

The Beacon Lights on Great Slave Lake and the Wonderful Tale of an Indian School

By Rev. T. E. R. Westgate

ON the southern shores of Great Slave Lake, and just at the spot where it receives into the embraces of its ample bosom the volumes of water brought down by the beautiful Hay River, there stand two simple but invaluable beacon lights, erected by the Dominion Government for the benefit of their still comparatively few, but ever-increasing number of mariners in that remote part of the new world. The writer has just returned from a visit to that entrancing section of the great continent in which we live, and if the man with the Sample Case has any desire to know more about its wonderful lakes and rivers, trees and minerals, hamlets and people, and above all its most wonderful centre of learning, which is the Indian School, established by the Anglican Church at Hay River, he is cordially invited to sit down and listen to what this friendly fellow traveller has to say.

The Route to be Followed

The city of Edmonton, the capital of the Province of Alberta, will be our starting point, and from there the first three hundred miles of the journey can be made in twenty-four hours, in a fine Pullman car attached to the end of a freight train. For about one hundred miles the road-bed is sufficiently stable to admit of an up-to-date rate of locomotion without danger or discomfort to the passengers, but the rest of the train journey, owing to the lack of suitable ballast and the spongy nature of the soil, over which this great thoroughfare is constructed, has to be made at a somewhat more moderate and less exhilarating speed. About one hundred and thirty miles from Edmonton where the cultivated fields and wagon roads come to an end, stands the little French town of Lac la Biche, built on the western shore of an altogether lovely lake of the same name, and when this has been passed scarcely any other trace of civilization will be found until the log-built town of Waterways, on the banks of the appropriately-named river, the Clearwater, has been reached on the following day. As the waters of this river begin to mingle with those of that mightier stream called the Athabasca, at a point about seven miles below, and where the town of Fort McMurray stands, the journey for this distance is generally made either on the clean deck space of a gasoline launch, or on the broad surface of a heavily-laden barge, which the launch takes with it, tightly lashed to its side or lead in tow.

The Steamship Companies

From Fort McMurray to the Arctic Sea very comfortable steamers are operated by the following well-organized and enterprising Steamship Companies, The Hudson's Bay, The Alberta and Arctic Transportation, and The Northern Trading, and the rest of the journey can be made in one of these. Although the companies will undertake to transport passengers on any post which their steamers can reach in the great McKenzie River Basin, and this is undertaking a great deal as it is twenty five hundred miles long and the second largest in the North American continent, the voyager must be prepared to have his journey interrupted by a sixteen mile series of tumultuous and deadly rapids into which the placid waters of the Athabasca River develop just after they pass the little town of Fitzgerald, about two hundred and ninety miles below Fort McMurray. Interruptions of this sort, however, are not always without welcome as they add variety and interest to the journey, and as arrangements have been carefully made to reduce the delay and discomfort, inconvenience and fatigue at this interruption to a minimum.



INFANTS DELIGHT TOILET SOAP

further reference will be made to it again a little later on.

The Journey

Beginning then at Fort McMurray, where the country is so rich with vituminous sands that a sufficient quantity could be procured to make good streets in every town and city, and good roads throughout every Province in the Dominion, you can book your passage, at a moderate cost, on any steamer belonging to one of the companies mentioned, and settle down for a two hundred and ninety mile ride as peaceful in motion and interesting in scenery as the heart could wish, or the eye desire to see. The Athabasca River is never straight enough to be monotonous, and as the banks in places rise to an elevation of nearly two hundred feet and afterwards descend almost to the level of the waters edge, being everywhere covered with spruce or poplar, alder or willow, the ever-changing scenes presented could not but elevate the mind of any man above the sordid things of modern life and fix it on One who is the Author of all these things, and whose friendship or favor can never be purchased, not even with the purest silver or the most refined gold. The vast solitudes through which one passes on the lower stretches of this magnificent river are wonderful in their magnitude, and magnetic in their power, and to the writer there is but little hope for the man who can pass through them and remain unaffected thereby.

Athabasca Lake

After being transported for about twenty hours in this delectable way down the channel of the Athabasca River, the traveller reaches the broad and beautiful expanse of water which is known as Athabasca Lake. On the map it may appear as a comparatively small and insignificant object, but here, as elsewhere, appearances are deceptive, for the lake is one hundred and ninety-five miles long, thirty-five miles wide, and can exhibit, when agitated by the north-east winds, the power of an angry monster which the strongest and most sagacious mariners are obliged to recognize, and have never been known successfully to defy. When the writer ventured to cross a twenty mile segment of this lake last summer the surface was as calm and beautiful as a lake of liquid silver, those who have crossed it oftener assured him that at times they found it in so defiant and truculent a mood that they were obliged to stand by for many days at a time until this had given way to one of benevolence and repose.

Fort Chipewyan

At the north-west part of the lake, and just at the spot where its waters begin to flow out through the channels known as the Quatre Fourches, stands Fort Chipewyan, a settlement of Chipewyan Indians with prosperous Missions of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, and the agents of different trading companies established in their midst. The traveler who takes a delight in things of historical antiquity will here find something of surpassing interest, for Fort Chipewyan is built on a firm foundation of that Archaean rock, which arose out of the darkness of prehistoric night as the oldest part of the earth in which we live, and extending eastward as far as Hudson's Bay and Ungava, is known as the Laurentian Plateau. Only here and there can this particular geological specimen be seen as surface rock, or as rock that lies but a little distance beneath the soil, and the traveler who stands upon it is standing on a monument which dates backward beyond the dawn of history to the very dawn of time.

The Slave River

About fifteen miles from Fort Chipewyan, and shortly after the Quatre Fourches have amalgamated into one stream, the waters of the Peace River may be seen pouring in through the western bank, and from there onward for a distance of eighty-five miles to Fitzgerald, the journey is made on the ever-widening surface of one of the most beautiful rivers in the world, but known by the simple and somewhat homely name of The Slave. The writer has travelled on the St. Lawrence, the St. Mary, the St. Clair, and many other beautiful rivers in North America, as well as on the Paraguay, and the River Plate, a long way further south, but none of these have afforded him that unalloyed pleasure, bordering on delight, which he experienced while gliding almost noiselessly and peacefully along on the strong current of this little known river in our own far north.

The Portage

As the steamer draws near to Fitzgerald the increased rapidity of the current and the ever-increasing number of eddies, attract the attention of

all on board, and serve as forcible reminders that the dangerous rapids are near. In years gone by men with stout hearts and nerves of iron have been known to negotiate these in safety, but, alas, so many failed in this, at the best, a hazardous endeavor, that the last of the series has been given the sombre and melancholy name of "The Rapids of the Drowned." The little town of Fitzgerald has sprung up on the left bank of the river, just where the rapids begin, and here the first part of the steamer journey ends. From there arrangements have been carefully made to transport the traveller his baggage, and all kinds of freight, by motor car or jitney, horse wagon or caterpillar tractor, across sixteen miles of portage to the town of Fort Smith, and there the second part begins. When the writer crossed this portage on the outward journey he did it in forty-five minutes, and as this included one brief stop to photograph the rapids from a point where the road lay near the embankment, and another at the straight broad wound in the face of the forest which marks the dividing line between the Province of Alberta and the North West Territories, it may easily be seen that the road he travelled was not, at that time, in any mean condition.

Fort Smith

The town of Fort Smith perpetuates the name of one of Canada's great men, namely, Sir Donald Smith, afterwards Lord Strathcona, who faithfully served his country for many years as Canadian High Commissioner in England. Like all other towns in the north country it possesses at present no great buildings in connection with any industry or activity, with the exception of those of the Roman Catholic Mission, but as history has often been known to repeat itself, there is a possibility that it may do so again, and future generations may find here a city that will surpass in riches and greatness many of those which now look down upon it with disdain. The presence of the chief executive officer of the Dominion Government who makes this his headquarters for administering the Territories, and of such splendid citizens as Mr. Card, who is the Indian agent and a Justice of the Peace, Mr. Conybeare, an officer in the British Naval Reserve, Mr. Lyle, the agent of the Hudson's Bay Company, and others who might be mentioned, provides the place with an interest and dignity which might otherwise be lacking and will serve as a guarantee that any development which takes place will be directed along the most desirable lines.

Great Slave Lake

The Slave River from Fort Smith to Great Slave Lake is even more magnificent than that part of it which lies above the rapids, and after the beautiful steamer, be it "The Distributor," "The MacKenzie River," or "The Northern Trader," has transported him a distance of two hundred miles down its delightful current, and in a period of time that is altogether too short to grasp a fraction of the wonders it contains, the eyes of the traveller will open wide as he beholds the waters of the Great Slave Lake, spread out before him and stretching away to the north, the east, and the west, to a boundary which he knows must be there, but which his unaided vision cannot see. Great Slave Lake, so far as its dimensions are known at present, has a greatest length of two hundred and eighty-eight miles, a greatest breadth of sixty miles, and, covering as it does a superficial area of over twelve thousand square miles can claim the proud distinction of being the fourth largest lake on the whole of the American continent. When the writer travelled for nearly one hundred miles across its surface there was scarcely a ripple to be seen, but on later days when strong winds from the barren lands blew steadily from the north-east, he had an opportunity of witnessing it in a state of violent commotion, and thanked God that at such a time the steamer which carried him was safely anchored in harbour, and he himself at rest on shore.

Fort Resolution

All round the mouth of the Slave River, and on the sand bars which have been formed on either side of the deeper channel for some distance out into the lake, large quantities of drift wood are to be seen, and once these are passed, the deep clear waters of the lake are reached, and the steamer shapes its course for Fort Resolution, on the southern shore. After covering a distance of about twenty miles the "Lepees" and huts of the Slave Indians, and the houses and other buildings of the White folk, who live amongst them, come into view, but the shallow depth of the water, in the bay beyond which

they stand renders a close approach impossible except for lighter craft such as the row boat, skiff, or canoe. In years gone by great men like Sir Alexander MacKenzie and Sir John Franklin have honoured and graced this place with their presence, but the onward march of time must have brought great changes, and one may doubt whether they would recognize it could they but come back and visit it once more.

Hay River

From Fort Resolution to Hay River is a distance of seventy miles in a south-westerly direction, and as the day dies down and the night comes on, all eyes are gladdened by the bright rays from the beacon lights which stand on a point at the mouth of the river and indicate the solitary channel through which the steamer can run. When the writer arrived it was the darkest hour of mid-night, and no sound was heard from the land until the steamer's whistle was blown, and this soon brought a crowd of dusky figures down to the shore. As the season of navigation is short in the north land every minute of time is treasured up as a very precious thing, and soon those who had this post for their destination were safely landed, welcomed by their friends, and hurried off to rest, while the steamer with the remaining passengers and freight moved out once more into the darkness and continued on her way.

The Beacon Lights

In the south of England, about fourteen miles from Plymouth, and ten from the Cornish coast, stands the wonderful Eddystone Lighthouse. Every half minute it projects into the surrounding darkness a double flash of pure, white light, which can be seen fully seventeen miles away. Before this first lighthouse was erected on the reef from which it receives its name, many a gallant vessel manned by still more gallant seamen, went down to a watery doom.

It was in the year 1696 that Mr. Henry Winstanley, courageously and in the face of much opposition and no little ridicule, erected his sixty foot, wooden, pagoda-like tower, with a lantern on the top, and where is the living man who can number the lives that have been saved, or the ships preserved from ruin, since that light began to shine? Great, benevolent, and wonderful as was the lamp lighted by Mr. Winstanley and kept burning by others who followed after to the eyes of the writer it fades into dimness when compared with that of Henry Martyn, the Cornish boy, son of a miner, who graduated from Cambridge University as Senior Wrangler, and then went forth to India, Persia and Arabia, carrying with him to those benighted and bewildered peoples those brighter rays which illuminate not only the body, but the soul, and which radiate forever, without cessation, from Him Who is The Light of the World. In the short space of seven years he translated into Sanscrit and Hindustani, into Persian and Arabic, that part of the Word of God called The New Testament, which is verily the brightest light among the nations of the earth today, and the only one which can guide them into the haven of safety and peace.

When the writer awoke on the morning after his arrival at Hay River, the thoughts which he has just penned were conceived within him, and as he gazed, first, on one side, of the river where stood the Beacon Lights, thoughtfully erected by the Dominion Government for the guidance and benefit of benighted, seafaring men, and, then at the Anglican Indian Residential School, with all its costly and indispensable equipment, on the other, it seemed to him that, as in the case of the Cornish lights, the latter was the greater of the two. The wealth and wonders, the immensity and importance of many things which he saw, and of others of which he heard, during his visit to that remote and little known part of the world greatly impressed him, but none so favourably, so indelibly, or to so great a degree, as this great centre of learning and light.

The Fauna

To some there is nothing so valuable or wonderful there as the great variety of fur-bearing animals and fishes, of migratory birds and great game which abound. Valuable and wonderful indeed they are, for that North land is the home of the moose and the caribou, the muskox and buffalo, and other creatures of their kind. There too, will be found both mountain sheep and goats, and bears black and grizzly, to say nothing of that great multitude of smaller species, such as the rabbit, beaver, muskrat, otter, mink, marten, wolf, weasel, lynx, fox and wolverine. There too, in the summer months, millions of ducks and geese of various kinds come up from the south, while the ptarmigan and different kinds of grouse remain throughout the year. In the lakes and rivers are various kinds of fish, and the writer himself has seen a trout that weighed no less than sixty pounds. Whitefish, pike, and suckers roam through all waters, while grayling, pickerel, gold-

eye and even herring have a more limited range.

The Timber

To others, the chief interest and wealth of the North Land lies in its timber. In variety the trees are not numerous, but they include such copious and deciduous species as the balsam poplar, tamarack, white and black spruce, balsam fir, birch, aspen, and balsam poplar of balm of Gilead.

The Minerals

To others again, and they are not a few, nothing is so great or wonderful as the mineral wealth which they are certain abounds, because some of it has already been gathered up, and in other places the outcrop has been found. The Devonian rocks assure them of oil, while placer gold has been discovered in the streams. Coal, salt, gypsum, lead, zinc, and gas have also been located, while in the Precambrian rocks iron, copper and nickel occur.

The Waterpower

The tremendous possibilities in the way of waterpower appeal with overwhelming magnetism to many others, and as the writer grazed for sometime in amazement on the wonderful Alexandra Falls on the Hay River, he felt in himself something of the astonishing force. There, an enormous volume of water, one hundred and thirty feet wide, is precipitated over a Devonian escarpment, and has a direct and unobstructed drop of one hundred and five feet. But while the Alexandra and Louise Falls on the Hay River were the only ones visited by the writer, they are not the only ones which exist, for great numbers have been located and measured, and possibly others may yet be found. Little Buffalo River has at one spot a direct fall of one hundred feet, while the waters of other rivers such as The Beaver, The Trout, and the Yellowknife, are precipitated over lofty escarpments in a similar way.

The People

Great and wonderful, however, as are all of the foregoing, and the writer is not incapable, he believes, of appraising them at their true worth, yet to him they disappear in value away off to the dim horizon of insignificance when compared with the numerous tribes and bands of Indians and Eskimo, numbering many thousands of souls, and each one more precious than any jewel, and infinitely dearer to the heart of God. The Chipewyan, Caribou-eaters Yellowknives and Dogribs are there. There, too, are the Slaves, the Hares, the Beavers, and the Loucheux, living around the lakes and along the rivers, while away in the mountains to the north and west are the Skanans, Kaskas, and Nahannis, with the Eskimo, possibly the best of all, everywhere along the Arctic shore. And in these, and in these alone, though, alas, how few there are who know it, the greatest treasure of that great dark North Land is to be found. For their sakes the Hay River School exists, and no human mind can calculate, nor any human ken portray the inestimable benefit which it has conferred upon them. For many years it has been sending forth in all directions its bright and hallowed rays of truth and learning, and these have penetrated the dense moral darkness even of the Arctic shores. Some of the choicest spirits which God's great army of workers has ever known have lived and laboured and died to keep that light burning, and it is the unspeakable privilege, as well as the responsibility, of those of us who live to-day, to see that that light shall not only not grow dim, but shine on as long as time shall last, with ever-increasing brilliancy and penetrating power. The graduates of that School are now occupying positions of trust in a great many different departments of life, and by the Grace of God the light will be kept burning till every man, woman and child still in the kingdom of darkness, which is the kingdom of Satan, shall be translated into the Kingdom of Light, which is the Kingdom of God's dear Son.

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