

Nahanni Journals: R. M. Patterson's 1927–1929 Journals

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Book Reviews

NAHANNI JOURNALS: R. M. PATTERSON'S 1927–1929 JOURNALS. By Edited by Richard C. Davis. Edmonton, Canada: University of Alberta Press, 2008. 225 pp. \$29.95 (softcover). ISBN 978-0-88864-477-0.

Raymond Patterson's canoe explorations of the South Nahanni River, made alone in 1927 and with a companion in 1928–1929, were among the last true expeditions of discovery, journeys into parts of the world—Canada's Northwest Territories in this case—that while not quite blank areas on the map, were nonetheless very imperfectly known at the time and filled with mystery, fable, and hazard. Patterson's retelling of these adventures, in his 1954 book *The Dangerous River*, became a classic in the adventure travel genre, and Patterson himself became an icon of the intrepid and capable woodsman and riverman. The South Nahanni, now protected within the boundaries of the Nahanni National Park Preserve and easily accessible by air, has become a prime whitewater rafting destination, and its mysteries have not been solved so much as forgotten. The style of modern fly-in-fly-out adventure tourism has little space and less time for mysteries or uncertainty.

The river that R. M. Patterson paddled and poled up in 1927 was a different world than the river that a present-day visitor will encounter. A young London bank clerk of modestly independent means, Patterson moved to Canada and homesteaded in the Peace River district of Alberta in 1923, but in short order was pushing beyond the confines of his settlement and into the exotic and uncharted parts of the Northwest Territories. His narrative in *The Dangerous River* tells the stories of two expeditions to the South Nahanni, bold adventures (in 1927, he covered nearly 1000 miles by canoe, of which more than 700 were done solo) in which Patterson—unaccompanied at the most critical moments—uses his skills and determination to overcome the daunting obstacles and downright threats presented by this fearsome river. These are stories of the subjugation of nature and of the value of stern and dauntless courage. Patterson writes of how he and his occasional companions “broke the spell” of the Nahanni, unraveling its labyrinthine course through the Selwyn Mountains, boldly pressing on into a country into which men were reputed to vanish and never return.

Writing *The Dangerous River* 25 years after the fact, Patterson relied on the journals in which he had recorded his days on the river during the 1927 and 1928–1929 expeditions. The journals, held by the Royal British Columbia Museum following Patterson's death in 1984, have been available to the public but were unpublished until now. The journals have now been transcribed and edited by the Canadian literature scholar Richard Davis, who also provides an extensive and thoughtful analysis of Patterson's writings, and, most importantly, of the differences between Patterson's later narrative in *The Dangerous River* and his contemporary day-to-day accounting of events and impressions. In this analysis, Davis explores the complex terrain of the narrative telling of events and of the difference between any event and its retelling. Any narrative description is necessarily a fiction

of sorts, a reproduction of actual occurrences in prose form, told for a particular audience and in which certain details are selected above others for emphasis. No narrative account can be perfectly mimetic; at the same time, a large part of the power of nonfiction writing lies in the fact that it is—one assumes—a true account, and a reader rightly expects the narrative not to deviate too far from actual events. But at what level is reinterpretation acceptable, and how large a detail can justifiably be omitted? And more generally, what is the function of narrative? Is it to record in a form as literal and complete as possible a certain occurrence or experience, or is it to tell a story which communicates most effectively the author's purpose in recounting the experience, presumably one with qualities that make it worth communicating as something more than a record of basic fact?

It turns out that Patterson believed that the spirit of his Nahanni adventures held more value for the reader than a purely factual accounting. Davis is quick to defend Patterson's deviation from a strictly truthful retelling of events, and his reasoning for doing so is convincing. Patterson had a good story to tell, one which moved more definitively to its conclusion with a protagonist somewhat more firmly in control of the situation than Patterson in fact was. And why spoil a good adventure with extensive disclosures of his own naiveté and inexperience if they didn't significantly influence the ultimate outcome? Patterson's adjustments of events in the narrative evolved over time, for he had told portions of the story in magazine articles in previous decades, and in those casual accounts he had more or less painted himself into a corner when the time came to tell the whole story. However, Patterson really doesn't commit an unforgivable deception in *The Dangerous River* when, for example, he omits the fact that when he encountered his first portages in 1927 he had to work out for himself how to pick up and carry his canoe. At any rate, *The Dangerous River* was, and remains, a valuable and entertaining book with a well-deserved reputation and following, especially among river enthusiasts.

Readers of *The Dangerous River* did suffer a loss, however, which is happily recovered in the journals. Patterson's day-to-day records tell a different, arguably richer, story than the book, revealing other levels of his experience which offer lessons largely absent from the narrative. The climax of the 1927 trip, Patterson's arrival, alone, at Virginia Falls, far up the South Nahanni, is a triumph of will and bold action as told in *The Dangerous River*:

“Something huge and white flashed into view as I cleared the sandstone point – it was the falls! Well, to hell with the Falls! They could wait: this racing water was all that mattered now.”

Events in the journal turn out to be rather different:

“A day of disappointment... the trees were all against me. ...I worked like a navvy, had lunch & worked again until three until I realised that it was hopeless to try to make a safe cache at that camp. I took some chocolate & my rifle & climbed the hills disgustedly, hoping to get a bear. I saw a moose a long way off & the heat became so drowsy among the pines that I lay down on the needles in the shade on a

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sunny hillside & dozed & listened to the roar of the falls—perhaps four miles away—that I may never see.”

Patterson did eventually make it to the falls, 10 days later, but only with a companion and a motor. His achievement, however, was not so much one of conquest but of perception, both of the environment he was passing through and of his response to it:

“If only you could see this silver night by the river—or even one tenth of all that I have seen this summer. It all looks so cold and barren on the map, & when you get to the heart of it you find humming birds, wild bees & tiger lilies, fruit, a warm sunlight that strikes right through you & colour & loveliness without end. And so to bed, first setting the porridge.”

The fact that Patterson accomplished so much in spite of his inexperience really makes the story even better: *the intrepid explorer reaches hundreds of miles into the Canadian wilderness with no prior whitewater experience—without even knowing how to portage!* But this was a side of himself Patterson was evidently unwilling to share. Richard Davis’s sensitive analysis of the journal’s content and his integration of it with other aspects of Patterson’s life make the journals doubly interesting and valuable, as does Davis’s consideration of Patterson’s accomplishments and writings in a broader literary context. Patterson’s true experience shares far more (as Davis points out) with Kenneth Graham’s *The Wind in the Willows* than with *The Headless Valley*, Ranulph Fiennes’ account of his 1971 military-style attack on the river. One can imagine Patterson on the banks of the river in 1927, barefoot and joyfully wriggling his toes in the sand, watching Fiennes and his commandos struggle past, 45 years later, groaning under the burdens of fame and sponsorship.

The world of blank spots on the map, the last vestiges of which Patterson explored more than 80 years ago, has truly vanished today. The discovery of more than what can be shown on a map, on the other hand, is inexhaustible, and great travel writing is about the exploration of this less tangible terrain, a country not only unconquerable by money, ambition, and bravado, but altogether inaccessible by those means alone. Patterson’s journals recount his passage through this land. His full perception of what was around him and his recounting of it in his journals read as true and to the point as any perfect line through whitewater.

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