

York's Richard Pope blends humor, fiction, social and linguistic history in successful 'hybrid' documenting Haliburton woodsman

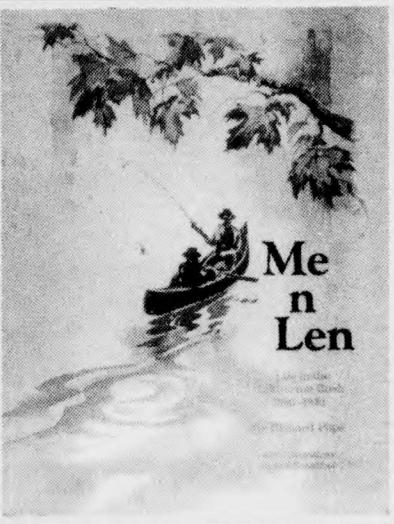


By DAVID BYRNES

Me n Len: Life in the Haliburton Bush 1900-1940
By Richard Pope
Illustrations by Neil Broadfoot
Dundurn Press, \$12.50

To York professor and author Richard Pope it has often seemed ironic that historians overlook so much on their own doorstep. Pope himself didn't have to go far, in fact "just under three hours" by car from downtown Toronto, to find a way of life which almost slipped away unrecorded.

Pope's *Me n Len*, released this fall by Dundurn Press, is a funny and detailed book about 82 year old woodsman Len Holmes, and through Len's memory the colorful backwater world of east Haliburton in the "'ol days" from 1900 to 1940. Len has been a hunter, fisherman, guide, lumberjack, farmer and probably everything else you can be working in the bush, and because of his remarkable memory and narrative ability, which Pope considers to be a genuine gift, he is an ideal source of oral history on the area. As a lin-



quist, Pope also takes great interest in Len's peculiar speech. Len tells of the days before the chain saw and the snowmobile in a dialect Pope dubs "Haliburtonese," an extension of the Ottawa Valley dialect that is cadenced off the beat and characteristically peppered with colorful visual expressions and use of folklore.

Unexpectedly for a book that in part aims to be an authoritative biography and historical, linguistic document, Pope uses some very funny fiction in the first two chapters as a means to warm the reader to Len, whose stories of the "'ol days" would not be well taken if not understood in the light of his deadpan sense of humour. Pope starts off by giving a somewhat fictional account of how he first met Len in 1972, when he and a friend arrived at Len's door in Wilberforce to see some property that had been advertised in a Toronto newspaper. Pope's friend,

in real life *Toronto Star* President David Jolley, is here mercilessly ironized as the helpless city greenhorn Lionel, a puppy compared to a seasoned outdoorsman like Len and the perfect target for his sense of humour. With his legs already bleeding from black fly bites practically before he gets out of his car, the perturbed "Lionel" ventures to ask if there will also be flies in the bush when they see the property. "Oh Christ, they'll chew the preem piss right out a ya," quips Len. "The deer flies'll rip pieces out a ya then fly up onto a branch and chew on em."

Because the complimentary use of fiction with factual historical information, as well as some other "hybrid" qualities of *Me n Len*, Pope says that some of the publishers he approached were not willing to take a chance on his manuscript. Another reservation he encountered was with Len's peculiar, often racy, but refreshing visual language that Pope insisted on being preserved. In the Dundurn edition a glossary of terms is provided as a reference for some of Len's more obscure words and expressions (such as dippo, nahrras, swale and snibby).

Len's account of the 'ol days is supplemented in the book by many photographs, some of them dug up from old family albums, and drawings and illustrations by Peterborough artist Neil Broadfoot. Broadfoot's illustrations are sometimes essential aids to visualizing Len's descriptions, which are detailed down to accounts of the origin of the saddle notch and verticle post styles of log cabin construction and the strategy behind the different arrangements of teeth on hardwood and softwood saws.

The heart of the book, and the bulk of it, are Len's detailed accounts of life in the bush in the "'ol days," which are strung together in stories. Pope's sense of detail, while the reason his humour works so well in the fictionalized parts, here becomes the key that unlocks Len's memory, and sets down on the record both a unique personality and way of life. Len's speech (which Pope considers the cornerstone of the book) is faithfully preserved, and punctuated by Pope's narrative, the product is the value of the book.

"With no doctor around, you often had to do your own doctorin," says Len. "I mind one time here Les got sick after my mother died. He was pretty bad and I couldn't think what to give him, cept Medical Wonder. I always kept it in the horse stable long with 'Gyptian Liniment, ya know. The horses would get colic or they'd get a bellyache or something, I'd give them a dose of stuff on their tongue and, by God, it'd straighten them up. So I give some to Les this night. It said right on the bottle, 'For Man or Beast.' I thought, 'Well, hell, I'll take a chance

on it, cause it's always good for horses.' So I give him a dose of a few drops—it said right on the bottle so many drops for a human person—I give him whatever it called for and, by God, inside of half an hour he was feeling better! Mildred, she thought it was gonna kill him but it worked. Medical Wonder—it was good for a lot of things."

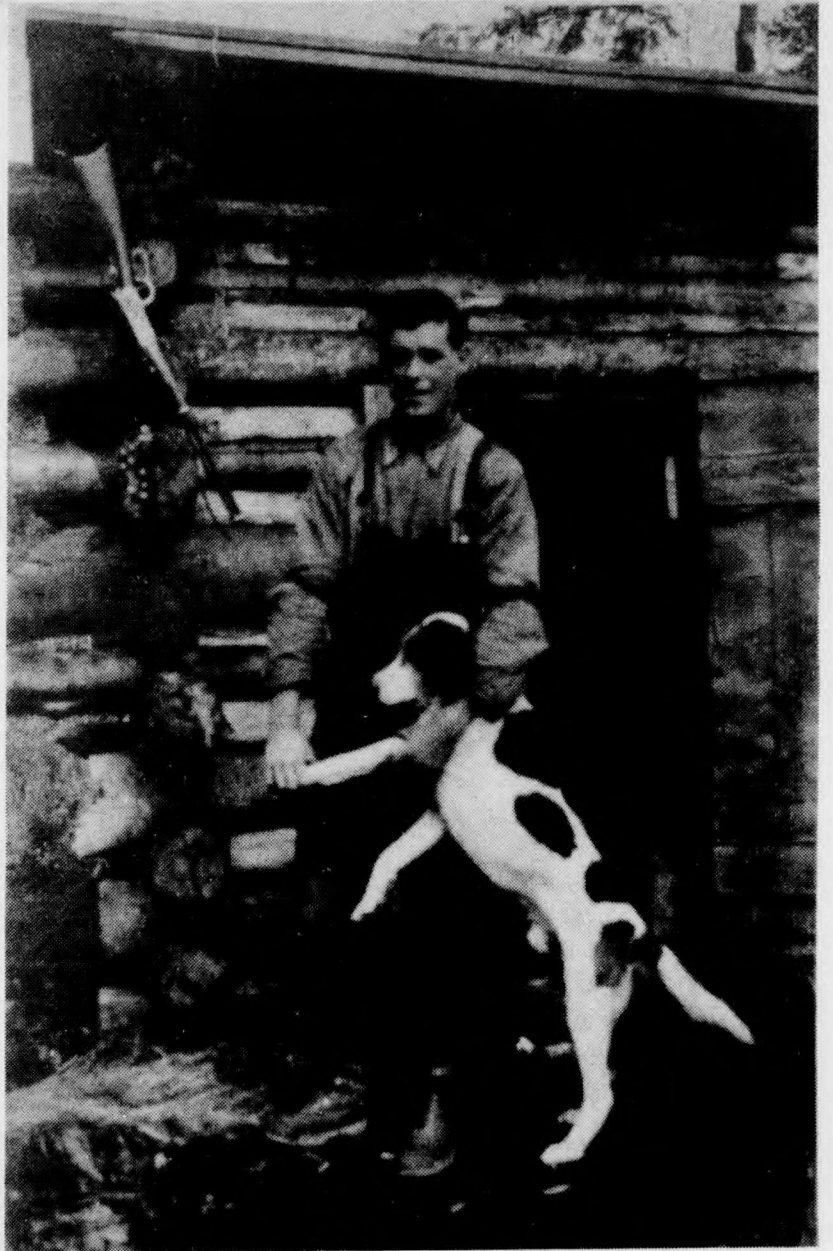
Pope steps in at this point with this report for the reader.

"Shortly after hearing this story from Len, I came across a bottle of 'Dr. Bell's Veterinary Medical Wonder: The Cattleman's Standby for Cattle, Swine, and Other Farm Animals.' There was nothing on the label to indicate that it was suitable for human consumption, but perhaps this was a label of more recent vintage. In any case Les survived and is alive and well today."

Me n Len, despite its unusual hybrid nature, works well because it is about and is the product of a complimentary relationship and genuine friendship between historian and historical subject. What is also unique about the book is that the history Pope writes about is still contemporary.

"There's something anachronistic about going into the bush with Len," Pope says, "as if something from another era were alive and well in modern times. Then you suddenly realize this is actually the case. The sad part about it is that when these old guys die a whole way of life will be disappearing with them, which in many ways was superior to ours. But in the meantime Len's still very much alive."

Above: Len with foxhound Rex at the second Barnum Camp circa 1920. Above left: Len earlier this month, with son Gord, taking a tea-break during a hard day's deer hunt.



WINTER/SUMMER 1986

NOTICE TO CONTINUING STUDENTS (Students currently enrolled in the Fall/Winter Session)

A limited number of places in Winter/Summer courses may be available to continuing students who present valid and compelling reasons for needing a place. Students must apply for a space by handing in an application form. All applications must be handed in no later than **Friday, December 13th.**

Applications may be picked up in the following locations:

Arts
Atkinson
Fine Arts
Glendon
Science

Advising Centre, S 313 Ross
Student Programmes Office, 150A Atkinson
Student Programmes Office, 222 Fine Arts
Student Programmes Office, C105 York Hall
See November issue of "Science News"

**NO APPLICATIONS WILL BE ACCEPTED
AFTER DECEMBER 13, 1985**