

THE SITE: A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

ROBERT NERO. 2001. Natural Heritage Books, Toronto. xii + 95 pp., 22 b/w photographs. 1 map. ISBN 1-896219-70-5.

For anyone who has ever read Bob Nero's works, this slim volume will be a trip down memory lane. It contains many reminiscences of his full life including zoology, birds, family, archaeology and poetry. In his life he was fortunate to be able to link his interests in various disciplines; while a trained and very keen biologist/zoologist, he still managed to make the time for his interest in pre-contact North American history, better known as archaeology.

After serving in WWII, Bob completed his university studies in Wisconsin supported by the G. I. Bill. The 1950s was a time of rapid expansion in North American scientific research and the study of animals, birds and environment was gaining momentum. It was also a time when the discipline of archaeology was on the cusp of great things—truly an exciting time to be a young man with an insatiable curiosity about the world.

A few classes in archaeology during Bob's college years kindled an interest in archaeology that stayed with him beyond his working years. He managed to luck into almost every major discovery of his time, working on rock shelters, Hopewell Mounds, Old Copper sites, burials and later, the scattered remains of Canadian plains occupations. His tales of his excavations reads like a "Who's Who" of the early archaeologists: Wormington, Forbis, Wittry and Phillips in the United States; Boyd Wettlaufer, J.V. Wright and William Mayer-Oakes in western Canada.

Nero tells of his arrival in Regina in July 1955 to take up duties at the Museum of Natural History (now known as the Royal Saskatchewan Museum). There he met the Kehoes, who were beginning their duties as the first provincial archaeologists—Tom with a master's degree and his wife Alice, with a Ph.D (hiring women into top positions just didn't happen in those days).

In his book, Bob takes the time to praise other amateurs who, like himself came from other callings, bringing with them their own particular skills and ideas. I refer to Bruce McCorquodale, a paleontologist, and Allan Hudson, a Moose Jaw area farmer and father of John Hudson, a retired Ceramics Engineer and an amateur botanist of renown in Saskatchewan. These men are credited with distinct contributions to archaeology in Saskatchewan.

Professional archaeologists say that "most of the significant finds are made by ten-year-old sharp-eyed children." Bob's wife, Ruth, accompanied her husband on many of his jaunts and brought their growing family into his circle of interest, thus providing five extra pairs of sharp eyes.

It seems fitting that Bob's most absorbing, and perhaps final, interest in archaeology, would be in the long term recording of an Oxbow or middle-period site in Manitoba, not far west of Winnipeg, where he has made his home for decades. The site, a blowout or dish-shaped hollow in very sandy soil, became almost an obsession. True to his observance of scientific procedures, he took out an amateur permit from the Manitoba government,

naming the find the Hacault Site. Limited excavations helped him put together a remarkable collection from the site. A few illustrations would have been helpful here of tools and point types and a Borden number would have been useful for identification of the Hacault Site.

The author has sprinkled his own inner thoughts throughout the book as poetry. They lend a depth to some of his

experiences. And, as with his other interests, his family has carried on the tradition, with several of their poems included in the text.

Read Bob Nero's book. It is a great way to spend a quiet afternoon, to reflect on your own life and to share in Bob's experiences over many years.

Reviewed by Muriel Carlson, Box 39, Livelong, SK S0M 1J0



WHERE THE RIVER RUNS

VICTOR CARL FRIESEN, 2001. Fifth House Ltd., Calgary. 480 pp. illus. Soft cover \$21.95 Can. ISBN 1-894004-77-9

Where the River Runs, subtitled *Stories of the Saskatchewan and the People Drawn to Its Shores*, is at once a book of geography, history and a collective biography. Of the forty chapters, 25 are biographical. The region covered is "the area between the rivers and the adjoining region on either side...known locally as the 'Saskatchewan Valley'...The total area encompassed is roughly toque-shaped, having a base of forty miles across and, skewed to the right, a rounded tip at Fort à la Corne, a dozen miles beyond The Forks." (p. 14)

The book consists of two parts. Part One—Furs and Adventurers—introduces us to the valley's geological and aboriginal past and is followed by a fascinating series of stories about early explorers, fur traders, surveyors, naturalists, geographers, big game hunters, tourists and even an artist. Names come up that most of us know: David Thompson, who left his name to a river, John Richardson (close friend of arctic explorer Sir John Franklin) who left his name to our prairie gopher; all together more than a dozen travellers who kept journals. The rivalries between the fur

trading companies and the building of posts and forts make for good reading.

Part Two—Surveys and Settlements—deals again with remarkable people: the famous John Palliser; James Nisbet, missionary and promoter of agriculture; Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel and their battles at Duck Lake, Fish Creek and Batoche; the men of the steamboat era; folk hero Almighty Voice; and the settlers of the valley belonging to various ethnic groups.

You can read any chapter of *Where the River Runs* on its own as you would read a short story. The opening paragraphs of each chapter capture your interest and point the way to the main theme; the final paragraphs summarize the material and satisfy you as to what you have just absorbed.

You will find many curious and amusing facts in this book—that Henry Kelsey wrote his first diary in verse; that the Red River carts fanned out rather than followed one track; that at one time there were six different companies trading at Peter Pond's fort; that the staff at Fort Carlton managed

to store 800 buffalo carcasses after the spring thaw; that the fur traders got dressed in their best before arriving at a fort and that Paul Kane had to move quickly after trying to sketch a wounded buffalo.

Where the River Runs may inspire you to consult the original sources of the traders' and travellers' journals, cited within the text. There are fine end notes that even the casual reader will occasionally look up and the more serious reader will surely consult. Friesen supplies an impressive bibliography of historical works, and two others he calls scientific/nature and literary/art. Although the text ends at 445 pages, the notes and bibliography add an additional 26 pages. There is also an extensive index of names and places.

Where the River Runs is a long work with material lovingly amassed over a number of years. Friesen describes it as "a new packaging of materials pertaining to a specific area not gathered in one volume before" (p. 5). Such a work should not (ideally) be limited by budget constraints which affect the print and the

number of illustrations. The coloured paper cover is very attractive; all else is black and white. There are six maps which are absolutely essential, a picture before Parts 1 and 2, a small picture on the title page, and a little scene (the same one) before each chapter.

Unless you are an expert on the subject of this book, and you need not be, the general impression you will come away with is amazement at the number of trading posts and forts that stood along the two rivers; the extent of the fur trade and the pemmican trade; and, most of all, the extent of travel in all seasons by early explorers and travellers and scientists—sometimes for years at a stretch and for thousands of miles. Every reader will be struck, perhaps for the first time, by the fact that the "valley" between the two rivers is a genuinely historic place. This well-crafted story of the two rivers and the people whose lives are connected with them recommends itself as a gift at any season.

Reviewed by Evelyn Chapuis, 2125 - 6 Avenue West, Prince Albert, SK S6V 5K7



BOLT FROM THE BLUE: WILD PEREGRINES ON THE HUNT

DICK DEKKER, 1999. Hancock House Publishers Ltd, Surrey, B.C. 192pp. Soft Cover \$19.95

This book is a popular account of field observations of peregrines in the wild by an incredibly focussed individual. Dick Dekker's interest in the peregrine dates back to his days as a boy in Holland and a chance observation of an attack on a Smew. For many people interested in natural history, early experiences seem to have a lasting

impact on their lives. In Dekker's case, the "thrill of the sighting almost made me fall off my bike" and led to a lifetime of observations of peregrines that are truly unparalleled.

The book contains fourteen chapters, ten of which are primarily dedicated to accounts

and discussion of hunting flights and the evasive behaviour of prey. Both successful and unsuccessful flights are described and an attempt is made to analyse what determines whether the prey escapes or becomes a meal. Although this is the major focus, the book also contains chapters on other aspects of the life of the peregrine including migration, nesting, the captive breeding and reintroduction effort, and interactions with other species, which form a good introduction to the bird for the uninitiated.

Three chapters are devoted primarily to observations of hunting flights seen each year from 1969 to 1983 when Dick spent 4 weeks (taking a holiday from work!) during the height of spring migration at Beaverhills Lake. Another three chapters are devoted to observations made of falcons wintering along the coast of British Columbia where Dick spent a few weeks each year starting in 1980. Chapter 8 describes a ten-day stay he made in 1995 on Langara Island watching nesting peregrines with Wayne Nelson. These large Peale's peregrines hunted seabirds on the open ocean, forming an interesting diversion from the flights at shorebirds and ducks that are the majority of his observations. Likewise, the chapter on the family group nesting at Wabamun Lake in central Alberta shows a different side to the hunting techniques used by the adaptable peregrine. This chapter includes some very interesting accounts of tandem hunting by the adult pair and accounts of the adults "training" the young to hunt, which are especially interesting.

Getting an appropriate "search image" for a particular species takes time and experience. The first spring, the number of peregrines Dick saw could be counted "on one hand". His abilities improved rapidly reaching an astounding 163 sightings in 1977! His seasonal *average* for the last ten years at Beaverhills was 75 falcons. Most birdwatchers in North America consider themselves lucky if they see one or two

peregrines a year unless they happen to visit one of the major migration concentration areas or visit an active eyrie. Many have never had the privilege of witnessing a single hunting attack by a large falcon. This perhaps puts into perspective the more than 2,000 individual hunts by peregrines amassed by Dick, the majority of which were birds seen during migration or on wintering grounds. Scanning empty skies for hours or even days at a time or keeping a perched peregrine in binocular view for hours with the hope (often futile) that a hunting attack will be initiated, requires a patience and single-mindedness that few possess.

Dick's abilities to spot falcons, often at great distance, and to interpret the action that often takes place in only a matter of seconds when a peregrine makes an attack on prey, are certainly extraordinary. Gordon Court, a peregrine aficionado of some note, once accompanied Dick to one of his favourite spring haunts, for a bout of peregrine watching. His unsuccessful effort to spot a soaring peregrine being watched by Dick led to some scepticism, until Dick shouted "It's stooping! Watch the lake! Watch the ducks!". The explosion of ducks and shorebirds scattered by the finally visible "bolt from the blue" made him a believer. In his Foreword, Gordon states that Dick's abilities to find and watch hunting falcons "remains the most impressive example of natural history observation that I have witnessed in my twenty years as a field biologist". Dick's abilities are all the more unusual given the fact that he has poor eyesight and does most of his scanning and observations through field glasses, often at distances of one or more kilometres.

A bonus of this book is the thirty-two-page colour section full of great photographs, mostly by Gordon Court, which includes an action shot of a peregrine attacking a flock of wigeon. There are also several photos by Dick Dekker that depict some

of the habitats where the peregrines were observed as well as some shots of prey killed by the falcons.

Dekker has an excellent command of the language and many passages are almost poetic, with beautifully painted word-pictures that conjure up the scene in which the action transpires. For some readers, an entire book focussed primarily on observations and conjectures on the hunting

flights of a single species of raptor might be a bit overwhelming. For raptorphiles or serious students of natural history, however, the book is excellent—filled with insights into the hunting strategies of one of our most glamorous birds of prey that can only be gleaned from long, attentive hours in the field.

Reviewed by Lynn Oliphant, Box 80, Site 600, RR6, Saskatoon, Sk. S7K 3J9



BIRD-BLOSSOMS

Poem by Jean MacKenzie

Were you called Aquilegia
by a bird watcher
who thought your spurs
resembled the talons
of an eagle?

Both are curved.
Your sole similarity
to that aggressive bird.

Was your other Latin name, Columbine,
given by a different bird lover
who, in imagination,
saw your inverted flower
as a cluster of five doves?

A better simile.
Both seem soft and gentle,
closer in personality.

The ancient Romans are said
to have compared your flowers
to birds scattering upward.

An appealing poetic description.

Tiny birds of many shades,
some of one pure colour—
white, pink, red, blue, purple;
some with pale-yellow heads
but wings and tails of coral.

Tiny bird-blossoms,
tethered by long stems
to graceful branching plants
with blue-green foliage
of deeply-notched leaves.

Tiny bird-blossoms,
with many stamens, five sepals,
five petals ending in spurs,
holding nectar much-loved
by bumblebee and hummingbird.
Unluckily, so favoured
by lace-making miners
which draw squiggly lines,
winding white trails,
inside the tender leaves.

Falling from the five follicles,
erratic black seeds wait till summer
to surprise the gardener
with different coloured blooms
than the parent plant.

Light-hearted,
carefree-spirited,
mischievous seeders,
dainty dancers,
Hummingbird-flowers.

Jean MacKenzie, 2002. *An Exhilaration of Flowers*. Nature Saskatchewan, Regina.