

On Solitude

William T. Edwards

In the early months of World War II, I had occasion to spend six months on the construction of a refinery in the northern reaches of the Yukon Territory. Because of the inaccessibility of the location, men hired to build the refinery were flown in by airplane. A more remote spot is not to be found on the North American continent than this particular region. The entire Yukon boasts of only two small towns, Whitehorse and Dawson—cities that came into being during the gold rush of 1898. The only other points of human habitation are a small number of Hudson Bay Company trading posts which support a few Indian trappers.

Here is an area rich in minerals but barren of tillable soil, a vast tract of mile upon mile of muskeg and scrub pine, a locality where the winter temperature frequently reaches seventy degrees below zero. There is nothing whatsoever to encourage its settlement. It is desolate.

It was during this six month stay that I came to know the awe-inspiring effect of solitude. From a hilltop near the refinery, I have breathed the cold wind that has swept hundreds of miles across nothing but snow and ice. I have seen the late afternoon sun glisten from a snow-capped mountain thirty miles distant. I have heard the solitude speak. There is nothing so thrilling as the nearly inaudible call of a distant wolf, or the whispering of pines on a frigid plain—sounds that carry miles in the brittle air. I shall never forget the silence when the

wind was stilled; nor shall I forget the breath taking beauty of nature's pyrotechnics, the Northern Lights; or the startling whiteness of the deep snow; or the awareness of a fear that can creep into the soul when the intensity of solitude is felt. There is nothing so inspiring, nothing so sublime, nothing that can create a deeper sense of admiration and respect than a part of God's earth completely void of the works of man. The presence of the refinery seemed sacrilegious. I felt as though I were imposing on the secret workings of the infinite. If there is an omnipresence, if there is a universal essence, it was there with me in the Yukon wilderness. There was something more than the mere stimulation of the physical senses.

The months I spent in the North are the most treasured months of my life, and I would like to describe the spell under which I lived, but it is not possible for me to convey the mingled feelings and sensations one may experience in a setting such as this. There is something intangible, something ethereal, something too deep for the pen and paper. I believe William Cullen Bryant was under the spell of solitude when he wrote:

“—Take the wings of morning, traverse
Barca's desert sands,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no
 sound
Save his own dashings—”