

The Arts:

Illustrator found magic in a frozen wilderness

By Alan Harvey

A pan of melted lard, a few chunks of fat pork, and a pailful of boiled tea — thick, black and scalding hot.

Hardly the fare to galvanise a gourmet, but travellers in Canada's frozen northland find it hits the spot. "I don't think I should like such food at home, but it's very appetising after a hard morning of breaking trail."

So wrote American-born illustrator and author Frank E. Schoonover (1877-1972), whose paintings and writings testify to a love of the Canadian north which lasted all his life.

A vivid impression of that lifelong passion comes freshly off the pages of "The Edge of the Wilderness — A Portrait of the Canadian North," published on March 6 by Eyre Methuen Ltd. (£12.50).

This is a handsomely printed book comprising 85 paintings and illustrations by Frank Schoonover, along with stories and records resulting from several extended visits to Northern Canada in the early years of the century. Some were previously published in magazines such as Scribner's and Harper's.

The book, as the publishers claim, is an accurate record of early 20th-century Canada and "an insight into the last frontier of the North American continent — the wilderness of the Canadian North." If one sentence emerges as a heart-cry from this tribute to the bleak, awesome majesty of the Last Frontier, it comes in Mr. Schoonover's frequent references to the bone-chilling climatic conditions that give the north its favourite adjective "frozen."

"What a cold, cold, bitter cold country this is!" writes the author. He speaks with awe of the boundless white northern wilderness, of pure white rabbits glimpsed frozen to the hardness of stone, of a "weariness that enters into the very marrow of your bones."

Mr. Schoonover made two main journeys, the first a 1,200-mile winter expedition by snowshoe and dogsled in the Hudson Bay and James Bay areas in Northern Quebec accompanied by Indian guide Xavier Gill and a half-breed, the second by canoe and portage to the same general area in 1911. He is thought to have been the first illustrator to take his own sketching tent through the bush by dog train, defying the "unbelievable severity" of conditions, including raging snowstorms and temperatures frequently more than 40 below zero. Everywhere he went, he took photographs on roll film and sketched



"The trapper" by Frank E. Schoonover, 1927, oil, 24 by 30 inches, now in the Stuart Kingston Galleries, Rehoboth Beach, Delaware.

endlessly, fascinated by snowy wastes now vivid pink in the setting sun, now deep purple shadows.

A sample passage gives an idea of the difficulties in painfully breaking trail: "I unfasten my axe and fall to work with the guides. No one may stand idle. The clothing, damp from the terrible work of the morning, soon freezes on one's back . . . it is bitter work in the biting cold to unfasten the strings that hold the loads, but no one thinks of complaining."

Hard work in the clear cold air is a marvellous appetiser, and the travellers crowd eagerly round the frying pan, taking a "gillette" of flour, water and baking soda browned in the pan and spreading it with lard or using it to pick up tidbits of fat pork. Thick cups of black tea, bitter

and scalding, accompany the treat, acting "like a tonic on the tired body." That is dinner cooked in the northern wilderness, says Mr. Schoonover, and "we grew strong and lusty upon such faring."

And it is a tribute to the spirit of sharing in the north that on an Indian campsite, the replete traveller may find hanging on a post a few bear-skulls, possibly containing a pinch of tobacco in the nostril sockets, thoughtfully left behind for any trapper who chances by without a pipeful.

Night falls early. You stop walking before three in the afternoon and make camp, packing the snow and spreading it deep with green boughs. It is now quite dark, and a "furious little red fire is blazing in the little sheet-iron stove, and the terrible cold is forgotten in its comfort."

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