Lord Tweedsmuir's Visit to the North

# *Never Be Off The Road*

**by William Galbraith**

*The appointment of a new Governor-General provides an opportunity to reflect on the role this office can play in the life of Canada, beyond the infrequently debated constitutional one. At each new appointment, editors and various commentators express views ranging from abolition, through re-constituting the post into a presidency, to acceptance and appropriateness of the individual. This article looks at the opinions and activities of a past resident of Rideau Hall John Buchan, whose life can serve as an inspiration for any Governor-General, present or future.*

"I want to see Canadians prouder of Canada — of all Canada, and if, during my term of office, I can do something to foster that pride then I shall feel that my work has not been in vain." Speaking to the Canadian Institute of Mining, the Governor-General added that "the east should know more of the west, and the west of the east, and both more of the north." This counsel was offered in March, 1937, a year and a half after his arrival in Canada. The country was then just coming out of recession. Air transportation, in its early stages of commercial development, was opening up the North, and Lord Tweedsmuir (John Buchan, a best-selling author, including of the classic novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps*) was the unique vice-regal representative.

His experience, as lawyer, public administrator, soldier, publisher, writer, mountaineer and Member of Parliament (U.K.), and his imagination guided him toward his objective by becoming the most travelled of Governors-General up to that time when miles travelled did not accumulate by the thousands in a day!

The longest and probably most significant journey he undertook was in mid-summer, 1937, when he travelled down the eponymous Mackenzie River to the Arctic, following in the path of another Scotsman, Alexander Mackenzie, a century and a half before. Tweedsmuir espoused a particular vision of the North. He wanted to draw attention to it, because he believed it could be "a binding force" for the country. It was a frontier seen, from a background of the Great Depression, to be full of promise and challenge, especially for the country's youth. Tweedsmuir's oldest son served with the Hudson's Bay Company on Baffin Island during 1938 and 1939.

> ***Tweedsmuir believed "a Governor-General should never be off the road", a message he repeated many times.***

The voyage lasted almost three weeks, departing Edmonton on July 20th, 1937, northward for Waterways, the "end of steel". One of the party, a Dr. Thomas Wood, wrote that the train that carried them the 200-odd miles could run "a good 20 miles an hour, downhill 25". Lord Tweedsmuir described the dustless journey, as running "through a flower garden of fire-weed, yarrow, golden rod, and equisetum", noting that "at Lac LaBiche one begins to feel the North".

That "feeling" of the North must have in part been personified by the variety of colourful characters who shared the train with the vice-regal party. They were described by Dr. Wood as "trappers, hunters, miners, and prospectors, who eat, sing, chew, play poker, spit hard and true into burnished cuspidors, and seem free at

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any moment to tell you their plans, accept a cigarette, and applaud while the policeman chases another hobo off the roof."

From Waterways the party made its way by barge to Fort McMurray, boarding a steamer headed for Lake Athabaska, and stopping at Fort Chipewyan along the way. The significance of this Fort was not missed by the historian in Tweedsmuir (among other historical biographies, he published one in 1924 of Lord Minto, Governor-General from 1898-1904). It was from here that Alexander Mackenzie set out in the late 1700s on his major journeys, to the Arctic and another to the Pacific. In a children's book, *Lake of Gold*, published posthumously in 1941, Tweedsmuir vividly describes the adventures of Canada's early explorers, passages of which would have been inspired by a journey such as this, and which he hoped would spark children's interest in the romance of Canada's early history.

The party reached Fort Smith, on the Alberta-Territories border. Here, the Governor-General addressed the community's civic reception committee: "so far we have only scraped the edges of (the North), but I believe we are going to make it far more habitable that it is." He added, "You are at a gateway to what I believe is a great treasure house", referring to the natural resource potential being revealed by the prospecting and mining activity, all of which was aided largely by the advent of aircraft into the North. The Vice-regal party then embarked on the Hudson's Bay Company steamer, S.S. Distributor, which would be their home for the next ten days and almost 1,000 miles, until it delivered them to Aklavik at the delta of the Mackenzie River.

**Lord Tweedsmuir**

On Monday, July 26th, they reached Fort Simpson where they put in for several hours, so cargo could be unloaded. Here, there was activity more familiar to southerners, and which generated some of the unique excitement about the North's potential, about making it more habitable. "Tweedsmuir Sees Farms Farthest North" noted a short article in the *Ottawa Journal*, while the *Winnipeg Free Press* editors posed a more rhetorical question to reflect the prospects: "Lord Tweedsmuir saw wheat and vegetables growing on a farm 950 miles northwest of Edmonton. Even melons were grown there last year. Doesn't this give us a new idea of Canada?"

It was also at Fort Simpson that Tweedsmuir heard of the rugged, almost inaccessible region of the South Nahanni River, flowing from the north into the Liard River, and believed at the time to be an area of great mineral wealth. The stories of men who had gone into the region exploring and prospecting, and who were never heard of again, added to the mystique. Tweedsmuir noted that the "South Nahanni fascinates me, and I want to make a trip there ... before I leave Canada", a wish that was not realized but that he lived through his novel *Sick Heart River*, published posthumously in 1941.

Sailing on from Fort Simpson, they approached Fort Norman at the junction of the Great Bear River. Here the Governor-General noted that in contrast to Waterways, where one began to feel the North, one could feel the beginning of the Arctic.

When they arrived at Fort Norman, Lord Tweedsmuir's sense of adventure and love of mountaineering got the better of him. Several of the party joined him in a climb up the face of Bear Rock which looks down over the Bear River pouring into the Mackenzie.

Age was no barrier for this 62 year-old Governor-General! Southern newspapers gave prominent titles to the Canadian Press story filed by Guy Rhoades, with a flavour of serious adventure: "Tweedsmuir Escapes Bad Fall on Mountain As Overhang Breaks", declared the *Toronto Globe and Mail*; the *Winnipeg Free Press* carried the same tone, "Nip and Tuck: Tweedsmuir Narrowly Escapes Fall While Mountain-climbing". The Governor-General remarked that "it was one of the nastiest climbs he had ever made

and would make the blood of experienced Alpiners curdle."

From Fort Norman they crossed the Arctic Circle, with a ceremony in which "his enfrosted majesty, King Santa Claus (played by a young Hudson's Bay Company employee, Richard Bonnycastle) the first emperor of the snows, grand seigneur of the Aurora Borealis and warden of the midnight sun, in the name of the polar bear, the caribou, the teepee and the kayak, (gave leave to the Governor-General) to cross the Arctic circle and be admitted into the most enviable order of seekers for the north."

Continuing northward, they reached Fort McPherson on Sunday, August 1st. Here, as at all the posts, Tweedsmuir spoke with the locals. One, an octogenarian, had been a Hudson's Bay Company post manager for 50 years. He refused to leave the North. He disliked civilization, recalling that he had once gone to Winnipeg: "It was in 1908, and I stood on Portage avenue watching the people rush here and there. Everyone seemed in a terrible hurry, chasing another dollar. I had three months' furlough and I had to come back in one. It was too monotonous." But he must also have been a crusty character because he was cited as the reason there was no Roman Catholic mission at the post. According to what the Governor-General's private secretary, Shuldham Redfern, heard, this post manager had always refused to give credit to Roman Catholics. Recalling a bit of economic history, he noted: "As was discovered and practised by many Elizabethan adventurers, a little commercial bullying is worth any amount of sectarian propaganda."

***For the Governor-General the North was part of a vision of Canada's future, representing more than just economic potential.***

That Sunday evening, the Distributor reached Aklavik, five days ahead of schedule despite some delays. The headlines in the South proclaimed "Boat Sets New Record on 1,200-Mile Voyage Down Mackenzie River". Everyone on board had agreed the 11-day journey from Waterways to Aklavik was the fastest time, "though none could recall the previous record". The entire journey was focusing everyone's attention on how much the North was changing. In a conversation recounted by Dr. Wood, one point was made emphatically: "You just wait 10 years, then you'll see what flying is going to do for this country."

This excitement in making the North more accessible coincided with other significant developments in the air that year: the cross-country flight of Air Transport Minister C.D. Howe to review the proposed trans-Canada air service route; airflight from London to New York in a day; and a report by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics that Canada led the world in air borne freight.

At each stop from Waterways to Aklavik, the Governor-General had been welcomed warmly by the inhabitants: the local native leaders, the RCMP officers, priests, traders, trappers and other residents. He received unique souvenirs during this unique trip, such as in Fort Simpson where he was presented a moosehide map of the Mackenzie River, embroidered in silk. He was entertained by native children, or just had tea, and left an autographed copy or two of his books along the way.

The party spent a couple of days at Aklavik, a settlement which Tweedsmuir thought to be "a complete mistake", in the middle of the delta, with "no proper sanitation, and the foreshore ... foul." His impressions of the delta area found their way into his Canadian novel, *Sick Heart River*, and were almost word for word his description recounted in the *Sunday Times* of London in December that year:

> "The delta of the Mackenzie is ... the most sinister place I have ever seen. It reminded me of nothing so much as the no-man's-land between the trenches in the war (of which he had personal experience) — but a colossal no-man's-land created in some campaign of demons — pitted and pocked with shell-holes from some infernal artillery."

The delta was left behind on August 4th, the vice-regal party flying in RCAF planes. They had to put down at Fort Norman because of bad weather. The next day, after the weather cleared, they flew east to Cameron Bay (Port Radium) on the eastern end of Great Bear Lake, arriving in the evening. Here, they were hosted by Harry Snyder, a Montreal-based oil businessman.

That evening, tragedy struck close by the party, but in a quieter, less sensationalist age, it was not reported in the media. The Mounties and a foreman from the Eldorado mine had left by boat for the RCMP base back at Cameron Bay. As they were approaching the dock, however, the foreman slipped off the bow, fell into the frigid waters of Great Bear Lake and drowned. This tragedy was never mentioned in the CP reports but was recounted in a rather nonchalant manner by Harry Snyder in an article he wrote in *Canadian Geographic*: "It is generally accepted that if a man goes clear under in Great Bear Lake the chill of the water paralyzes him and

he never come up. Such are the risks and hazards of the North."

Perfect weather on the following day permitted Harry Snyder to fly His Excellency and members of his party to Coppermine, where the river of the same name empties into Coronation Gulf. The contrast with the "sinister" Mackenzie delta was marked, but the scale was similar:

> "The most wonderful impression I had was flying over the Barrens on a cloudy day. The cloud shadows in these infinite plains, in constant motion, made a beautiful fantastic world. It was all out of scale with humanity; but it is a good thing now and then if you manage to realize that the world was not created on your own scale. It sharpens the adventure of living."

On August 9th, Tweedsmuir and his party flew from Eldorado, heading for Fort Rae and then on to Fort Smith where they spent the night, returning to Edmonton the next day. They had completed a journey of several thousand miles in the space of three weeks that only two decades before would have taken months.

This special northern journey by the Governor-General was significant at three distinct levels. Ffor the inhabitants it was a very special event to see the King's representative in their own remote corner of Canada, taking a genuine interest in their affairs and future. For John Buchan the writer, the scenery, the history and the colourful characters he met along the way stimulated his creative mind, feeding a novel and a children's book, both set in Canada and published after his death, while still in office, in February, 1940.

The North, he wrote in a private "mid-way" report to Britain just before the trip, "would be a binding force, for (it) is common to practically all the Provinces and to all our different race stocks." Elsewhere, he noted it "is common to both east and west, (and) is a natural bridge to unite the two divisions. I look to the North as one of the great unifying factors in the future of the Dominion."

With this voyage, Tweedsmuir did contribute to greater attention being focused on the North. The *Winnipeg Free Press* editors confirmed this to some extent, commenting that with Lord Tweedsmuir's trip to the Arctic, and Cardinal Villeneuve, Archbishop of Quebec, making a trip to Hudson's Bay in August, "our north country is receiving full recognition this year."

Tweedsmuir's belief that the future of Canada lay in the North may not have been realized, but the reality today is certainly more complex than it was 60 years ago (for example, self-government in the territories, land claims, and environmental questions surrounding development). The reality today is also that the position of Governor-General does not carry the prestige it once did when it was occupied by lords and generals, nor does it seem to attract as much attention. There is still, however, a lasting lesson in Tweedsmuir's approach.

The inspiration then was to create a vision that could enthuse everyone, a common theme on which to focus. Using his position to draw attention to the North was one way in which Canada's 15th Governor-General since Confederation put his vision into action. And his advice to himself about never being off the road echoes through the decades to ring relevant today.✦