the river must contort impossibly and descend a frightening gradient. There has been no stop all day and I am becoming dangerously tired. Slack water rides the outside of the next bend and I ease Canoe over into a kindly berth on the right on which the sun pours its golden light and Grayling swim lazily in a clear, stream-fed eddy. The opposite shore and steep mountain are in shadow. This is a quite private haunt and safe. We must have run twenty-five miles today.

Through the sunlit woods I walk around to get the feel of my surroundings and to ease the tension of the mad day's ride. A soft zephyr stirs the lofty tops of the spruce whilst at my feet I become aware of what seem to be old drainage channels for the creel that clatters nearby. Mountain avens grow on the rotting sill logs of a long derelict cabin and this might be some sort of trap-door. A slight eeriness creeps around the sun-kissed tree trunks. What history does this place hold? Who I wonder lived here in such isolated splendour? A shiver involuntary touches my back as I look downriver, down into the shadowed, narrowing cleft that drops and turns out of sight into the overwhelming strata of towering cliffs. It is a cold, storm-blue sea down there with a muted echo rising up and held within the walls. I turn my attentions to preparing camp.

The sun rises to light the green mountain across the cold river. Eleven snow-white Dall graze contentedly the high slope. I look over the river again. It sweeps around this bend, moving fast and angling left, riffle water on the left coming down to the centre, creek outflow and rapid charging down from the right. We should get through with just a bit of a twist but what on earth is down there beyond that wall and out of sight? Even if I could cross this creek I wouldn't be able to walk much further – so much for scouting ahead. Nerves do not allow for the most relaxed breakfast but I force myself to eat the usual ration, I won't be eating again till we stop this afternoon.

Canoe slips out and we're in the thick of it in seconds. Nerves subside beneath the pure physical action. Rapids are such a glorious fight – it isn't always strength so much as cunning – one can be awfully sly in this game, but then, so can the river. Surprisingly the expected drop levels off quite soon and we are sped into a six mile run where unbelievable mountains spear into view and I see why this river is so named. It would be great to stop and take photographs but the flood allows for no such touristy pursuits and I wonder at times where I could exit should I really need to. More sheer-sided ice fields are passed and navigation is strained to the limit as walls of green rise on all sides and across my horizon, allowing for no directional aides. The river is too wide here to just blindly follow the raging current. Ice-jams are once again a real possibility, bergs sit or grumble down the riffles and I am forced to race between them.

Then the river narrows and winds a way down into the first of the hairpins. Weird rock formations mock from a little knoll on the western shore, rolling thunder comes to meet me from between the walls and a huge swell rises back from the small canyon formation. The land is being asked to swallow too much water and is in a state of constant vomit. Boulders pierce the foam but everything is too fast – don't ask me for directions. This is nasty. I brace into the turn, keeping off the wall, another bend, a tighter one, left again. Oh God! Get left. Bloody hell. It's sickening to look at. It's huge. The frantic swell surges off the wall but even in this great flood depth of mud-thick river, an immense head of a boulder protrudes with every passing wave. Veritable grey-beards of water seethe and writhe a tortured passage upon and over it. It is the mythical head of the Gorgon itself and the water snakes scream out from the shaggy headed monster and pull me closer and closer. The noise is dull and deep, a constant pulling vibration at a pitch conducive to terror. The awesome brown head and curling cream waves with the roaring hole beyond drag me perilously near. Strength plays no small part now. Forget about broken wrists, this is a life at stake.

The river is kind and I am allowed to pass. More tight bends follow, perhaps with bigger waves but the Gorgon head is left within its canyon cage and the valley begins to open up and the river steadies momentarily. Here a backwater offers me a short respite and I consider breaking off for

the day but by the time I have procrastinated the slack water has drifted us into fast and the chance is lost. The scenes fly past in a wonderful frieze of mountains, sometimes they sit above forested banks, at others, above ice shelves or overhanging cliffs of eroding, black gravel earth. Constantly the paper map in my head unfolds to the reality, to which the most able cartographer shall never do justice.

Cache Creek will be entering on our right soon. That means the first of the main canyons. A dangerous one I've been told and imperative to scout. Miles go on by, the green of spring growth lends a peace that even the muddy fury of the river cannot dispel. Land forms finally dictate a canyon ahead, a back channel is snatched at and I pull up, tethering Canoe to the remnant of a washed-out log-jam. I reconnoitre the channels coming out on a point of land level with the river and surrounded by the thin stems of young willow. Beaver dams and ponds litter the land behind me but the scene ahead might have been thought up by Cecil B. deMille, certainly Charlton Heston could have used it to good effect for any of his epics. Across my field of view a high, sheer slab of rock reaches up and up and stretches so far into the southeast I cannot see its end; a higher golden-pink mountain raises its summit beyond. Not very far from where I stand a black gateway has been cut cleanly through the wall and into this the river glides, swirling and sucking in a tremendous tension of muted understatement. It is a sight to catch ones breath. Am I really going to have the nerve to put Canoe into that slit of rock?

To my left, the wall continues across and above me but a slow creek meanders out and I follow it along. The water here is quite still, deep and aquamarine. Large Grayling dive into the shadow depths on my approach. An old beaver dam spans the breadth of water, from the wall to a level, well-spaced forest which is sunny and sheltered. I'll bring Canoe around to here, make camp then scout this canyon from above. This will make a beautiful campsite and our run for today must be in the low twenties.

With Canoe safely berthed I sling the camera over my shoulder and begin a steep and slippery climb up the rock face, straightaway wondering how anyone could possibly portage this canyon anyway? On top I work my way through the scanty forest and yielding tussocks over to the abyss. It is a restricted view and only a seething hiss is borne up on a cold draught of air. Continuing on I find any number of safe vantage points from which to look down and along a good section of the canyon which must be all of a mile or mile and a half in length. Generally it is a straight canal, very deep and very fast. From up here the waves look small and regular though I estimate they'll be about eight feet. I climb over a steep open slope and the end of the straight comes into view but across on the other side the crag of pink mountain exposes itself to best advantage and I sit down to absorb it all. High up, from out of some unseen cleft, a silver stream falls uninterrupted for two hundred feet before disappearing in the folds of rock to leap out again from a lower nook to clear the golden body of the mountain for a further hundred feet

before streaming down with ethereal grace through short, sinuous turns and finally cavorting through a boulder bed as it joins the mother river. Silver water upon glowing pink rock set against the royal blue sky. What a secret, perfect place. Only with reluctance do I turn my attention back to the river below. Let's take a closer look.

Standing on the crumbling precipice I stare into the most impossible piece of water I have ever seen. The 'straight' as I'll call it, comes down the narrow corridor of rock, it widens a little in a slight oval amphitheatre, then if you're facing downriver the rock walls allow for a small spur of water to escape off at the one o'clock mark. Yet before it is allowed to do so the subterranean pressures are such, that the total width of this 'doorway' is occupied by one immense boil. If I haven't described very fully before what a boil is, this one deserves the full treatment, because it must be the granddaddy of all boils – given the conditions of the day. To look down on it from a hundred feet up is to see the very pulse of the river, a three foot rising pulse which is contained within a semi-whirlpool. I have to call it this because water falls into and out of it over the lip of a revolving peripheral current, but all similarity to a whirlpool ends there – there is nothing regular or smoothly beautiful about this boil. The head of it moves in all directions, in fact there are heads within heads, each moving contrary to the other. Only the slightly irregular beat of the pulse rising and falling cancels the maelstrom of the cross-currents. I watch, mesmerised by the spewing of this live thing. Entranced, I study its breathing. How do you get by such a thing? Am I seriously thinking about canoeing through here – this canyon, this boil? The flood must have infected my brain and the river has cast its spell. I am not sure there is any other way out.

Camp is quite idyllic – a virtual Eden, and there are no mosquitoes. A pair of Teal have their home here. The heat of the day is sufficiently oppressive to persuade another freezing dip in the crystal clear creek then I explore about in the sun-dappled wood where the smoke from the campfire drifts in a soporific haze. Occasionally I give thought to that consuming cleft of rock waiting beyond the trees. You're really going to run it aren't you? I wonder back to put a few sticks on the fire, water is boiling in the pot and smoke escapes upwards through the dead, still branches, time lies easily upon this place where only faintly, felt as much as heard, is the dull, sucking swell of the canyon an intrusion on all of this peace. Evening encroaches gently. I unburden Canoe of a few more pounds and throw surplus food to the fishes. There is almost no darkness now but a short sleep is in balance with the long sleeps of winter. I am up with the rising sun and once again, there are no clouds in the sky.

Canoe is paddled upriver in the flat water then turned into the pulling current. We have just enough time and space to line up on the canyon mouth – for there are no banks on either side, just flat, swirling water – with one small escape. We are being drawn in now, dark, cold rock hangs over us. It is suddenly chill and echoes rear up as does the immense swell. I feel weak in

the presence of such forces but knees set hard against the hull and I brace myself firmly against the pack in front as the paddle bites deep into the riding wave. The first corner is entered and rounded in sunlight. Now I see the size of the stuff. Eight foot was a good guess. But they are not at all regular. Canoe rides up through several then one attacks us beam on, a wall of water rolls over, a second angles across the bows ripping away the front of the tarp'. I am kneeling in six inches of water, the pink mountain is racing by, Canoe surges heavily through more big, crashing waves, I can't believe the speed we're travelling, the amphitheatre is coming up already. Move to the right – inside of the bend. I can see the boil now, ferocious from this level and I see the flaw in my plan of attack. I thought I could squeeze by on the right but now I realise the upsurge of water is powerful enough to trap me against the rock face and throw me over. It is even more savage than I thought. What am I to do? Three seconds you've got. Go for centre. I'm mad. If I had the time I'd laugh. And if I had the time over again I wouldn't be here. But there is only the now. Canoe runs heavily dead into the eye of the boil and we're held fast in its clutches, the paddle is useless. We are in a punch-bag with this monster and water rises up on all sides as we fall into its feeding mouth. Then spewing – as if we were a matchstick – it flicks us round, foam pours in over the gunwale, flick again, we're facing upstream, tarp' streaming behind us, Canoe is a dead weight holding tons of water. I am beyond panic, into the energy borders of hate and fear, we'll be rolled over any moment. The paddle must be close to breaking, the boil vomits us out backwards, full of water – brimful – Canoe sags wearily beneath me. Rock walls tower overhead, closing in on another bend, the sucking undercurrents at the edges hiss a gleeful victory. But they haven't got me yet and the paddle continues in desperation as I try to steer us through. The walls are opening up, another bend, inside on the left, quick, pull left, get in there. A bar of cobbles and boulders wait patiently in the sun, the river races on, I feel rocks under the paddle, throw it away onto the bar and jump out with the track-line. Canoe, overburdened as she is, cannot protest. I pull her into shore. I am worried about food supplies and my sleeping bag. There is no time to rest. Packs are wrestled from their ties and from the clutching weight of water. Rifles, tent, everything is thrown out and then spread around in orderly fashion on the warm rocks to dry. Canoe is tipped, then overturned, and brought up higher. There is no loss, most things have stayed quite dry, and I am through. We made it! Nearly died of fright, but we made it. Elation coagulates with shock. I am dreadfully weary. But the sun is high, it must be time for food. In fact it is still early but lunch is eaten and within an hour or so everything is more or less dry and repacking gets underway. We are ready to go again. These mountains that are closing in once more are, I believe, known as the Shattered Range.

If the experience of this morning was bad, this afternoon is exquisitely worse. Sudden bouts of fear we can all take – probably good for the heart muscles – but protracted fright is something else. If you know anything about canoeing you know that it is law to scout ahead on all rapids and canyons, yet this now is an eternal, overflowing rapid of a velocity that allows no one to get

out for a leak let alone a reconnaissance . The sharp rock banks slope in at a steep angle on either side and the river, a single channel, throws itself along in the steepest descent I've yet encountered. I don't like big-dippers and this river is beginning to feel like one. At intervals, down through the ranges of mountains, some idea of the drop ahead can be gauged, but for now there is no end to the battle. I don't think I have pulled on the paddle for the last five miles. It is all braking work, trying to slow the descent. Shoulder muscles are racked. Waves are careering over us constantly. This water is beyond my level of competence. – Come on, you've been reading too many 'how to canoe' books. You're not here for the bloody sport, you're here because you have to be. We'll reach the bottom of this hill yet. In one piece too. Jagged boulders line every shore, three foot waves offer no respite in this choppy, downhill sea. I am so tired. It feels late in the day. Clouds, light fleecy ones, block the sun. Another five miles, the river is widening, rapids are being replaced by a roller-coaster swell, maybe we'll pull up soon.

The steep walls have finally given way to a more open aspect, but what's this coming up? Another canyon – a short one by the looks of things. Keep left here, that's a shelf against that right wall. Water leaps down along the rising cliff face, sand flats and bars fall away on the left to meet a sheer rock wall at the base of the river's hill. The breadth of the river falls away to the left so that my horizon is tilted and this declination can be felt as we speed down. But before the cliff turns the water right, a stump of ancient geology sits stubbornly in mid-river, some sixty feet wide and sixty tall it waits while all about the river runs flat and seething, wave-less and ominous. Which way is the main current? Canoe rides in the centre charging down on this not insignificant obstruction. I cannot for the life of me tell where the majority of water flows – left or right? I have no time to fight a wrong choice. Heads or tails? Tails it is, let's get left. Well we're getting by anyway though we'll now have to cut in behind the stump to come into the inside of the bend.

We are past the stump rock but I have misjudged the strength of the current, the massive downward flow moving into the bottom left corner of the turn. Canoe seems quite powerless. The cliff is looming up and the muted roar of water slipping over a deep ledge of rock under the wall comes to me on a threatening breeze. I have little energy left with which to fight. Canoe is only feet from the cliff, I turn her to parallel the wall but we are going to get swept over the ledge. A boiling cauldron of churning water waits three feet down. At this point I give up. The paddle has nowhere to go anyway, it is all air. I give up the physical effort, it is too great. I pray. Not words. It is automatic. It is total. All consuming. Fear and peace together. I love this river, love it with all its murderous threat; I love my life, but I submit both to the same power. Wilderness teaches you your insignificance. I am nothing. For a second everything is nothing. We hang in the air – dropping – then we are not overturned, the cliff does not smash into us, the wave does not roll over us. The river spits us out from beneath the wall to race us on through

the dog-leg canyon and into a short straight where a huge ice-field along an incoming river shows up. Beyond, in a back channel, I find a beach on to which Canoe glides. Thank you.

Clouds have dispersed and by the sun I see it is still early afternoon. Willows are cut back from the top of a sandbar and camp is pitched. There is plenty of driftwood for a fire. Walking back to take a closer look over the river which flows in from the west clean water is found in still pools set amidst soft sand and boulders. Once again packs are lifted out and dried off in the sun and Canoe is cleaned. I lie in the shade of the tent and read through a few pages of this log – bringing you up-to-date – in pencil of course. The river might try and take a closer look at what I am writing about her – and ink would run away. Today has unnerved me to some extent, but though I am afraid I feel a very positive sense of well-being, of being almost invincible. This is in no way bravado – and I don't think such is possible after nine months of complete isolation – it is more a feeling of resignation, that there is no alternative but to go on, (and there is none.) I can't really put it into words. There was a seven lined poem I wrote a while back, it started: "See Life – Lie in the arms of death…" and it keeps going round in my head. It has been a strange day altogether, lived at a pitch of existence I think should be experienced more frequently – especially perhaps by those who would dictate life's terms without moving far from their fireside.

The river rises every day about this time as the mid-day melt-water in the high mountains finds its descent along the watershed, but by morning it will have dropped a couple of inches again. Overall there is no appreciable difference to the high flood levels. Given a good day tomorrow I should have put the mountains behind me. I've been told the rapids below could be bad and that there is a canyon with a waterfall in it, making a half-way portage necessary. But we've survived so far and with food enough for a month I have no time to linger. Many thoughts drift with the smoke from my campfire and I listen to the talking gabble of the river and watch as ice-rafts are spawned from the parent field. " See Life – Lie in the arms of death…"

Canoe sings out upon the broad sunlit waterway where for a while our way is relaxed and joyous but then as the river winds amongst closing banks it becomes an immense rapid once more. No sooner does one stretch of rough water end than another begins – not as before with short, choppy seas, but with bigger rolling swells that at times fully engulf one end of Canoe. Twice I am forced to land and bail out and though the sun shines brightly I am very cold from the constant wetting. By noon we have come a tremendous distance for I think this is the canyon coming up.

The river begins to narrow, the left shore offers my only possible landing but I should have pulled up half a mile back. Let's get over there. But the current falls down at speed and I fear that by putting in here, close to the oncoming cliff, I shall never get out, and furthermore, if I

fail to make a landing I shall be dangerously close to the wall, off which is a vicious backwash. It is too late I know, the decision has been made. Canoe faces down into the turn, rising gold and grey-purple walls surround us. It is like looking down into a pit, dark and black at the bottom where cream-thick waters churn and mud-coloured waves throw up their twisting bodies, shouting and clamouring to find a lower state of being. Gravity drags me down amongst them.

Waves attack from every angle, I brace as best I can, the sheer din is incredible, I can hardly think. It is dark and cold but there is the heat of battle here. Six foot, eight foot waves punch one another aside, I am powerless, yet I fight. We are turning left out of the bend, there is a short straight opening up, the waterfall will be on the next bend, try and move right. Yes, there's the boulder bar, but watch that channel. A raucous, furious channel flies down on my right, large boulders rise beyond it, we get closer but pass the mouth of this overflow. The paddle touches rock and I throw myself out grabbing Canoe's stern to pull her into the lee of a larger rock. I haul her onto the stones. Now then, let's see what we've got ourselves into.

The left margin curves round as a short, sheer, eroded wall that is forest topped and rises to cliffs at the twelve o'clock mark – if there is a waterfall over there, I cannot see it. More than likely the water levels have smoothed it over. The twelve o'clock cliff breaks off and at two o'clock the right margin cliffs go on into the beginnings of another bend – turning the river left – but this I cannot see. The boulder bar where I stand is completely surrounded by roaring, boulder-studded river; a smaller channel cuts it into two. Maybe we should get something to eat then we can portage over to the lower rocks and work things out from there.

Two hours are spent in eating, resting, taking photographs and in the carry itself. Canoe is packed and everything is strapped back in. I feel sick. I pray. There won't be time once we push out.

The main river comes down from my left, bounding along its course in a great rolling wash. This then meets up with the big overflow channel coming down from behind me on my right, the meeting of these waters creates a wild, turbulent wall of rising waves that the main flow forces onwards into the sheer right wall that begins to turn the river left. I cannot see beyond the height of these waves. All I can hope to do is crash through them into the inside of the bend – and that will mean one very lucky ferry. I push out from shore. Keeping upright is the immediate consideration. I cannot possibly cross the current. Water roars into my ears, it is quite deafening in here, but we are through that first wall being carried on into the bend. Oh my God, sixteen feet! Three monstrous waves curl back off the cliff and take up half the river, only the inside of the bend is flat but all the powers push me from there. There are perhaps fifteen seconds to go and I am trapped between a desperate back-ferry, knowing full well that I cannot

make it, and an equally futile effort to take the wave bows on. The rising colossus twists diagonally across the thrust of the current. It is a magnificent sight. Canoe rears up and keeps going up. I have no doubt that this is it. Strange business. I am half amused and half annoyed. It all happens too quickly, I suppose we just get rolled out. Cold slams me into shock, my right hand finds a poor grip on the gunwale and a hundred tons of water throws itself on top of me, blotting out the horrible noises above, exchanging them for a far worse lung-squashing, head-squeezing torture. Then it passes in a struggling, gasping rise to daylight, the mouth tube of the life-jacket is before me, I exhale to fully inflate it. No sooner do I, (I am at the bottom of the trough,) than the second wave falls down exploding against my head in subterranean screams. My lungs are bursting, time is already stretched beyond endurance, the airless weight screwing all life and will out of me. Then there is air again and I gulp it down, a half lungful only before water smothers it out. Fear pouring into my soul and cold sinking deeper into the very heart of me. Both hands grip the gunwale and feet swing up and brace against the opposing side. I try and protect my head by leaning into Canoe but the action is the opposite of what the life-jacket is designed for; the position is extremely tiring. We are being carried through the bend and the wall is coming up. God, don't let us be trapped against it. I still cannot get my breath, the current rides us along the wall and out, waves constantly enclosing my head. Perhaps I can climb on top of the hull? I raise my upper body out but hands have no hold on the slick shell and legs are being dragged on by the water. I am in danger of losing Canoe altogether. I retreat back, slung as I was and braced beneath, but the effort is too much, the cold is sapping all strength from me. Work your way up to the front of the bows, there has to be a better grip. Hand over hand I reach the snout, the big waves have gone but smaller ones are still killing me, stopping my air supply. My right forearm can only lock up into the bows, there is no other hold. I try and assess what lies before me, the thought of more big water approaches terror. Now that there are longer periods of half breaths my body has time to recognise the contracting cold. Briefly I think of things dropping out of Canoe, the packs slung underneath on their straps and ropes. I don't reason it out but the load must be absorbing its own weight in water, Canoe is beginning to act as an anchor. My whole body is streaming out before me in the current, my arm is slowly being torn from its socket. Larger waves again consume me. The elastic band of time stretches to breaking point – have I been here for hours? From somewhere I recognise that unconsciousness is not far away. I have enough sense left to tell me that will mean the end. Hypothermia is very close. If I don't get out soon, I'll be dead. Waves again wrack my lungs, the cold saps the will to live and the sheer torture of asphyxiation screams for a silent end. If only it would end. What a violent, drawn-out death. My arm won't take any more, at least it is a conscious decision to let go, it is my only chance. Even if I could swim I would not be able to do so now, I can only feebly scull toward the left shore – left puts me on the downstream side of the mouth out on the Mackenzie, downstream to Good Hope and that's where I'm heading. A boulder scrapes beneath my back, I fear more rapids, I can see nothing but water rushing past at eye level. My legs knock against rocks, I make an extra effort, trees are close-by but the current

tumbles me along till I feel gravel underneath and a small anger thrashes out to fight the flow and grasp for any purchase. I am down on my knees crawling, the river still washing over me but I'm getting out. I crawl up onto the bank and into the forest.

The solidity of the earth, the relative warmth of its hold, the leaves, the bark, the twigs, I drag myself across them, feeling them intimately but unable to open my eyes for the quite dreadful nausea of the dashing scene that speeds by in front with quite sickening dizziness. In a green pool of sunlight I collapse face down and shake in uncontrollable shivering. I am conscious and fully aware of the crucial temperature balances fighting within me. By thought, I try to control the violent shuddering but I think the effort may consume more energy than the shaking. I let it have its way, I will live. Fire is the essential. I force my hand to steady and fingers feel for my match container. From a kneeling position I concentrate both hands to open it, to unscrew the twist cap, but the loop breaks off and I haven't the dexterity required to open it without. Deliberately and carefully I replace the container in my pocket. I lie down again, exhausted, and shake and shake, holding fast to the warm earth.

I must have been here for a long time. My clothes are quite dry and the shadows have moved quite around. I am seventy-five miles from the Mackenzie River and a further sixty from Fort Good Hope; I had better start walking.

There should be some traffic starting to use the Mackenzie by now. Today is June 4th. I'll be able to attract somebody's attention once I get there. What have I got? Life-jacket, sheath knife, matches – if I can open the container. Everything else seems to have been ripped out of my pockets. Pity I'm not better shod. I should have known better than to travel this river in old rubber canoeing boots. My legs want to stagger off without me. I suppose I should walk along the shore and keep an eye out for Canoe. Wonder where she is?

But the shore is so overgrown that passageway is impossible and I am forced to climb higher and higher through the unending, unyielding forest. At every step my head swims in a fainting sickness and my stomach and lungs seem swamped in muddy water. Water has forced its way into my sinuses. Evening light shrouds the forest floor, the temperature has dropped. One old black sweatshirt is on my back. I am wearing Rohan breeches and gaiters. I put clean socks on yesterday and they are too short to protect my legs between gaiter top and the zippered leg of the breeches. The boots are already letting in every twig and sharp spruce needle and they give no support. What an idiot I've been. I do not walk far. I stop to lie down amongst a stand of thin, young spruce. Mosquitoes whine in toward me, a squirrel chatters nearby. A mosquito steps across my ear, whining intently. It is really not the bite but that incessant bloody song they sing. I get up and walk on. Let's get down where there is some deep moss. A little later I find a fallen tree, a big one surrounded by thick beds of moss. Branches are broken and woven from

its upended rootstock still luxurious with mosses down to the ground. Within half an hour I have fashioned a small moss cave into which I can insert my upper body. Inside it is dark and silent. Maybe I'll get some sleep now? But within five minutes the first mosquito has found a way in and now his song is amplified in the confines of the mossy cavern. Oh let him be, let him bite and maybe he'll go to sleep as well. But of course there are always more for me to feed. With the mosquitoes and the cold, sleep never really comes.

In the grey light of dawn, which is perhaps no more than an hour or two on, I rise, shake myself, feel for my knife and match container and pick up my life-jacket; let's get going. The forested mountainside is still complete jungle, the top of my gaiters chafe at every step and exacerbate the mosquito bites of the night. My ankles have had a fair going over too. The sun is not too long in rising and a moose calf runs past bleating. I am not the only one down on their luck. I reckon my chances are better than his though. Wonder what happened to the mother? Pity he wasn't closer, I could have killed him with the knife. Too dangerous to try and run him down – couldn't possibly through this stuff – and would waste too much energy. I must travel smoothly, don't exert yourself, don't get angry at the conditions, we'll make it easily. Seventy-five miles is a doddle. No problem.

The great conspiracy of vegetation does everything within its power to frustrate my passage. Small copses of spruce grow so thickly I have to find a route around their borders. Travel is never in a straight line and never on the level. Each few hundred yards of the journey passes through its own subtle, yet distinct terrain. The supposed uniform forest possesses as much individualism within it as the average crowd of humanity. Alder groves grow in excruciating contortion. Thick, unbreakable limbs reach into every space and I am forced to climb over, or under, or around each one, acknowledge its existence with a firm hold so that it will not spring back and hit me in the face. It is an erratic sort of locomotion but I endeavour to make my body flow and to enjoy the complexity of the forest puzzle. Sometimes I fail. Frustration boils up forcing me to hurry, but then I am made to laugh because hurry is the last possible accomplishment for a mere human here. However within a few miles the forest becomes a different character, more open and accessible, and progress is a beautiful freedom. With no pack to weigh me down, with no food to stop and eat, (but for a rare shrunken cranberry of last years crop) I enjoy the forest to the full. At times now the river is at my side but it is so wide and littered with log-jams that it is almost pointless to look out for Canoe, and were she only ten feet out from shore I have no way to reach her in this torrent. To waste time therefore in looking allows less time for my exit and I am fully aware that the energy expended in walking is not being replaced. Though hunger so far, is no problem I have read that it is the third or fourth day of starvation when it begins to hurt; it will be interesting to see what it is like, to discover how much of the world lives.

Where any bend in the river can be detected I endeavour to cut the corner by travelling through the interior forest but it is virtually impossible to say whether this saves me any distance. More often than not I become fearful that the river has swung off at an entirely different tangent and I make tracks to my right to intercept it. Water is a problem in other ways; I have a constant thirst. The terrible nausea of yesterday has faded somewhat but I need water as if it were food. The river is virtual mud and tastes fowl whilst the snow off these lower hills has all gone and the smaller streams are already dried up. Only rarely is a small trickle found to allow me a carefully constructed drink, as lying outstretched, I manoeuvre leaf or stone to pour a little stream over a step which affords me a flow of clean water. But even so I feel it may be dangerous to drink too much. The icy cold liquid is uncomfortable on an empty stomach.

As the sun moves overhead I come onto a creek that forces me back into the forest, to find a shallows where I can wade across, and I continue on my way. I am not tired and it is important to cover as much ground as possible in these first days of good health – and whilst the country is hospitable. By the time afternoon is recognisable the land leads me upward away from the river into a bleaker, more sparse forest and on to crumbling bare rock and I realise I have come to the edge of the Mackenzie Valley. From the lee of a small defile I look out across an unbelievable vastness of flat land. Millions of spruce trees. In the far, far distance, literally as far as the eye can see, a hint of further hills mark the horizon. Somewhere about there will be the Mackenzie River. I turn about, the valley of the Mountain River reaches back into a line of distant gun metal-blue mountains, still snow-capped. It is a grim scene. ‘We have let you go this time’ they seem to say. With emotion I think of all the important material possessions and the work I have lost, but with a still more powerful feeling I know that the land is offering me freedom – freedom from being possessed by my possessions. The river has taken them all, save a few clothes on my back. Hungry and happy, I have never felt such elation, such perfect union. Curling up on the rock, sheltered from the wind, I close my eyes and rest in the lowering rays of the sun. The sharp short whistles of ground squirrels talk back and forth across the hillside.

Cold keeps me from sleep. The sun has disappeared behind the mountains in the northwest, perhaps it is just before dawn? I start walking down open grassy slopes towards the valley floor that spreads for square miles in a maze of green-poplared islands and brown flooded flats of river channels. The river floods back along obstructing fingers and each progress is thwarted by a return, to get by these too deep gullies. Ice coats any still puddles, mud is frozen and I am very cold. Then I look at the elastic bandage still wound about my broken wrist – perhaps it could be put to better use? I take it off and wind it about my neck and head as an improvised turban. That should keep a little more heat inside. For several miles I meander along dry aisles amidst a world of poplar trees and poplar leaves until I come to the river again beside several acres of shingle where logs and debris are stranded. For a moment I stand and watch the raging water. I can hardly believe its speed. Was I really travelling on that for over a hundred miles?

My thoughts are interrupted by a movement out along a snye under a muddy bank – a porcupine.

The porcupine is wisely suspicious of my approach and I hate to do what I have to do, for I have a particular fondness for these inoffensive creatures with their warm brown eyes. There is no solid timber about to club him, my only weapon is my Puma sheath knife. He is not entirely without defences, he turns his back on me and all his barbed quills rise for his protection. But I tread firmly on the base of his tail and reach over to stab him in the head repeatedly. It is a bloody sort of death.

On the low distant horizon the sun sinks into the quills of the black, spruce forest. It is not yet midnight. Against a dry tree trunk I gather drift-wood and collect handfuls of spruce twigs. The match container is unscrewed for the first time, I have twenty matches. One of them starts the blaze. To feel the heat of the growing fire is basic satisfaction, I feel in control of my own small world and I know that everything I am doing is right and good. Whilst the fire builds up its ember bed I skin the porcupine and take its four limbs, the remainder of the meat is negligible. I prepare two green sticks, skewer a joint on one and the other serves as a spit, with the leg roasting inches above the coals. Pity I haven't got a pot. You really need to boil porcupine – the longer the better – then it is as good as lamb. But this will be good. I should find one or two more on my way out, there shouldn't be too many days without food.

As I sit by the fire eating the third roasted leg, the sun comes up over the horizon, just a little along from where it went down. I leave the fire to burn itself out and begin walking, eating the last leg as I go. What supreme simplicity. What a beautiful sun. And I watch the ever changing symphony of colour across the north-eastern sky. Black changes to purple and blue and pink mingles with touches of gold. A rippling flood of colour over the earth and I walk and climb and stumble my way towards it all.

The going here is hard to believe. The land is formed by gigantic earth slides causing deep holes and steep mounds that are now grown over with dense alder. So dense that to force a way into it feels absurd, but there is no other way. Below, along a steep and eroding shoreline, the river swirls up into the alder whilst above, the jungle continues just the same. I can be making no more headway than a mile an hour, and probably much less. In time I am able to continue more easily – along a pink cobbled shore and through forest that has grown up over the centuries across acres of this same boulder field. It is pleasant here and I am left to cross a multitude of easy waterways as a creek worries its clean waters to join the muddy river. Trying to sleep through the still freezing temperatures of night is I realise, futile – far better to make use of the sun and rest in its blanket warmth. It is also easier to choose my bed during the day, to locate a site less likely to attract mosquitoes. And they dislike fierce sun.

I wake feeling tired and sick. The sleep doesn't seem to have done me any good at all. I start walking. Legs and ankles are chafed and the mosquito bites are swollen. My neck and back itch crazily. Down through stony, poplar-grown flats I pass close to two browsing moose, then crossing another creek of pink boulders I work my way through a forest of scrub spruce. Small trees these and the toughest, stubbornest wood in the world that will lose no opportunity to impale you on one of its dead branches. But the going underfoot is reasonable and anything is better than those alder brakes. The river is now comparatively peaceful and I cannot help but think how short this journey would seem were I back with Canoe. Every so often my mind clicks on some particular item that is now lost – something I had quite forgotten about – the moose bowl or a small book that has been in my possession for over twenty years – as if something of oneself had been lost, had been cut off.

It can only be some two weeks from the mid-summer solstice and night is a short evening of twilight. Days merge easily. I haven't found a single berry to eat today, nor did I yesterday. Thoughts of possible food-catching or gathering meet with pessimistic assessment and I believe correct analysis – keep walking and I'll make it. I should be out on the Mackenzie definitely within two weeks, and I can survive that. Once there I can lie up with a fire and wait for someone to investigate my signal. There's bound to be traffic going down, and between Good Hope and the Wells. I have no doubt in my mind that I shall get out. Those must be the Imperial Hills up ahead, looks like quite an escarpment. There will be another canyon in there and the Gayna River comes in from the north somewhere. Let's hope I'll find an easy place to cross.

More landslides make following the shoreline impossible. I am forced to climb the eroding earth cliffs high into the forest above, but even so the torn earth exposes its ribs far back to threaten firm stands of ancient timber and my own right of way. For a time I am able to climb across a landslip but it is a steep and fatal ride to the river below, and I am thankful when the forest returns me to a relative sense of security. It is never a boring walk. Even after two years of solid wilderness I am still amazed by the vitality of the natural land and its diversity. Walking now along the river it is hard not to dawdle over each stone, beautiful purple orbs, like old canon balls, yet with the patina of a sea-shell. I find a brilliant polished mosaic, translucent with purple, red and green, cast as a fossil mollusc. I wonder if I could carry it out? Don't be an idiot. 'Starving man found dead clasping petrified mollusc!' I place it high up from the river and wonder if I will be able to remember this exact spot – someday when I return?

I am beginning to have other flights of fancy too, some that are a little more disconcerting. The river is starting to sing to me. Fortunately I know what is happening. All I need is a solid eight hours of sound sleep to banish these audible hallucinations. But fat chance of that. I wouldn't mind so much were the river singing some tolerable song, but horror of horrors the noisy little

waves keep belting out in this nasally American ladies chorus – barbers shop style – and I know every confounded word that's coming up, a veritable déjà vu torture. I try all sorts of things like shaking my head, talking to myself and whistling but these American dames are forceful sirens. It really is enough to send one barmy.

The canyon land of the Imperial Hills closes in. From my viewpoint it seems reasonable to hike up through the forest and skirt the difficulties of cliff face close into the river. From on top of a wide and wooded ridge I look down into a quite secluded and tranquil valley. In the far distance I can make out the broken defile of the canyon so setting my bearings to make allowance for the passage of the sun, I descend into the woods. It is quiet and still and an atmosphere of ancient peace hangs in the very air, there is great comfort here. Along the valley floor the vegetation becomes thick and I find easier travel wading along a cooling stream. In crossing over a fallen log I disturb a party of big black wood ants. Bears eats ants. I kill one with my thumb and taste it. It's quite good, a bit vinegary perhaps, it would probably make a palatable salad dressing. The other ants are killed and eaten, maybe they'll supply some protein? So far, if I have managed to find a dozen small cranberries in any one day I reckon I have done well. Occasionally I chew tentatively on new young spruce needles for a little vitamin C, but the powerful taste is not encouraging. Mosquitoes too have been tried and found wanting, altogether too saccharine for my taste, which is a pity, there would be tremendous justice in surviving off the constant vampire horde.

With the ant repast complete I find myself, by ways unknown, out on the bed of a nearly dry and very stony river. For a moment I consider the Mountain River has played some trick on me and dried up or gone underground, for the whole topography seems quite altered, but by back-tracking down the creek I come back to the river and a quite extraordinary contortion of water.

It is hard to see exactly what is going on. I seem to have cut off one headland to have descended amongst many. Sheer five hundred foot cliffs enclose about me and about the brown snaking river. The question is where to go? I battle a way through a dense island of poplar and thinking I see a clearing ahead I work over but it is only a stagnant pond where a solitary moose track has been left in the mud. I head back into the poplar and willow maze to tackle another direction. A narrow path of sand allows me passage between willows and the river till cliff face confronts me and there seems no possible way to avoid it – maybe I'll be trapped down here? For I'm certainly not climbing up that. Another rank swamp tries to block my way as I work back along the cliff base but I get by to win some height and on a corner where the rock has eroded, one or two trees offer a semblance of safety. I climb up towards them. Juniper needles pierce my hands and work into my boots. The river below seethes about upon itself and I can clearly hear the hiss of its silt-laden undercurrents as they tear quietly along the foot of the cliff. When I finally reach the topmost point I look across a panorama of forest to where the sun sinks out of sight

and though a little breeze blows across my face it does nothing to dispel some hundreds of mosquitoes. The cleft of the canyon can still be seen winding left, while a few miles further on, a dull red gorge carves across the massed ranks of trees.

That will be where the Gayna River crosses my path. I'm going to have to move; these mosquitoes insist. Pity, it would have been nice to stay up here a while. Once again I line up my route of travel and head off downhill into the trees.

By the time I come out to look upon the Gayna River the sun is a mere reflection of blue and gold in the sky whilst at the bottom of the canyon gorge the river tumbles in a series of cold, grey and white rapids between the narrow confines of slab rock walls. These rise up on the far side to giant boulder fields which surround the ruined castellated grandeur of some still lofty plateau. The time of day and the condition of the river I find depressing. I am cold and there appears to be no wood supply on this side.; the mosquitoes are unmerciful. But how am I going to get across? Rapids upstream and bigger rapids downstream. I wonder if on this bend I were to get in at the top could I scull over to the inside of the next bend? Though the river is narrow enough it is horribly deep and swift. I haven't much reserve energy so it has to work first time, this water will be pretty cold. I throw in a short log and watch the way the currents take it. Well that is all very well and good but it still doesn't tell a non-swimmer that he can just inflate his life-jacket and jump in. Fear of drowning, fear of the cold and fear of being swept into the rapids below are again an actuality. But what is the alternative? Do you want to starve here or do you want to get to the other side and put a match to that drift-pile you can see?

With a long pole for psychological support I wade in. The Avon life-jacket brings my body up and pushes my head back and I scull backwards with nervous rapidity to the far shore. Easy! But I am freezing, teeth chatter and shaking hands claw away at the drift-pile for small branches and spruce twigs to shove under them and an unsteady match applied. Slowly the heat rises and slowly, dreadfully slowly, my clothes steam. The canyon is dark and the noise of the river echoes down from the boulders and rock faces above. A dome of deep purple envelopes the leaping flames and I lie down alongside the fire. Every hour it grows cold and I get up to add more fuel then lie down and drowse for another hour in the warmed sand. Eventually it is time to go. The sky grows lighter as I climb above to the threatening fields of fallen rock, between towering broken façades to the very top of the plateau. From here I gaze out upon the dawning sun, across the heads of millions of trees; mile upon mile upon mile.

Keeping a straight course through the forest is no easy feat but at least I find a few old cranberries to start the day. It is a totally mysterious place with the strong feeling of being inhabited. Ghosts no doubt do dwell here. Everything is still and hushed, my footfall is the first on these mosses for many years. I pass beneath a rotting birch-wood cache. Though I have

again taken bearings on the sun, within two hours I have serious doubts as to what those bearings are – such is the power and effect of deep woods. I sit a while beneath one giant of the forest, with a placid lake, reed-lined and silver before me. Stillness abounds in every fibre, one can almost hear it growing, almost feel it being absorbed into the blood; panic and war are a million miles away; to die here would be the most serene moment.

After a long walk I come out to the top of a high, steep, forested cliff. The going has been tough and I long to get down to river level and easy walking. The day is sweltering. But there are landslips all along the bank and its steepness hides where it must meet the river. However I feel there must be a beach of some sort. Half way into the descent I am faced by an abrupt drop where eroded earth falls away leaving me still unable to see the shore below. Once again the land forces me into a laborious uphill slog. A mile on I try again and am again thwarted by sheer erosion. On a third attempt I find a precarious descent and am rewarded by a firm beach of sand for my swollen, battered feet. I rest for a few minutes then go on. By mid-day I am still at river level, the nature of the country has changed dramatically, being the true floor now of the vast Mackenzie Valley. Stands of polar parade upon all the cobbled bars and on one such maidan I find a small hollow and lie down to sleep.

From these naps I wake feeling worse than when I started, an hour of partial sleep is not for my nature. But it must be enough for I am ready to go on – always hopeful of coming on to a porcupine again. The expected hunger pains have not materialised, certainly there is little comfort in the situation but generally I only acknowledge a hunger at the usual times of breakfast, lunch and dinner – which may say something for being a creature of habit. Tiredness I think is the biggest problem. Of course this is an aspect of having no food but if only I could sleep a night through, unmolested by mosquitoes and in warmth.

Before leaving my bed I check my feet and legs. They are seriously chafed and tender. The mosquito bites look very angry. If blood poisoning comes to mind the thought is not dwelt on. All I have to consider is the simple task of putting one foot in front of the other. I am after all still enjoying life and there is no shortage of opportunity for cracking a joke – though my sense of humour may be a trifle more weird than usual.

By afternoon I have crossed backwaters and sand dunes where a family of Canada geese tempt me with the thought of their meat and I consider carving a boomerang should I find a suitable piece of wood. But I never do and the walk continues back into the mosquito-thick forest, along the top of a sheer cut-bank. The bugs are really bad; stop walking and the swarm at ones neck are carried forward by their own momentum to block out the light in front. And the forest makes no allowances. The short spiky spruce are everywhere, waiting to break a limb or impale. Cranberries are more common though but the mosquitoes take full advantage of one's stopping.

Gullies cut deeply across the trail at intervals and it is folly to move quickly here for they are steep and blocked by fallen logs. In desperation I smear thick wet clay over my face and neck and over the backs of my hands but it is to no avail, the biting, swarming horde is in full cry and as I walk I realise the danger of the situation. My mental attitude must change, I am using up excessive energy for my anger and frustration. Pain and a little blood I can afford but I cannot afford to lose control.

Miles of this goes by before I can get out of the suffocating heat of the trees into the open air of a sand bar. My belly and throat crave water. I drink the mud of the river and lie head on arms while the mosquitoes prance in their thousands over me – a frantic, crawling, feather-stepping touch beneath that sanity-sapping song. Go on, slowly, love the little buggers, they'll only send you stark raving crackers if you don't. Hate them and they'll kill you for sure. Love them, that's your only chance. Save your energy for walking. I drag myself up and go on.

It is no doubt night time, I am disappointed, there were porcupine tracks over this bar but I have lost them completely and I can't see a sign of him anywhere upon this whole stretch of boulder clad flat. I am very disappointed. Hoping to catch a breeze to clear the still thick mosquitoes I build my fire way out in the middle of the flat, far from any vegetation and I lie down next to the line of fire and endeavour to sleep, I am exhausted. Sleep never comes. The mosquitoes never stop and the cold crawls into my head and into my stomach. Every hour I drag more wood onto the fire beside me. With the first lighter shading in the sky I take a last warming over the rekindled blaze and walk away.

The morning is cold and through mud-sinking sand bars I cross to firmer ground where Sandhill cranes gather, stepping lightly and calling loudly in the chill dawn air. They fly away as I approach and for two miles I walk to the next peninsula of land only to find my way barred by deep water and treacherous, body-holding mud. I walk back to my starting point and bushwhack a way through the jungle shore. It is not exactly an uncommon occurrence on this walk.

The river is becoming a multi-channelled stream and the flood waters must have receded for I am finding more open cobbled strands upon which to walk. On one beach I stop to empty my shoes of collected debris and to clean my feet of sand and dry them in the sun – for they are constantly wet from fording shallows and creeks – when coming along behind me a white wolf walks the shore. Seeing me he stops in curiosity then approaches. He is the first animal I have been able to talk to since the capsize and all things considered he is really quite sociable. I sit on the log cleaning my socks and call him up. I don't think he has seen a man before for he is at a complete loss as to what to do. Tentatively he approaches to forty feet and listens to my voice, his head on one side in puzzlement. Then he trots off in a wide semi-circle around me and as I walk away he is still watching, wondering.

Last night was cold and for the first time it rained. Camp was out on a sand dune to escape mosquitoes. I am hearing the American ladies chorus from the river nearly all the time now. Maybe it is 3 o'clock in the morning, maybe 2 o'clock or 5 o'clock, I have no idea, it doesn't really matter, it is the eighth day of no food. If I covered a couple of miles on the first afternoon fifteen miles were walked on the following day for certain, but that was the record. Often this last week my daily total couldn't have been much more than five miles, for the going in places has been terribly slow. The cold rain continues as I wander down wet, ankle-twisting, cobbled stream beds between thickly wooded islands of poplar. There isn't a spruce tree or any prospect of fire in sight. I am shivering and the lacerations of mosquito bites are chafed at every step. If I don't start a fire soon, hypothermia will take over. It's not going to take very much to end this game.

On a small poplar island at the edge of the main channel an old log-jam is piled high and I find a way into its side and out of the breeze and biting rain. Raking fibres of dry poplar bark together I add birch bark and apply a match, the birch ignites but the flames go no further. Smaller twigs are gathered and added but a second match and flame is again defeated by the pervading damp. I can barely control the violent shaking of my body but with studied patience I force myself to search out a pile of dry fibres from the underside of big logs and dry leaves too. Birch bark is curled under the little tent and the flame catches. Small twigs are added and soon damp, large branches are taken and burnt with ease. The heat restores some life into me and I consider the young poplar trees behind. The inner bark of poplar is edible. My knife peels back the outer bark and cuts a sliver of the inner, but it is tough and quite unpalatable. Yet under that again a thin, onion-like layer of sap heavy fibres cling close into the raw trunk. I scrape about a teaspoonful of this and find it delightful. However it is laborious to collect and with a few teaspoonfuls of nourishment down I am ready to get back to the fire and rest.

The fire is everything and I lie beside it sheltered by a makeshift canopy of poplar branches, but in its drying heat the mulch of dead leaves opens here and there into little tongues of flame and it takes some effort to smother these leads around my bed. Within an hour a flame has found the log-jam and I stand back as it begins to crackle and leap its way skywards. The all-enveloping heat is wonderful and the huge conflagration is exciting entertainment that does a lot to uplift my depressed state. After two or three hours the fire is dying down so I rake out the hot ashes, lay green poplar branches over them and lie down upon their heat. The rain has stopped and I decide to stay here for the day. I do nothing but doze and scrape the occasional rare teaspoonful of sappy bark. A small fire burns continuously at my side. At some point I get up and carry on walking. Today, or rather this time, I will get to the Mackenzie. I am not stopping again till I do.

The maze of islands has lessened, the shoreline is steeper and often I am forced to walk a narrow margin of mud or back into the forest where arms as much as legs have to be used to gain any advance. Mosquitoes of course are thick. Someday, sometime, I'll get out of here. At times this jungle of the Mackenzie lowlands is quite claustrophobic, even were I properly clad and shod it would still number one of the worst on earth. Yet I retain a certain perverse pleasure in the knowledge that I am overcoming the swollen bites and the cuts, am drumming the pain out of my head and have overcome the hunger – at least until it kills me. I must have come seventy miles, but on and on it goes, the twisting eternal river. If only I could float down with it. It is so peaceful now, such a placid, muddy, hypnotic stream. Canoe would have loved this.

Late at night I sense a difference in the air and the landscape supports my intuition. The Mackenzie is not far away. The Mountain River bends around upon itself, travelling south then east, north and east again till a run north opens up a vista as wide as the sea itself. Leaving the muddy swamp shores behind I come out onto a small spit of sand and beyond, under lowering ink-blue clouds I see and hear the expanse of white tossed rapids of the San Sault – the Mackenzie River. The welcome is classic however and before even a fire can be started the clouds open and the heavens pour down solid sheets of rain.

For three hours I hang over a struggling flame, fighting for its life in the sodden wood and wind. Dawn drifts under the rolling clouds, the rain stops, the mosquitoes do not. Taxing my strength I climb the bank and cut away branches of spruce and with leafy fronds of willow fashion an unsatisfactory shelter on the beach. I haven't the energy to do more. Collecting firewood from the scattered wet driftwood is an overwhelming chore. I build the fire alongside the shelter and lie down. Mosquitoes crawl over me, they are almost like old friends now, irritating old friends. Only the sound of engines brings me to life. The whistle on my life-jacket is used for the first time and I wave the jacket above my head. I only see a small dark form speeding along downriver.

The Mackenzie here is two miles wide and the noise of the San Sault Rapids is a solid, yet subdued roar. Their thin line of white hovers in a mirage effect across the width of the river just to the north. I realise my chances of being seen or heard are slight. The day wears on, more distant boats go by, I am ignored. I think of setting fire to the forest behind but I know that that too could easily be mistaken for a natural fire and be given little attention. Six boats have gone by. Indians speeding along from one hunting spot to another; they too will starve when their technology fails them. I lie by the fire, my head resting on the semi-inflated life-jacket. I have to keep my feet constantly wet and I haven't been able to take my boots off for days. My ankles are swollen and raw. The tops of my calves where mosquitoes have been feeding are raked by constant chafing and are bleeding. By evening it is raining. I keep the fire going as close to my body as possible. The night sky dries and a thin smoke drifts up and is lost. I have no more

strength to improve my lot, the only comfort is in prayer. Thy will be done. But the ego still has amazing strength and I ask God to get me out of this mess and to get me out before this day is through.

The mosquitoes do not go away nor does the small fire grow warmer and it seems an altogether sorry business. Then I remember that night before my accident and how the story came to mind of the apostles caught in the storm while fishing on the Sea of Galilee, and how these men, hardened fishermen, were scared out of their wits. Christ chided them for their lack of faith. That night I understood, for perhaps the first time in my life, what faith is. That it is no automatic, ready to hand commodity, that it is in fact the ultimate result, the Alpha and Omega of everyman's existence. That realisation made me want to go on, death was in its correct perspective. I was afraid but there was now a strange sense of release; my life was given over to another – not through fear, but through faith.

And now I am faced with another small test and again I try very hard to see how the apostles would have reacted. Would I have been any less afraid in that storm? Have I been so in this? Yet if all the logic of wilderness, all of this Earth's beauty, its greatness and its minuteness mean anything at all, I know it can only be because of the underlying creative force holding it all together for every second of its being in the almighty power of love – for nothing only ever yielded nothing. In this I now throw all of my faith and I know, with certainty, that before this day is through, my predicament will be over and life will be mine, or death will be mine.

I am trying to sleep. The noise of engines far upriver makes me lift my head. Is it worth getting up? Come on, you have to. I put a few more chunks of driftwood on the fire. Then I see the boats a mile away, travelling upriver. I wave and whistle though I know now they will neither see nor hear. They seem to be stopping though, turning in this direction, they're coming over. I can't really believe it. Two Lund boats ride onto the sand and cut engines. Seven Indians stare at me. I gabble out my story. The one man says they saw my smoke and wondered who was here. The girl in the back of the boat continues to stare hard at my head. I suppose I must look quite the sight, teeth missing, mud-caked – oh, that's it – my 'turban'. I unwind the elastic bandage from my head. She grins. 'You're from Good Hope?' I ask. 'Can you give me a lift?' 'By the way, what's the time?' 'nearly midnight?'

Yes. Yes, it would be.

See Life,
Lie in the arms of death
Hear her sweet breath.
Touch her lonely eyes,
Live seconds, not hours,
And sleep ‘neath the
Awe of stars.

A POST-SCRIPT

a far cry

You may wonder how anyone can take three and a half years from their life and live in the 'wilderness'. What relevance could time so spent possibly have for our modern age? Whilst I accept that my interpretation here may be flawed in some part, I would ask you to remember, before censuring me too severely, that I have been privileged to view the sacred goldfish bowl of our society from both sides of the glass. If you are to pass fair judgement you too must be prepared to climb from out of the tangled and sticky webs of our bowl. Were you to do so, you would know, as I know now, the anti-climax and the joylessness running as some counter-current beneath my pleasure in returning to old friends and forgotten luxuries; something is absent from life here, a something which will draw me back to the wilderness.

At the tail-end of last winter I was sitting high up on the northern shoulder of the Eagle Hills, it was a warmer April day and though I was safely away from avalanche paths it was just their sort of weather, it was a day conducive to thought and to roaming over the whole topic of existence. The land teases such thoughts from the mind and so it was that I began to ask myself what relevance to society could wilderness have, and I began to sketch the bare bones of an answer. This skeleton of thought assumed the form of a short essay. That is now lost but prompted by the prejudice of questions I have since encountered, I try to recall the words that I first wrote below the Eagle Hills.

Here six thousand feet above sea levels the wind has blown the snow from this shoulder of scree and at my feet lie the catacombs of countless crustacea, fossils so common they lose their significance in minutes. But within those moments of my rapt attention a million, million years have embarked and died: time scales of eternity. And as my eyes wonder from rocky scree to distant peaks those millennia reach up and surround me on all sides, they face me with the unfathomed strengths of time and strangely sap my own minuscule strength. But it is only rock. Is it? There is an energy here, a vitality I cannot understand, a mystery whose complexities are shrouded in simplicities, an attraction that is both alluring and repelling. In this eternal rock there is no time. Atoms are exuded and borne once again upon the waters to the sea to live as a crab, a sea-anemone, a shark. Here is the perfect imprint of a sea-shell, it drops from my hand and falls two feet further down the mountainside. Two feet to eternity.

I think of those primitives who worshipped mountains and pause while the awesome meaning of 'worship' penetrates my mind. There is no time, there is only motion. With eyes closed I listen to the pulse. All substance merges in the oscillating cycles and in a quite un-frightening

way, I feel that if I knew a little more of something about which none of us know anything, I could simply disappear – pulled into the gravity of reality we choose to call the eternal. I sympathise with the primitive. We have denigrated his case to amplify our own. He was nearer to the reality of existences than we are.

We live on the presumptions of our immediate past even though the physicists have informed us of the irreversible nature of matter, industrial growth remains out touchstone, blinding us to our error of collective pride, causing us to forget our nothingness. Wilderness underlines this but rather than proving us 'mere' animals – following instinctive paths of destruction - the harmony of wilderness insists that we question our disharmony, for it is unique. No mere animal could compete. Man is more than animal. Man is free. It is a terrible yet beautiful responsibility proved by the very alienation of our society from the natural world. Look at the extent of our freedom!

By exercising our wills in opposition to natural law with the belief that regardless of limits, (which the fractional reserve banking system allows the suspension of,) the conversion of matter of itself, can provide for human advancement, is to hold fast to a terrible illusion. Such a vision panders to the physical and disregards the spiritual. Wilderness living highlights the imbalance. The Industrial Revolution was a revolution against the spirit and the land, not because of the technology itself, for this would likely have broken-out two centuries earlier under monastic learning had it not been stopped by the despoiling pride of Henry Tudor , rather it was a revolution against ourselves for the philosophy of the Enlightenment had intervened and this was fundamentally a revolution against God; this no isolated segment of history but a continuing virus with both aim and ambition. Something which the messianic mind of Dostoyevsky foresaw when he spoke of the 'spirit of self-destruction and non-existence'. The history of this revolution remains so scattered and mis-labelled that we do not perceive its true nature. Divide and conquer appears to be its first rule of war, for is it French, or is it Russian? Was it Luther, Marx, or Voltaire, or was it Descartes or Adam Smith? Or is it actually Rothschild – and the unseen people who made the name? That we should see Monopolistic Capitalism opposed to Socialism is an indication of how carefully we label our 'history'. Both have their tap-roots buried deep in Atheistic Materialism. Considering the dubious history of both world wars it is not difficult to believe in the long term collusion of these two supposed adversaries.

With Christian Civilization effectively emasculated the two entities are free to unite openly. There will be no political capitulation, that has long since come to pass, there remains only the final act: the capitulation of the individual. Do I act according to my conscience under Natural Law or do I act according to the humanistic principles of rational, Atheistic Materialism? Both the monopolist and the socialist can comply with the latter, and we see an increasing

spiritualisation, or animation, of universal democracy to carry the masses. The third revolution is very nearly over.

No, I haven't muddled my labels. This has everything to do with wilderness. Man is destroying the earth because he is out of balance with himself, for Materialism permits no balance. Furthermore, if we are to recognise our predicament for what it is, we will have to acknowledge that this Materialism (and 'environmentalism' is but a sub-set in this cult of matter,) is rooted in Atheism. Indeed modern society would never have otherwise come to pass for the Christian ethic relates each Man's existence to the infinite – yet explicable reason of being. Valuing freedom it functions easily with self-restriction and recognises the moral legitimacy by which freedom itself imparts its true value and whole meaning.

People will not turn readily from a materialistic world view but the very rhythms and cycles incorporated into the heart of nature, of economics, of truth, are already exerting influence and the discontent will find its way forward as a freshet of water ceaselessly attacking the wall of imperturbable ice. Governments know this and act defensively; the State is at stake; the financial status-quo is crumbling through the inevitable arithmetic of debt saturation. The age of the sociopath is ending.

Wilderness above all gives to Man his sense of freedom. Jesus said: "the truth will set you free". He also said: "give to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar" - while under imminent threat of arrest by the Pharisees and Herodians for the crime of political subversion, which their lawyers minds were endeavouring to build against Him. Their trap begs us to ask the question, in our own self-interest at least: what does Caesar legitimately own? So where is the balance of Justice to be found – if the purpose of government is solely the protection of private property – which in turn allows for the multiple divisions of labour which go to build higher civilizations, that only free-markets allow, (because all other 'ism's ultimately fail to provide economic allocations of scarce materials through natural and organic price discovery,) then one begins to see how nature is raped by way of the fraudulent fiat 'money' (which is not produced by way of work, as is silver and gold;) the Statist control of 'free-markets' and the abolition of private property through taxation, which along with all taxation, represents a massive, hidden well of violence against innocence which strives to live through honest work and enterprise.

This freedom cannot be antithetical to either nature or to real progress, which the conditioned environmentalist abhors, as he abhors humanity. The only true freedom for mankind is in self-restriction. The trend of the last five centuries has been to undermine the moral order which sustains this self-control. This began with Luther who denied the moral teaching authority which Jesus established for Christian Civilization and this denial was reinforced through statist

doctrine, which is now endemic to all western democracy as it is to non-western tradition (unless Lao Tzu might yet be heard in his ancestral home.)

The individual no longer possesses responsibility for himself or for his family, or as a consequence, for his neighbour. The state has usurped that fundamental responsibility to replace it with a pottage of 'rights'. This is deliberate. Deny Man responsibility and you deny him freedom. (Wilderness is being converted into a network of 'national parks' and we are then air-lifted to 'safety' at any threat.) In a society based on mechanistic principles individual freedom is wasteful and inconvenient. The full cycle of logic turns and one finds the ideology of Atheistic Materialism (communism) fulfilling its purpose. In denying God, matter is presented as replacement but the finite nature of the substitute can only atrophy the spiritual nature of Man and disguise, then distort, the objective truth upon which Justice rests. The state effectively contradicts its reason for existence. For Justice to reside in ideologies, despotic or democratic, is for it to reside in its anti-body. Those anti-bodies serve the revolution.

Stillness. No studied meditation. Simple awareness of the still silences. Stop and listen, now. What do you hear? I hear nothing, nothing but stillness – and sanity. No rationalisations – it exists, here. And there? Hiroshima, Nagasaki. Legal-tender laws; Belsen; Dresden; the abuse of science, the torturing of animals under vivisection; the wholesale destruction of ecosystems; the destruction of whole cultures through mass immigration; Bhopal; Gulag; government sponsored drug wars; Yalta; Central Banking and the creation of 'money' from nothing upon which interest is charged; the domination of politics by finance and the purposeful collapse of the family; Genocide of indigenous people; the desecration of civilized tradition; orchestrated war by banks and states; Cambodia; torture; institutionalised euthanasia and abortion; the state's monopoly and corruption of education; the cancer industry; the taxation of labour, which is nothing other than enslavement. You see, it isn't really possible to escape, for even along my route your instincts pull you apart – 'get back in with the shoal' – 'stay out and save your skin'. For the moment let's just say I am flopping about on the rim – hoping perhaps to tip the bloody bowl and allow a few more beside myself to see what lies beyond. Because when you are in there, the glass is really far too dirty for you to see the alternatives outside; alternatives hidden within the heart of every man.

The wilderness remains as an impaired Eden. By reason, by faith, it is for man to repent and begin anew and return to the source of all Life. Learn first to walk quietly on the mossed aisles of forested dawn, bathe in some distant spring, raise eyes to the ever-faithful returning sun, sing slowly the praise of evening star, listen reverently to the wind and feel with your whole strength what Life really is … rapid roar, raven wheeling, the song of wolves, … thunder, lightning, flower dew sparkling, … the far cry of geese.

Llanfair Caereinion
Montgomeryshire.

Anno Domini 1987.

breaking trail....

About the Author...

With my daughter in central Yukon during the summer of 2007.

This website is designed and built by my son, Dominic Larkin.

I now live in Yukon Territory with my two children and spend much of my time studying Austrian economics, history and the dishonest, government manipulation of the gold and silver market; in addition I have a long-held interest in the junior mining industry. I am currently working on a new web-site concept and continue a life-long interest in all innovation and entrepreneurial potentials.

If you have enjoyed reading A Far Cry please do forward a link to your friends and relations, it is here at this web site for free, for anyone to read.

Naturally, whilst we all tend to hesitate before giving up our hard earned cash, especially when there is no obligation to do so, please understand that keeping any web site open costs money and any donation, however small, would be much appreciated. This free publication is something of an independent experiment in internet book marketing and whilst the hope is to generate the interest which will allow for a hard copy edition, we would like to see as wide a readership as possible, all around the world, simply for the sake of the story itself. (Stories are written so that other people might read them, are they not?)

I would like to comment here on the changing face of both literary and musical production. Long ago, before the advent of recording or print technology, people told stories and they sang songs, they undoubtedly earned their living, at least in part, by their audience giving them a few coins in appreciation of their effort and it was probably a rare event which saw the audience charged before the performance. It might just be that technology is returning us to that economic model where the audience is in control, and the marketer and publisher are removed from the equation.

Though publishers have been interested in my story, when one looks at the figures, even were one successful, readership would be relatively small and as I said in the Preface, it is the story which is important - and I have never favoured hype and all the hurrah of the marketing machine. So, like the audience of olden times – you are in control - if you have gained from my writing and can afford to pay an honest coin for what I have given honestly, do so. If you cannot afford to do so, I take you at your word and sincerely hope my story will have given you something of value, and may your fortune improve.

For now, thank you for joining us on these pages and if you have found yourself involved in my journey please consider becoming involved in the future of this book and books in general, by giving your support to a genuinely free market in literature.

You can email me directly at: Chris@afarcry.net should you wish to make personal contact.

Chris & family.

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http://www.thedoctorwithin.com/intro/

The following companies were kind enough to donate equipment in 1978/79. The fact that they survive to this day says everything that is necessary in regard to their quality. (Unlike

governments these companies survive because people freely choose to buy their products – with no coercion yet with much competition.) I take this opportunity to say a belated, but public, thank you. I would not be alive today were it not for Avon and Puma.

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(Robert Engle, CEO, Northwest Territorial Airlines.)