

***The Old Way North: Following the Oberholtzer-Magee Expedition.* By David Pelly. St. Paul, MN: Borealis Books, 2008. 197 pp. Illustrations, index, bibliography.**

“The old way north” is an historic travel corridor that follows rivers and lakes from northern Manitoba into Nunavut. It was well-known by the Inuit and Dene and used by the early Hudson’s Bay traders, missionaries, and geologists. David Pelly uses a 1912 expedition by Ernest Oberholtzer and his Anishinabe companion Billy Magee to lead the reader through the history of the landscape and Inuit-Dene interactions from the mid-1700s to the present day. The Oberholtzer-Magee expedition is arguably the least interesting of the stories that Pelly recounts, and that narrative is soon largely abandoned for a wealth of information about Catholic missionaries, fur traders, and trappers.

Pelly’s narrative style at times competes with the drama of his stories. The author arrives at conclusions with meagre evidence and offers up contradictory world views without examination or clarification. The dangers of the “unknown” country are highlighted to dramatize the Oberholtzer-Magee expedition while the semi-nomadic travels of the Inuit and Dene through this same country are related in a matter-of-fact tone. None of the stories are referenced so we can only trust that Pelly is reflecting the original viewpoints.

Pelly falls short in his stated goal for writing this book. He presents the drama of Canadian history but fails to illustrate the national identity that the geography lends to our history. He does paint a picture of the people living in two very different landscapes, boreal and barrens, gradually brought together through the pressures of economics and government, and of the outsiders who wander through or briefly live on the edge of the barrens.

Despite its evident flaws and need for some ruthless editing, this book is an enjoyable and colourful riot of facts and personalities. The route is so well described that the reader might be able to follow it without a map. The index is helpful in reconstituting the story of a particular person or event and the details leave the reader with a desire to explore the first- and second-hand accounts listed in Pelly’s extensive selected bibliography.

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