

English Bloods in the Backwoods of Muskoka, 1878 By Frederick de la Fosse. Edited, with notes and illustrations, by Scott D. Shipman

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English Bloods in the Backwoods of Muskoka, 1878

By Frederick de la Fosse. Edited, with notes and illustrations, by Scott D. Shipman. Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2004, xiii + 207 pp. \$24.95 softcover. ISBN 1-896219-96-9.

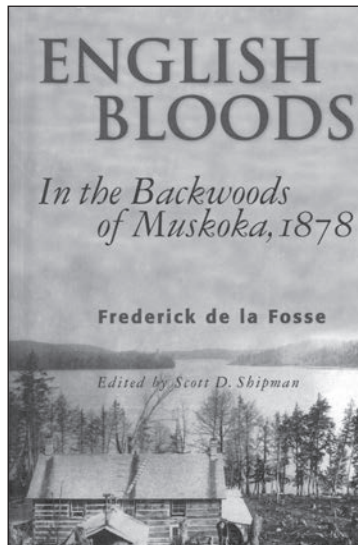
Late in the nineteenth century, my mother's grandfather was sent from a rather posh life in London to colonial Ontario. Family lore holds that the reasons, while shrouded in obscurity, somehow brought shame on the proverbially good name – perhaps not unusually, for how many other young English folk ended up in Canada for similar reasons, and what did these *expats* do upon arrival? Happily, published personal accounts of Ontario's settlement by Europeans are on the increase, punctuating general histories with particular place-specific tales. Scott Shipman has made a fine contribution in this respect by reissuing *English Bloods*, a set of reminiscences about early settler life in north-central Ontario. A sampling of the book's content was in fact published in this journal in 1942 under the title 'Early days in Muskoka,' but the republication of the entire volume is a long-awaited contribution to the Ontario history literature. The author, Frederick de la Fosse, was orphaned when he was only seven years old. Following schooling, de la Fosse was sent at the tender age of 17 by his family guardian to apprentice as a farmer (or so it was hoped) with another English officer in Muskoka.

Originally published by de la Fosse in 1930 under a pseudonym, *English Bloods*

contains twenty-three vignettes presented in chronological order, beginning with his harrowing journey in 1878 via transatlantic steamer to the then-faraway reaches of the Muskoka-Parry Sound district. Upon his arrival, de la Fosse acquainted himself with settler life and efforts, mostly futile, to carve farmsteads out of the Canadian Shield. A dozen chapters recount characteristic aspects of life in the area, including one titled 'Local Dentistry.' "The gentleman who operated on me informed me that he did not claim to be a dentist and only 'jerked out teeth' to oblige his friends." (p. 72) Later chapters tell of how, after three years of apprenticeship, he took up his own free grant land, upon which fifteen acres were to be cleared and cropped within five years or revert to the Crown.

The book ends with a brief account of de la Fosse's two-year sojourn in the Canadian West, his subsequent return to Muskoka, and broad reflections on his early experiences. To the original volume Shipman has added a four-page introduction, a longer epilogue, and two appendices sketching out key details of people and places mentioned by de la Fosse.

Among the highlights of de la Fosse's original volume is an account of the 'Preparation of the Log Shanty' by his erstwhile farming instructor. This endeavour



brought settlers from far and wide to help out in a labour-pooling episode that seems, by de la Fosse's account, to have been very much the norm. Pleasantly woven into the narrative, too, is the respect that de la Fosse developed for his fellow settlers who rose to meet most occasions regardless of background, formal education, or social class, all of which were moot amid the tribulations of backwoods or bush life. (De la Fosse uses these two terms interchangeably.) In this experience is a reassuring subtext of how the early settlement of Canada shaped the values of equity and mutual respect that one hopes continue to define our country. The author seems to have been an astute observer of social dynamics, and yet surprisingly unmentioned are the aboriginal groups, loggers, and miners that we often think of when focusing on the early history of places like Muskoka. Giving de la Fosse the benefit of the doubt, this omission suggests that less contact between settlers and other users may have taken place than conventional wisdom would have us believe.

English Bloods is a good piece of Canadian popular history. Its republication has been a labour of love for Shipman, who is to be commended for undertaking much detective work to supplement de la Fosse's florid but entertaining prose with explanatory notes. Unfortunately these are buried at the end of the volume; they would be more useful as footnotes so as to preclude the need to continually flip back and forth. A great strength is the editor's juxtaposition of photographs, paintings and sketches from various archival sources where appropriate, an example of how he anticipates and addresses many of those niggling questions that arise whenever one reads obscure texts. Providing contextual information, these visual analogues to what de la Fosse would have known lightly

annotate the writing.

Serious historians will notice a few shortcomings and scholarly weaknesses in Shipman's supplements. One endnote is missing altogether, for instance, and some of his explanations are drawn from dubious sources. The editorial introduction and epilogue are also somewhat disappointing, as these could have gone further in critically framing de la Fosse's original work. This comment should be tempered by the knowledge that Shipman did not set out to present an academic study; rather, it suggests that a great opportunity now exists for the current generation of Ontario history scholars. A useful precedent exists in the work of Orm Øverlund's book, *Johan Schroder's Travels in Canada, 1863*, reissued in 1989. It not only presents a comparable text that had languished in untranslated obscurity (in Norwegian) but also provides a critical contextual study of Øverlund's work.

English Bloods makes for great leisure reading, bringing a charming and evocative account of early European settler life in the bush of what has since become Ontario's cottage country heartland. It is bound to be enjoyable reading not only for students of Ontario history but also for a larger audience, including many thousands of cottage folk. All should find de la Fosse's account a fascinating tale of pioneer life in north-central Ontario.

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