Prentice G. Downes (1909-1959)
previously unknown river have been worked out. Kasmere Lake is now plotted, both north and east arm. Actually, far more was accomplished than a successful trip through to Kasba would have afforded." Much of the North was as yet imperfectly mapped then, of course, and one of Downes's primary achievements was his meticulous mapping of every obscure route he followed. It was on this trip that he met Charles Planinshek, "Eskimo Charlie", who won northern immortality by canoeing, with his Cree wife and children, from Windy Lake to the Gulf of Mexico and on to New York and Montreal. Among his friends Downes counted Douglas Leechman, Del Simons, Paddy Gibson, Richard Finnie, George Douglas, and numerous HBC men, Indians, white trappers, Mounted Policemen, and missionaries; by 1940 his name was a familiar one from the Eastern Arctic to Great Slave. His was a winning, unforgettable personality.

During the war Downes had a marriage that failed, and worked for the U.S. Army map service in Washington, D.C. At war’s end he lived for six months on a Vermont mountainside where he dined on porcupines and "became a medical curiosity, a modern day scurvy case." He then worked at Harvard for the great cartographer Dr. Erwin Raisz before resuming his teaching position at Belmont Hill in 1947. That summer he made his last canoe trip, "a sort of dream trip, alone, just visiting Indians", from Amisk to Lac la Ronge. 1948 found him in the Aleutian Islands with the U.S. Geological Survey. He married Edna Grace Faithorn in 1949. In the years that followed he added to his stature as a teacher, wrote articles and stories, and researched the life of the white Indian John Tanner. Prentice Downes died, much too soon, in 1959: he is survived by his wife and their two children.

Early in that final year of his life, he was asked to contribute autobiographical notes for a school reunion, and wrote of his travels into the far North:

I liked that life and I liked the people there. I saw a lot of it just as the old north was vanishing; the north of no time, of game, of Indians, Eskimos, of unlimited space and freedom . . . I remember one time after a dreadful trip, camping on the edge of the tree line, again it was one of those indescribable smoky, bright-hazy days one sometimes gets in the high latitudes. I had hit the caribou migration and there was lots of meat; it was a curious spot, for all the horizon seemed to fall away from where I squatted, and I said to myself: Well, I suppose I shall never be so happy again.

FURTHER READINGS


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