

John Hornby: Legend or Fool

By Thomas H. Hill



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After graduating in 1975 from the University of Denver, where he received his BA in European history, he went to work as a reporter for a regional weekly, concentrating on local land and water use issues and writing occasional features about rural life in Northern Virginia. In time, he found his way into management in retail banking and retired from the business in 2000. He now manages his family's investment partnership and serves on the board of the Hornby Charitable Trust based in London, England.

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There was his habit of bringing into the cave a wolf carcass ready for skinning. With the candor of a child taking a toy apart, Hornby would squat on his sleeping-bag and disembowel the wolf. The mess he thus created was frightful. (Waldron 83)

It is hard to understand how John Hornby, the center of this hideous scene, could have ever become a legend. But legends come in all stripes. The one thing they all have in common is the legacy of a good story. Hornby's story is certainly good, but also cautionary.

The gruesome image of wolf guts in the sleeping bag was a recollection of a trail companion who had once accompanied Hornby as he explored northern Canada in the early 1900's. In addition to his penchant for butchering large beasts in his bed, this short, wiry man with a perpetual shock of unkempt black hair had some unusual personal codes which ordered his life: He refused to travel with anyone except blue eyed men; he disdained money despite his constant need for it; and he insisted that his travel companions be educated, well-bred gentlemen (Waldron 16). He once said: "When I consider a trail companion, I look for a gentleman because he's got backbone," adding, "it's the same with grub. A man who has *not* been accustomed to the best will likely demand it (more) than a man who has had it all his life. You can usually tell what sort a man he is when the flour sack goes empty" (Waldron 17).

Hornby preferred the "empty sack" to a full larder and an easy life. George Whalley, author of *The Legend of John Hornby*, wrote of him: "Hardships and starvation seemed to take on a positive value for him, as though they were the

only substantial values left, as though an ascetic and masochistic spirit were driving him to some impossible consummation with the country he loved" (131).

Born September 21, 1880, into a wealthy family in Cheshire, England, John Hornby spent his childhood at Parkfield, a colonnaded stone house set amongst ancient oaks and manicured lawns. His father, Albert Neilson Hornby, was one of the most celebrated cricketers of his day, captain of the English team in the first Ashes test match against Australia in 1882. His mother, Ada, daughter of the founder of the *London Illustrated News*, was described by her granddaughter as "a real battle-axe."

Like his father and brothers before him, he was shipped off to Harrow, where he matriculated with other "sons of aristocracy." Not a great scholar, he did excel on the athletic fields. After graduating, he flunked the Diplomatic Service "sorting out" tests, leaving him few career options. So, in 1904, aged twenty-three, with no purpose and no plan, he headed to Canada to seek his fortune. Arriving in Edmonton, he worked a myriad of jobs: trapping, surveying, even mule skinning (Whalley 12).

In 1907, his life changed when he signed on to do odd jobs, including caribou hunting, for a trapping expedition to Great Bear Lake in northern Canada (Whalley 50). The venture was a financial failure, but Hornby had found his element. He loosely attached himself to a two-year mining survey around Great Bear Lake and down the Coppermine River, sponsored by George Douglas, who became Hornby's life-long friend and

informal archivist (Whalley 52). Winters at Great Bear Lake were difficult in the tiny one room cabin he built himself, and he was uncomfortable and underpaid, but he was living the happiest time of his life.

Hornby had fallen under the spell of the North. According to one biographer, “For Hornby, the three years on Great Bear Lake were crucial: they mark the beginning of his fatal devotion to the Barren Ground. All fascination, like love, undermines what the world calls reason; and in the end, the Barren Ground was to steal Hornby’s” (Whalley 50)

The lure of the Arctic is hard for most to understand. The Barren Grounds is a treeless tundra that spreads between the woodlands of Great Bear and Great Slave Lakes to the west, Hudson Bay to the east, and north to the Arctic. Scraped level by the last glaciation, it seems nothing more than pond, bog and muskeg, the nursery for clouds of mosquitos and blackflies that drive men and animals to suicidal madness. Winter is brutal and begins early. By November, night temperatures seldom rise above zero; during winter’s depths, thirty below is considered benign when temperatures regularly plunge to negative sixty. The wind howls at hurricane force for days. Daylight is brief or non-existent for weeks, depending on one’s proximity to the Arctic Circle. Summer temperatures can soar into the eighties, but one must stay bundled in sweaty flannels and thick trousers as a foil to the blood-thirsty insects.

But there is a mystical beauty to this rugged land. For a few species, including some especially durable men, it is the only place they can survive. It can be a refuge for soul searchers and “anti-socialites” and a harbor for those who have lost direction. A fellow traveler, James Critchell-Bullock, recounted Hornby’s words:

Those lakes, sometimes they are like mirrors...sometimes they are like rapids when the wind churns them. Mostly, though, they are under ice. The summers are short. But for a few weeks there are flowers everywhere. But the winters are long. And they are cold...I have known it to fall to 80 below. There are no human inhabitants. (ah, but) ... the caribou...There are millions of them there. At migration time the whole horizon will be a trembling black mass of them...There is no sight like it. (Waldron 15)

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To Hornby, the place was magical. It was the only place he could see himself living: “I am too old and have lived too long with ... the uncivilized races ... to ever get accustomed to the continual wrangle and utter selfishness of the white races” (Whalley 110).

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When World War I broke out, Hornby, then thirty-three, joined the Canadian army. Soon after he was transferred to the English Army, promoted to lieutenant, made a sniper, and then evacuated to London with a German bullet through his breast and the Military Cross for bravery around his neck. Two months later, without permission, he walked out of his military hospital and booked passage back to Canada, bringing shame upon his family, which had already lost one son in the skies above Flanders Fields.

Charges for desertion were never brought and he got to keep his medal (Whalley 13-15).

Returning penniless to Canada, he was forced to borrow from friends to get back north. In 1924, Critchell-Bullock, enthralled by stories Hornby had told him while acting as a hunting guide, bankrolled an expedition built around Hornby’s dream—being the first white man to winter in the Barrens. Although the expedition failed as an investment, it cemented Hornby’s reputation amongst the trappers, hunters and fortune seekers who now saw that he could conquer the wilderness and suffer hardships that would have killed anyone else. One reporter glowingly noted, “In Canada, the expression ‘Hornby of Hudson Bay’ was becoming almost as familiar as ‘Lawrence of Arabia’” (Hornby family archive).

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Again out of money, prospects, and plans, Hornby returned to England to visit his aging mother. While there he visited his first cousin Marguerite Christian, whose 17 year old son, Edgar, became mesmerized by Hornby’s stories. Undecided about his career, Edgar was entertaining the notion of joining the Foreign Service, but his mother suggested, instead, that Hornby take her son to the north of Canada. Edgar jumped at the opportunity. Sailing out of Liverpool on April 20, 1926, Hornby and Edgar left England for the last time. Colonel Christian, Edgar’s father, handed his son a letter as he boarded the ship: “Remember our trust and love go with you. You have ambition and I am sure you will overcome all difficulties. You will have great hardships probably, but be patient and work hard” (Whalley 254). How prescient those lines would be.

Young Edgar chronicled his travels with weekly letters home to his parents, assuring them, “I am as safe as a house with Jack.” He also wrote, prophetically:

“I have seen lots of trappers who have been on this trail with Jack and many won’t go again because he is too tough.” He ends with “I shall be with someone whose name runs through Canada with highest praise which makes me feel absolutely satisfied about the future” (Whalley 23-24).

Along the way, they picked up Harold Adlard, a 27-year-old former RAF pilot still looking for direction in his own life. Edgar was pleased: “He is a nice chap and will be more company and makes it so I am not the only greenhorn in the camp” (Christian 18).

They made good time going north, arriving at Great Slave Lake by June 23, just as ice went out. No more letters were posted after this as they had reached the end of “civilization.” What is known about the rest of the voyage is directly from Edgar’s diary that he promised his father he would keep. That diary became the capstone that secured Hornby’s status as a legend.

The winter camp site chosen by Hornby was deep in the Barren Grounds, 200 miles from any help or other human. Although surrounded by tundra, this one spot was enveloped by a stand of stunted spruce trees growing in what is known as the Thelon Oasis, a long thread following the Hanbury and Thelon Rivers for about 100 miles. He had passed that way the year before with Critchell-Bullock and calculated that the trees would shelter the caribou, harbor fur animals for their traps, provide logs for their cabin, and fuel for their fire. It was sheer speculation. As he often did, Hornby had overestimated the quantity of animals populating the area. By mid-October, when Edgar resumed his diary, their cabin was almost complete, but night temperatures were already below freezing (Christian 45). Unfortunately, they had arrived too late for the fall caribou migration. The herds had already moved 150 miles south to their winter range around Dubwani Lake.

The line between life and death in the Arctic is very thin when it depends upon “timing” the caribou. Although there are hundreds of thousands in vast herds that follow general migration routes, the migration itself is never predictable. Miss the fall migration by a week and it could be a hungry winter. Miss it by a month and it will probably be fatal. Worse still, caribou have an uncanny ability to just disappear. In Gyldendal Forlag’s *In the Land of Feast or Famine*, he writes: “The Indians have a saying: [Caribou] ‘are like ghosts; they come from nowhere, fill up all the land, then disappear.’ When the animals disappeared, hunger and famine followed in their wake” (156). By the time the Hornby party arrived, the only caribou left were a few stragglers making a tough living eating the sparse moss and lichens off rocky outcrops. Edgar’s diary excitedly records a sighting on October 18, but on the 19th he writes: “Disappointed in seeing nothing for miles around as a strong cold north wind was blowing...we decided to turn back” (Christian 46-47).

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As winter deepened the number of animals caught in their traps declined along with the temperature. They had set nets in the river, but it was a poor fishing spot and by late December, when the river had frozen solid, they abandoned the effort. By November 26 all stores of meat were depleted. By December 5th, they began to alter their routines. Temperatures were now

dipping to 30 below, and snow piled up on their trap lines. Their traps would sometimes yield a fox or two, even a wolverine, but winter conditions were so hard on these creatures that none of them had any fat on their meat. Their January take (three hare, four fox, one wolverine, eleven ptarmigan, and three weasels) amounted to fewer calories than one could find on the tables at a single Torch club dinner.

Starving is cruel. After a few days without food, the gnawing hunger turns to pain, though obsession with food subsides. After a week, the pain also subsides as the stomach shrinks. But if food arrives, the process begins all over again. The body searches for calories, and if there is no food, it begins to consume the sub-cutaneous fat just below the skin. For a person of normal weight, these fat reserves could last a month, perhaps two. Adding morsels of outside nourishment can extend the time even longer. But once the fat stores are depleted, the body begins its final cannibalistic phase and looks to the muscles, especially in the legs, buttocks and upper arms. And then the brain goes. Starvation brings confusion, irritability, irrational behavior, and finally apathy towards everything, including finding food. Death usually comes quietly as the body surrenders to itself.

On February 1, Hornby finally shot a caribou (Christian 72). They rationed the meat for nine days. That one caribou, along with a few ptarmigan and foxes, kept them going through February, but by early March, Hornby was beginning to weaken and then, on March 15, he severely injured his leg (Christian 88). This was a catastrophic blow. Hornby was the main bread-winner, their trusted leader, and the experienced hand in the wilderness.

Edgar’s entries remained unwaveringly optimistic. On March 18, he heard a raven outside the cabin and wrote, “I hope [the raven] means

caribou coming. A change of wind might easily cause them to come north” (89). A week later he wrote: “Caribou should be here in a week at least and that should end the strain” (92).

In desperation, the three began to eat animal hides and their spare boots. This was a mistake. Because digestive acids have little effect on leather, it moves slowly through the small intestine as a solid mass, ending up lodged in the large intestine, causing constipation and severe cramps. Edgar referred to this as “binding up,” and their only cure was to give each other cold water enemas. More insidious is that the body uses more energy trying to digest the hide than the hide actually yields.

So it went for another month, but the end was coming. On March 31st, Edgar wrote: “Harold grumpy all day, seems to think he is ill, so Jack made him get out and get wood while we two had a good rest” (94). Harold’s brain was now compromised; he slipped in and out of rationality. At the same time, Hornby was weaker than ever. On April 4th he gathered Edgar and Harold to his side and told them they would soon be fending for themselves. In the same entry, Edgar finally expressed some sadness about their predicament: “What a mental strain it was. I felt homesick as never before and hope to God they know not what Jack is suffering” (96).

On April 11, Hornby, again, called the boys to his bedside and gave them their final assignments. Five days later, on April 16th, 1927, Hornby’s 46 year old body finally succumbed to his beloved Barren Grounds. They wrapped his emaciated body in a blanket, carried him outside, and propped him against the cabin just to the left of the door. Burial was out of the question; the ground was frozen solid. Edgar’s poignant entry read: “Determined to pull through and go out to let the world know of the one

who has made a foundation to build my life upon” (107).

* * *

Poor Harold lasted only two-and-a-half weeks after Hornby’s death. On May 4th, Edgar was truly on his own. It had been a year and a week since he had sailed from England with his youthful exuberance and high hopes for adventure. Now, alone in one of the most remote spots on the globe, he faced his own mortality. His diary testifies that he met the challenge with dignity and grace. Not once did he ever complain or question why Hornby had brought him to a spot where rescue was absolutely impossible. Instead, he continued to write about his determination to make it out alive and tell the world what a wonderful man John Hornby really was.

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On June 6, he knew his end was near. “Weaker than ever,” he wrote in shaky script. “Have eaten all I can. Have food on hand but heart petering out. Sunshine is bright now. See if that does any good to me if I get out and bring in wood to make fire tonight. Make preparations now. Too weak and all in now. Left things late” (128). Soon after this final entry, Edgar struggled to his bunk, pulled a ragged wool blanket over his head, put his hands beside his shriveled hips, and went quietly into history on his 19th birthday.

* * *

It was over a year before the Canadian Mounted Police were sent to investigate

the Hornby party’s disappearance. When they arrived at the cabin, they found Hornby and Adlard wrapped in woolen blankets, still propped against the outside wall, untouched by wolves or wolverine. Inside were young Edgar’s skeletal remains, also undisturbed under his blanket. They buried the bodies, took an inventory of the cabin’s contents, and most importantly, found Edgar’s diary in the stove where he, according to backwoods tradition, had left it to be found. It was published in 1937 and has become a classic of lore and literature of the Far North. It was the one key item that made John Hornby a legend. A deeper investigation into his life might lead one to the conclusion he was also a patent fool, but there is no law saying one cannot be both.

Today, the dozens of tourists who arrive at Hornby Point after a two or three hundred mile canoe trip find the cabin fallen into itself, with bits of bone still strewn around the perimeter. To the right they find three wooden crosses marking the graves, with each man’s initials carved into the wood. For those who are fascinated by the Barrens of Canada, this quiet spot overlooking the Thelon is the object of their pilgrim’s progress and an inspiration to all who come.

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