

BOOK REVIEW

WALTER HARPER, ALASKA NATIVE SON

Mary F. Ehrlander, 2017. Bison Books, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln; xx + 196 pages, 31 figures, 3 maps, index. ISBN 978-0-8032-9590-2 (hardcover) \$29.95.

Reviewed by William Simeone

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In her epilogue, author Mary Ehrlander writes that “Walter Harper stands out as an exemplar of Athabascan manhood.” In Ehrlander’s view, this seems to mean mastering the traditional skills required to live in a harsh, unforgiving environment and achieving success in the world of the White man. According to Ehrlander, Harper stands for “resilience in the global society” and the ethos he “embodied transcends time and culture.” His life offers “guidance and wisdom” to young people searching for meaning today.

Walter Harper was born in 1892 to a Koyukon woman named *Seentahma*, or Jenny, and Arthur Harper, an Irish immigrant. Three years after he was born, Harper’s parents separated, and Walter grew up firmly in the Koyukon tradition, speaking the Koyukon language.

At the time of Harper’s birth, the Dene of Interior Alaska were on the cusp of a disaster that would produce long-term consequences. The purchase of Alaska by the United States in 1867 had little direct effect on Dene living in the Interior. To be sure, Alaska Native people had suffered severe epidemics, but by and large they controlled their collective destinies. The gold rush of 1898 changed everything. Like some invading army, thousands of prospectors swarmed across the land, killing game and bringing disease, alcohol, and an egalitarian, freewheeling ethos that contrasted sharply with the hierarchical collectivism of Alaska Dene. Into this upheaval stepped several denominations of Christian missionaries, including the Protestant Episcopal Church.

Under the influence of Sheldon Jackson, Protestant missionaries had divided Alaska into spheres of influence to avoid competition and ensure a territory-wide missionary effort. The Episcopal Church was allotted an area that

included the Koyukuk River drainage, the central and upper Yukon River, the Tanana River drainage, and locations along the western Arctic coast. Beginning in the 1880s, the church established a series of missions, and it was the job of Hudson Stuck, archdeacon of the Yukon and the Arctic, to deliver supplies and moral support to these missions. Stuck chose Walter Harper to be his river boat pilot, winter trail guide, and interpreter.

In 1910 Walter Harper had been living at St. Mark’s Mission at Nenana for almost a year when Stuck made the choice. After that Stuck and Harper traveled throughout Interior Alaska, becoming well known figures on the frontier. Harper became Stuck’s protégé, and Stuck began to map out the young man’s future, which included a formal Western education. But before that, Stuck had a dream of climbing Denali.

Ehrlander devotes an entire chapter to the expedition, which resulted in the successful summiting of the peak on June 7, 1913. Before Harper and Stuck’s ascent, there had been several attempts at climbing the mountain, but all had failed. For their part, the local Native people were incredulous that anyone would bother to try to climb a mountain where even the Dall sheep fell off. Members of the expedition included Stuck, Harper, Robert Tatum, who was a young theology student, and Stuck’s close friend Harry Karstens, who had experience in the uplands around Denali guiding the naturalist and big game hunter Charles Sheldon. Assisting were two young Dene men: Johnny Fred and Esaias George. The success of the expedition was due largely to Harper’s and Karstens’s expertise as outdoorsmen.

In the fall of 1913, Harper and Stuck traveled to the East Coast so that Harper could attend Mount Hermon

in Northfield, Massachusetts, a school known for preparing Native American students for leadership roles. When Harper and Stuck arrived at the school they were met by Arthur Wright, another young Dene man. Harper did not do well academically, and after three years he left Mount Hermon and returned to Alaska. According to Ehrlander, Harper's experience at Mount Hermon shook the young man's confidence by revealing his lack of preparation for a formal education.

After returning to Alaska, Harper met Frances Wells, a member of a prominent Philadelphia family who had come to Fort Yukon to work as a nurse at a hospital established by the Episcopal Church. Harper and Wells fell in love and eventually married. Stuck and Harper had recently traveled the Arctic Coast, which Stuck described in his book *A Winter Circuit of Our Arctic Coast*, published in 1920. Along the way Stuck tutored Harper to prepare him for college and medical school. Upon returning to Fort Yukon, Harper courted Wells, despite the disapproval of Stuck, who thought marriage would interfere with Harper's education. Eventually Stuck acquiesced and married the two in September of 1918. After the ceremony the

couple headed Outside so that Harper could enlist in the Army Air Corps and Wells could join the Red Cross. In the meantime, the war ended so the couple planned to go straight to college. On October 23, 1918, Harper and Wells boarded the SS *Princess Sophia*. Encountering a fierce snow storm, the ship ran aground on Vanderbilt Reef in Lynn Canal, Southeast Alaska. After nearly two days of chaos, the boat slid off the reef and sank. There were no survivors. Harper was only twenty-five years old.

Walter Harper was born into the frenzy of the Alaska gold rush, a period in Alaska history that was devastating for Alaska Native people. The Episcopal Church attempted to mitigate the catastrophe by selecting young men to be future leaders. Walter Harper was one of those young men. He was nurtured and supported by Hudson Stuck, who believed that once the gold rush had subsided Alaska Natives could flourish if they had good leadership and remained on the land. Certainly Harper was a master of the out-of-doors and by all accounts a gregarious and good-tempered young man, but whether he would have risen to the challenge of leadership in what would become a trying and difficult period for Alaska Dene is open to question.

REVIEW

SHEM PETE'S ALASKA: THE TERRITORY OF THE UPPER COOK INLET DENA'INA (REVISED SECOND EDITION)

James Kari, James A. Fall, and Shem Pete, 2016. Foreword by William Bright. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks; 432 pages, 27 color plates, 324 halftone figures, 66 maps; ISBN 9781602233065 (paper) \$39.95.

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Building on the foundation of the first (1987) and second (2003) editions, the revised second edition of *Shem Pete's Alaska* (2016) features comprehensive knowledge of the Dena'ina homeland as told by Dena'ina people themselves, as well as the findings and observations of several researchers who have lived, worked, and studied among the Dena'ina. As captured in the title, the book centers on Shem Pete (1896–1989), an elder regarded by his peers as having unparalleled knowledge of the Dena'ina homeland and language. His knowledge spanned the contact and post-contact periods, and the sheer expanse of his understandings and conceptualizations of his people's home—and their connections to it—is wonderfully captured in this volume. Shem Pete spent his life hunting, fishing, and trapping across more than 13,000 square miles (33,000 square km—approximately the size of Maryland) of the Upper Cook Inlet Basin. While practicing these activities, he memorized the names and locations of over 650 Dena'ina places. He also knew the Russian and English names of places. Shem Pete's library of accumulated knowledge of the land, supplemented with the knowledge of other elders, is superbly recorded in this book.

The editors, James Kari and James Fall, draw on their considerable expertise relating to studies of Dena'ina language and culture in the production of this volume. They have done justice to Shem Pete's wealth of knowledge. The book serves as a tribute to his revered place among the Nulchina clan of the Dena'ina in Southcentral Alaska—Susitna Valley and rightly recognizes him as a national treasure. Together with nearly 50 other contributors, in-

cluding contributions by Shem Pete himself, the compendium presents rich information on the Dena'ina homeland in the form of stories, dances, ceremonies, place-name maps, songs, illustrations, and archival and contemporary photographs of people and places. The reader is further informed of the Dena'ina homeland through reference to, and discussion of, oral histories, historical maps, linguistic studies, archaeological investigations, and ethnographic fieldwork.

Capturing the breadth of knowledge associated with any indigenous homeland or any indigenous knowledge-holder is no mean feat, and the editors should be commended for their care and diligence in how the book conveys and represents different forms of knowledge relating to the Dena'ina homeland.

The book's template and structure are largely consistent with earlier editions. The revised edition features a suite of new material, including articles, annotations, terminology, photographs, map references, an expanded bibliography, index, and new and revised place names. Stories and anecdotes are supported by richly produced maps and photographs. Essays on the social, cultural, and historical significance of the area are captivating and informative. Perhaps the most arresting feature of the book is the attention given to place names and the mapping of them. Being informed about the Dena'ina landscape through their language provides the reader with an intimate sense of how every part of their homeland is known and conceptualized. Through Dena'ina place names we learn about favorable fishing and hunting grounds, the suitability or

otherwise of places to camp, historical and contemporary interactions and events, settlement patterns, historical figures, and a picture of the terrain.

The letter-sized format of book, retained from the first edition, provides an appropriate format to showcase the variety of visual elements of the book. The enlarged format provides room for photographs, maps, and illustrations to be shown without their quality being compromised.

Although scholarly in nature, the book does not purport to be an academic volume, and the inclusion of numerous and informative visual materials will likely appeal to a wide readership base, including Dena'ina people themselves. The release of this edition will ensure that generations of Dena'ina people to come will have access to the information that their elders recorded. Much of this information may one day be digitally accessible, and provisions may be made for the Dena'ina to be able to update maps themselves with the names of new places that they make on the land and the stories that accompany them.

Densely packed with information and detailed accounts, the book will be well received by those interested in the Dena'ina homeland and Alaska, as well as those interested in indigenous knowledge systems more broadly around the world. As with the previous editions, the collaborative methods that were employed to generate this book serve as a model for others embarking on projects that attempt to capture the holistic nature of indigenous knowledge.

This professional account of the Dena'ina people and their places deserves wide readership, and given the respectful tone and collaborative nature of its production, the book should be regarded as necessary reading for researchers and graduate students who plan to work with or alongside indigenous people. The book is easy to read, ethically sound, and leaves the reader with a greater sense of the extraordinary knowledge and wisdom held by indigenous people in this part of the world.