

Sigurd Olson

Why Wilderness? (1938)

IN SOME MEN, the need of unbroken country, primitive conditions and intimate contact with the earth is a deeply rooted cancer gnawing forever at the illusion of contentment with things as they are. For months or years this hidden longing may go unnoticed and then, without warning, flare forth in an all consuming passion that will not bear denial. Perhaps it is the passing of a flock of wild geese in the spring, perhaps the sound of running water, or the smell of thawing earth that brings the transformation. Whatever it is, the need is more than can be borne with fortitude and for the good of their families and friends, and their own particular restless souls, they head toward the last frontiers and escape.

I have seen them come to the "jumping off places" of the North, these men whereof I speak. I have seen the hunger in their eyes, the torturing hunger for action, distance and solitude, and a chance to live as they will. I know these men and the craving that is theirs; I know also that in the world today there are only two types of experience which can put their minds at peace, the way of wilderness or the way of war.

As a guide in the primitive lake regions of the Hudson's Bay watershed, I have lived with men from every walk of life, have learned to know them more intimately than their closest friends at home, their dreams, their

hopes, their aspirations. I have seen them come from the cities down below, worried and sick at heart, and have watched them change under the stimulus of wilderness living into happy, carefree, joyous men, to whom the successful taking of a trout or the running of a rapids meant far more than the rise and fall of stocks and bonds. Ask these men what it is they have found and it would be difficult for them to say. This they do know, that hidden back there in the country beyond the steel and the traffic of towns is something real, something as definite as life itself, that for some reason or other is an answer and a challenge to civilization.

At first, I accepted the change that was wrought with the matter of factness of any woodsman, but as the years went by I began to marvel at the infallibility of the wilderness formula. I came to see that here was a way of life as necessary and as deeply rooted in some men as the love of home and family, a vital cultural aspect of life which brought happiness and lasting content.

The idea of wilderness enjoyment is not new. Through our literature we find abundant reference to it, but seldom of the virile, masculine type of experience men need today. Since the beginning of time poets have sung of the healing power of solitude and of communion with nature, but for them the wilderness meant the joys of contemplation. Typical of this tone of interpretation is Thoreau with his "tonic of wildness," but to the men I have come to know his was an understanding that did not begin to cover what they feel. To him, the wild meant the pastoral meadows of Concord and Walden Pond, and the joy he had, though unmistakably genuine, did not approach the fierce, unquenchable desire of my men of today. For them the out-of-doors is not enough; nor are the delights of meditation. They need the sense of actual struggle and accomplishment, where the odds are real and where they know that they are no longer playing make believe. These men need more than picnics, purling streams, or fields of daffodils to stifle their discontent, more than mere solitude and contemplation to give them peace.

Burroughs, another lover of the out-of-doors, spoke often of the wilderness, but knew it not at all. When he regretted having to leave Old Slabsides on the Hudson for the wilds of Alaska and the West, we knew there was little of the primitive urge in his nature. The birds, the common phenomena of the passing seasons, and work in his vineyard satisfied abundantly his need of reality and physical contact with the earth. For him the wild

had little charm. As we explore our literature for men who have felt deeply about wilderness we find them few indeed, perhaps because in the past there was wilderness enough and men had not learned to wean themselves so completely away from its influence. Invariably men wrote of the struggle and the dominating effect of wilderness as a mighty unconquered force and everywhere we find evidence of the part it played in molding the lives of those it touched. Fear was the keynote of the past, fear of the brooding monster of the unknown, and little of the joy of adventure and freedom is ever in evidence. Were it not for a few such daring souls as Joseph Conrad and Jack London, we would know little of the feeling some men have for the far places of the earth.

With the rapid elimination of the frontiers, due to increased facility of transportation and huge development programs, the opportunity to see and know real wilderness has become increasingly difficult. As it approaches the status of rarity for the first time in history, we see it not as something to be feared and subdued, not as an encumbrance to the advance of civilization, but instead as a distinctly cultural asset which contributes to spiritual satisfaction. The greater part of the old wilderness is gone, but during the centuries in which we fought our way through it we unconsciously absorbed its influence. Now as conquering invaders, we feel the need of the very elements which a short time ago we fought to eradicate. The wild has left its mark upon us and now that we have succeeded in surrounding ourselves with a complexity of new and often unnatural habits of daily living, we long for the old stimulus which only the unknown could give.

Why wilderness? No two men would have the same explanation. Something definite does happen to most men, however, when they hit the out trails of our last frontiers, and though they react in various ways there is a certain uniformity noticeable to one who has often seen them make the break with civilization. Whatever it is, they are changed almost overnight from the prosaic conformists they may have been, who dress, think and act like all the rest, to adventurers ready to die with their boots on, explorers pushing into the blue, once more members of a pioneering band.

It is surprising how quickly a man sheds the habiliments of civilization and how soon he feels at home in the wilds. Before many days have passed, he feels that the life he has been living was merely an interruption in a long wilderness existence and that now again he is back at the real business of

living. And when we think of the comparatively short time that we have been living and working as we do now, when we recall that many of us are hardly a generation removed from the soil, and that a scant few thousand years ago our ancestors roamed and hunted the fastnesses of Europe, it is not strange that the smell of woodsmoke and the lure of the primitive is with us yet. Racial memory is a tenacious thing, and for some it is always easy to slip back into the deep grooves of the past. What we feel most deeply are those things which as a race we have been doing the longest, and the hunger men feel for the wilds and a roving life is natural evidence of the need of repeating a plan of existence that for untold centuries was common practice. It is still in our blood and many more centuries must pass before we lose much of its hold.

Civilized living in the great towns, with all their devices for comfort and convenience, is far too sudden a violation of slowly changing racial habit and we find that what gave men pleasure in the past—simple, primitive tasks and the ordinary phenomena of life in the open—today give the same satisfaction. Men have found at last that there is a penalty for too much comfort and ease, a penalty of lassitude and inertia and the frustrated feeling that goes with unreality. Certainly the adjustment for many has been difficult and it is those who must ever so often break their bonds and hie themselves away.

All do not feel the need and there are many perfectly content with life as they find it. They will always be the picnickers and the strollers, and for them are highways, gravelled trails and country clubs. For them scenic vistas of the wild from the shelter of broad and cool verandas. The others, those who cannot rest, are of a different breed. For them is sweat and toil, hunger and thirst, and the fierce satisfaction that only comes with hardship.

While wilderness means escape from the perplexing problems of everyday life and freedom from the tyranny of wires, bells, schedules and pressing responsibility, nevertheless, it may be at first a decided shock and days and even weeks may pass before men are finally aware that the tension is gone. When the realization does come, they experience a peace of mind and relaxation which a short time before would have seemed impossible. With this dramatic change of atmosphere comes an equally dramatic change in individual reactions as they feel that the need of front and reserve is gone.

I have seen staid educators, dignified surgeons, congressmen and admirals tie up their heads in gaudy bandannas, go shirtless to bring on the tan of the northern sun, and wear bowie knives in their belts. I have seen them glory in the muck of portages, fight the crashing combers on stormy lakes with the abandon of boys on their first adventure. I have heard them laugh as they haven't laughed for years and bellow old songs in the teeth of a gale. With their new found freedom and release many things become important that were half forgotten—sunsets, the coloring of clouds and leaves, reflections in the water. I can honestly say, that I have heard more laughter in a week out there than in any month in town. Men laugh and sing as naturally as breathing once the strain is gone.

With escape comes perspective. Far from the towns and all they denote, engrossed in their return to the old habits of wilderness living, men begin to wonder if the speed and pressure they have left are not a little senseless. Here where matters of food, shelter, rest and new horizons are all important, they begin to question the worthwhileness of their old objectives. Now they have long days with nothing to clutter their minds but the simple problems of wilderness living, and at last they have time to think. Then comes the transformation and, of a sudden, they are back to earth. Things move slowly, majestically in the wilds and the coming of the full moon in itself becomes of major importance. Countless natural phenomena begin to show themselves, things long forgotten and needing only the rejuvenating experience of actual contact to bring them back. With this, some of the old primitive philosophy works itself into their thinking, and in their new calm they forget to worry. Their own affairs seem trivial. Perspective? I sometimes think that men go to the wilds for that alone. Finding it means equilibrium, the long-time point of view so often lost in towns.

Ernest Holt, one-time guard to the late Colonel Fawcett on his first Amazon expedition, told me that in the depths of the jungle he experienced a spiritual uplift and sense of oneness with life that he could find nowhere else. I believe that here is a sensation born of perspective that most men know in any wilderness. Whenever it comes, men are conscious of a unity with the primal forces of creation and all life that swiftly annihilates the feeling of futility, frustration and unreality. When men realize that they are on their own, that if they are to be sheltered and fed and, what is more, return to civilization, they must depend entirely on their own ingenuity, everything they do assumes tremendous importance. Back home, mistakes

can be made and easily excused or remedied, but here mistakes might cause discomfort or catastrophe. Knowing this makes all the difference in the world in a man's attitude toward the commonplace activities of daily life. Simple duties like the preparation of food, the taking of a fish, or the caching of supplies become fraught with import. Life soon develops a new and fascinating angle and days which to the uninitiated may seem humdrum or commonplace are filled with the adventure of living for its own sake. There is no make-believe here, but reality in the strictest sense of the word.

Men who have shared campfires together, who have known the pinch of hunger and what it means to cut a final cigarette in half two hundred miles from town, enjoy a comradeship that others never know. Only at war or on wilderness expeditions can this type of association be found, and I believe that it is this that men miss as much in civilized living as contact with the wild itself. I know a busy surgeon who once left his hospital operating room and traveled without thought of compensation a thousand miles through the bitter cold of midwinter to save the life of his guide, stricken with pneumonia. Nothing could have made him consider deserting his practice to take such a long hazardous trip but a call from a comrade in need. I stood at the bedside of that woodsman as he babbled incoherently of rapids and lakes and wilderness camps they had known together, and I knew then that here was a bond between men that could only be forged in the wilds, something deep and fine, something based on loyalty to open skies and distance and a way of life men need.

I do not advocate that the men of whom I speak allow the wilderness idea to claim all of their energy or enthusiasm. I do believe, however, that if for a short time each year it were possible for them to get away, not necessarily to the great wildernesses of the Arctic or the Canadian lakes, but to some wild part of the country which has not as yet been entirely caught up in some scheme of exploitation or development, that they would return to their friends and families strengthened and rejuvenated.

Why wilderness? Ask the men who have known it and who have made it part of their lives. They might not be able to explain, but your very question will kindle a light in eyes that have reflected the campfires of a continent, eyes that have known the glory of dawns and sunsets and nights under the stars. Wilderness to them is real and this they do know: when the pressure becomes more than they can stand, somewhere back of beyond, where roads and steel and towns are still forgotten, they will find release.