

## HSTC Bulletin

Journal of the History of Canadian Science, Technology and Medicine  
Revue d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine au Canada

hstc  
bulletin

### *Industry in the Wilderness: the People, the Buildings, the Machines -- Heritage in Northwestern Ontario.* Frank Rasky, Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1983. Pp 128, illus.

Thomas R. Roach

Volume 8, numéro 2 (27), décembre–december 1984

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800195ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800195ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

HSTC Publications

ISSN

0228-0086 (imprimé)

1918-7742 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Roach, T. R. (1984). Compte rendu de [*Industry in the Wilderness: the People, the Buildings, the Machines -- Heritage in Northwestern Ontario.* Frank Rasky, Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1983. Pp 128, illus.] *HSTC Bulletin*, 8(2), 158–160.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/800195ar>

*Industry in the Wilderness: the People, the Buildings, the Machines--Heritage in Northwestern Ontario.* Frank Rasky, Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1983. Pp 128, illus.

It is quite some years now since I cruised timber and fought fires in Northwestern Ontario. As a result, I picked up this book with more than usual interest. This was especially so as it appeared to be illustrated with a larger number of photographs than the average. In 128 pages, Frank Rasky introduces the area that made up Ontario's last mining and wood production frontier. He briefly reviews the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company men, Robert Bell of the Geological Survey, the railway construction gangs, the lumber men and then on to prospectors, miners and bush pilots. Besides many prints from original photographs of towns, mines and other activity in the area, there is a collection of photos of abandoned machinery, dam sites and mines as they appear today.

Rasky's text, however, is not extensive, the print is large and even so the columns often fail to fill the pages leaving large blank spaces that could have held additional pictures. For his sources, the author, 'a well known journalist and editor' has relied largely on interviews with surviving 'industrial pioneers.' For the early chapters he has gleaned his information from published sources but there is evidence he failed to check some of the stories he was told with these same sources. In his introduction, Rasky states 'If you are a first time visitor to north-west Ontario, you may be inclined to say that you see nothing but wilderness' (p. 8). He then goes on to define the purpose of the book as 'to banish the dire legends and celebrate the very real achievements of the people who pushed back the wilderness.' Before these pioneers came, by the way, the area was 'untamed and untenanted, inhabited only by hobgoblins of fantasy and perhaps

a handful of primitive people.'--so much for the tribes of Cree and Ojibway with their rich culture and woodcraft that enabled them to prosper in the often unforgiving forest.

This brings me to my major problem with this book. As a tourist and as one who worked full-time in the trade, I would expect a book intended to introduce an area to tourists to be accurate, without cant or bias and well written. *Industry in the Wilderness* falls short on all these counts. Consider accuracy. Historic pictures of logging teams in Algonquin Park are captioned as if they were taken in Northwestern Ontario (pp. 29, 30, 32 and 33). Sir George Simpson has a quotation (p. 12) lifted directly from Elaine Mitchell's book, *Fort Timiskaming and the Fur Trade*, which is completely out of context. The section on the discovery of gold at Red Lake is written as if nothing happened before 1925, ignoring completely D.F. Parrott's *The Red Lake Gold Rush*, which shows that considerable amounts of ore were discovered before that year and that the rush happened because mining only then became profitable. Photographs of the mill at Dryden (p. 111) are incorrectly captioned giving the impression that the establishment shrank instead of expanded.

The author is also biased. Besides the reference to native people, we are told on page 28 that J.P. Bertrand's unpublished exposé of the 'Old Tory Timber Ring' (see R.S. Lambert, with Paul Pross, *Renewing Nature's Wealth*) of 1920 and earlier is 'part of the modern conservationists' demonology which depicts pioneer lumbermen as ogres.' Rasky then continues to defend these men by quoting the manager of public affairs for the Great Lakes Forest Products mill at Dryden: 'They had the courage to tackle the wilderness, and in my book, they were lion-hearted pioneers.' Unfortunately for the author, one of his subjects tells us on page 36 'there ain't no more wood on Lake of the Woods. It's bone-dry of pulpwood,' apparently having cut, the company that employed this man got out without making provision for the future.

Nor is the book well written. For the first sixty-three pages, the author's text is uneven and broken. The historic figures he writes about come across as one-dimensional. They are described in what I can only call bombastic clichés. The text in the last half is, however, different. Here Rasky relies heavily on interviews with about a dozen people in the Red Lake-Lac Seul-Hudson region. They are real men and women, bush pilots, store owners, housewives, prospectors and linemen. They tell their stories eloquently and simply and the author's small amount of original text does not interfere. In fact, sometimes Rasky's text in these pages adds to the sense of what we are being told. In this section too is the bulk of photographs of the abandoned mines and mining machinery but, unfortunately, there is not much analysis. The tourist is encouraged to use his or her imagination when looking at a rusty boiler and decide what the abandoned relic most resembles, 'a hippo yawning, a wart-hog snoring.' The spookiness of a half-collapsed headframe is pointed out (pp. 100-102) while, at the back of the book in small print alongside a map locating interesting sites, is a warning to be careful 'climbing out is a lot harder than falling in.'

This book is a disappointment. Northwestern Ontario is, I am persuaded, not served well by it. As a local history, it is not a shining example of what can be done and neither does it truthfully introduce the area to tourists, the market at which it is aimed. This is a shame, the more so as the preparation of the manuscript and the publication of the book were funded by the Government of Ontario, which holds the copyright. One reaches the conclusion that, if the government had the money to pay for this work, it surely had the funds available to ensure a quality production.

Thomas R. Roach