

Heart of the Yukon: A Natural and Cultural History of the Mayo Area edited by Lynette Bleiler, Christopher Burn, and Mark O'Donoghue. Mayo: Village of Mayo, 2006. ISBN 978026306, paperback, 138 pages, maps, B&W and colour illustrations, bib.

Reviewed by Dave Mossop

Most of us have an innate curiosity about the world around us. The stumbling block we often face satiating that curiosity is a good clear aid that talks to us at our own level. Starting with simply putting a name to things, then wondering how it works, and finally watching things change are the tools that fuel the excitement generated by human curiosity. This book sets out to be the starting place—a clear simplified aid for opening our eyes to a wonderful little part of the North.

In the centre of Canada's Yukon Territory is the Mayo district. Passion just seems to ooze from the three principal authors and editors who call it home and have put together this collaborative effort. One is a long-term resident, a one-person repository of the cultural history of the place; another is the regional biologist; and a third is a university geography researcher who has been a summer resident there for over twenty-five years.

Between them and several guest authors, they have created a wonderful little "for the average person" book designed to be a resource tool that will never sit idly on the shelf for long. The Mayo district might be one of the better researched in the Yukon. Yet, for most of us, it is one of the less well-known regions in the North. With a very long history of occupation by its original people, the Na-Cho Nyak Dun, and a hurly-burly of European history mostly in pursuit of precious metals, a warehouse of traditional, historic, and science information has piled up. The vision of this little book (twenty-two chapters, eight authors, 200 figures, and a topical reference list) was to provide an easy-to-read synthesis of this mass of work, providing a starting place reference for us to begin exploring this special place.

Divided into three sections dealing in turn with physical landscape, the living world, and the cultural history, the several authors have worked admirably to fit their contributions into a nicely flowing and comprehensive work. The quality of expertise that could be turned loose on a project like this is stunning. The physical world is provided by a great pair: Chris Burn, truly a world-class authority on the physical geography of the Mayo area and the North generally (in particular its glacial and periglacial landforms), and Charlie Roots, whose contributions to the geological literature of the Yukon are seemingly endless. Mark O'Donoghue supplies the living natural

history component. He is the territory's regional biologist in Mayo. He earned his PhD in the Yukon wilderness and has become an integral part of the community. Lynette Bleiler assisted by Ruth Gotthardt and a wonderful lineup of local elders, has the daunting task of making sense of the literally thousands of years of human occupation of the area. Lynette is a twenty year past president of the Historical Society at Mayo and comes from an old time family whose grandparents came to Mayo in 1903.

It's not often that a work explaining the natural functions of a landscape is given a synthesis that completely and seamlessly integrates the history of people into the mix as well as this book does. It gives a dimension to understanding and simply enjoying the area that is often missing. The original people lived by having an intimate cultural knowledge of the geography, natural history, and ecological functioning of the land. And they had to have it right: in the words of a respected elder, they "survived if it was the will of the land."

The now well-known "waves" of European invasion are explained wonderfully; it becomes clear that the Mayo story of the good and bad impacts of this time on the land and the people is a more understandable sub-set of the massive disruption this era had across the whole continent. (Especially intriguing stories are the obviously gut-wrenching attempts by wise elders to try to "save" their children by secreting them out to the land at that time.) The ensuing "non-native" era becomes a story of classic give and take between two cultures, massive commercial environmental change, a First Nation land claim agreement, and an evolving self-governing people. In particular, the work benefits from its obvious attempt to be non-judgmental and objective in presenting the sometimes fascinating historic events.

Anyone with an active curiosity about the world around us will find something in this book. The universal questions in the outdoors: "What do you call that?" "Who were those people?" and "How does that work?" are the stuff of natural history and cultural study.

As a "read through" the book provides its best experience. It is captivating and puts the reader right at home in the region. The use of illustrating photos (many of which have invaluable historic value), tables, and graphs is well done. Minor editorial glitches (some figures have been numbered incorrectly) in no way interfere with the information flow intended. The only unfortunate problem with the book emerges in terms of day-to-day returns to it as a reference: a good topical index is missing and would have assisted the book's usefulness immeasurably.

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