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Labrador

The Land that God Gave Cain. By J. M. Scott. (Chatto and Windus. 12s. 6d.)

In his last years at Cambridge the author, half-resigned to a life of dull and honourable employment, confessed by chance to a secret longing to travel about the world before he settled down. An Antarctic explorer, taking him seriously, suggested that he might meet a man who was even then planning an expedition and that he would in due course write to him, arranging a meeting. The meeting was arranged, but not before the author had forgotten the name of the man whom he was to meet. But eventually the two men met each other and not long later they sailed for Labrador, which is the land that God gave Cain. Their names were Scott and Watkins: a combination that might conceivably have become historic. But they were, in fact, to make only one other expedition together before Watkins was drowned while rolling an Eskimo kayak a year or two later.

The Labrador expedition was Watkins' idea. "Labrador," he said, "had got into the papers because Canada and Newfoundland had been arguing about its ownership." The Privy Council, it seemed, had decreed that the boundary should run from this point to that and so on. It was all a little obscure, after the manner of councils, though legally the matter was clear enough. For Watkins the really important point was that the land was ill-mapped, "so badly mapped that no one knew where the height of the land might be." On this point Watkins seized, characteristically. Scott and he should map the country, by air if possible, but if not by air then by compass traverses across the country, defining the positions of lakes and waterfalls. He had worked out a scheme: but not only that, he had raised funds, had got the Royal Geographical Society interested, had arranged for a loan of instruments. This combination of the enthusiastic and the practical seems to have been characteristic of Watkins, who was then, like his companion, only 21. At the last moment they became a party of three, joined by Lionel Leslie, seven years their senior, who had travelled alone in Burma and Africa.

They arrived in Labrador, to be welcomed by an unexpected plague of a million mosquitos, in July. The sea-plane had not been possible: so that, if they were to traverse the country at all, they must go by canoe in summer or with dogs in winter. They set out by canoe, accompanied by a fourth man, Robert Michelin, a native. This first expedition, the summer journey, was to be in a northerly direction from their base, North West River, through the long chain of lakes and rapids to Hopedale. On paper it looks and sounds extremely simple: a sort of adventurous boating holiday in magnificent lake and forest country with a climate very like that of Scotland. But the combination of powerful currents and rapids and shallows, meaning that the men must often wade and push their canoes and just as often carry canoe and food and baggage and all overland, turned the whole thing at times into an agony of hardship.

"I suppose we did about three miles today. It was all wading and pulling the canoes over the stones. Their bottoms are now pretty thoroughly torn and they leak at a great pace. Robert and Douglas walked on and reported worse to come, falls and portages."

But they succeeded. Not only that, they returned to North West River and began almost immediately, undaunted, to plan the real expedition, the winter journey into the country south of their base, up Hamilton River to the Grand Falls district, where they would map the Unknown River and Falls. The summer, according to Scott's own words, had been delightful. They were never really hungry or tired out. But on that winter journey it was all very different. They were often seriously hungry, the cold was intense, and the dogs, fed according to outside advice, dropped out and died when they were most needed. The food question was so acute that, at times, they could have devoured margarine in blocks, pure, with immense pleasure. Michelin, obstinate, superstitious, sensitive, but in every way invaluable, again accompanied them. Leslie had returned to England. On the summer journey Scott and Watkins had become the best of friends, never quarrelling, and the winter consolidated that friendship as firmly as the ice over which they struggled, still never quarrelling, from North West River to the Unknown Falls.

October 20, 1933.]

THE SPECTATOR

And again, in spite of the hardships, the dogs, and the food difficulties, they accomplished what they had set out to do, making maps of known and unknown territory, finding new waterfalls, charting the streams which give origin to Unknown River.

The book is worthy of that journey. Written at Watkins' suggestion and finished in spite of the sense of futility with which his death filled his friend, it is a lively, fascinating, even humorous account. Watkins' own spirit of adventure, heroism and light-heartedness permeates it. In this sense alone it is a worthy memorial to him. Mr. Scott will ask for no higher praise.

H. E. BATES.

Cornwall in the Civil War

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