

Reader's Corner

Canadian Rockies Explorer

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Graeme Pole has written a genuine love letter to the Canadian Rockies with his twelfth book on the human and natural history of Western Canada. It's careful, comprehensive and committed. And right from the preface, it is suffused with his mountain-influenced spirit, keeping before the reader what this experienced rambler, historian and photographer wants to convey: that everyone can have a "rich, life-giving, awe inspiring association" with the Rockies. As Pole says, "we each explore differently, and for each of us the Canadian Rockies promise to reward us in ways that we can but imagine". His several decades of exploring represent the limitless possibilities for human enrichment these mountains offer.

This book achieves a number of felicitous balances. It's easier to handle and carry than Ben Gadd's benchmark *Handbook of the Canadian Rockies* (the 'Bible' for mountain aficionados, enthusiastically acknowledged as such by Pole). It is just as serious as Gadd's book about the natural history and composition of the mountains and the life forms in them. It keeps the geological details present, quietly familiarizing the reader with just enough technical terminology, one piece at a time, to be confident with the vocabulary. Respect for the facts is leavened with clear writing and easy humour: "Rock Talk", for example, is a chapter title. Climate, elevation/vegetation zones, the animal communities, types of forests, wetlands and above-treeline terrain are all discussed and the reader senses the grandeur of inter-dependent ecosystems.

Pole the historian might well have made the 'guide-book' author's mistake of providing more history than his readership for *Explorer* would appreciate. But while his historical coverage is comprehensive and authoritative, it is deftly woven into the fabric of the book. He presents compact foundational chapters to present the "many landscapes" of the Rockies, their geological history and composition, and their "life zones". A fourth short chapter (there are a total of 23 in a book of just over 300 pages) establishes the human historical parameters that commenced around 10,000 BC following the Late Wisconsin Glaciation period, i.e. "the First, First Peoples". Hunting, trading and long-distance routes had been in place for millennia prior to the 1700s' influx of First Nations peoples from the east joined by the first Europeans. The chapter contains a modern human history timeline from the 1750s of The Fur Trade, Exploration, The Canadian Pacific Railway, Parks-Peaks-Pack Trains, Parks and Prosperity, Preservation and Development. Brief excerpts from the journals and writings of four 19th and 20th century explorers are judiciously located in the chapter, as in

all succeeding chapters. Resource extraction interests, transportation, mountaineering and tourism, the axes of the modern human history of what became the five National Parks and the three contiguous provincial parks located in the Rockies, are then tracked through the body of *Explorer*.

Following the initial four chapters, the remaining ones cover ‘place’ from Banff to Waterton, Radium to Robson, the Icefields to Kananaskis. Edge-of-page coloration and numerous compact sub-sections in these chapters are the template; the result is that each is a guide to the natural and human history of the ‘place’ (Kootenay National Park, for example), but focuses on the ‘rewards of exploration’ a visitor to the mountains can find there. What is presented in the foundational chapters is echoed and deepened with specific examples, whether it be geological formations, bird migration routes, weather patterns, hanging valley lakes or National Parks’ prescribed burn policies. The individual explorers, mountaineers, painters, early concession-holders or railroad builders who shaped the area, and the way the area is now perceived are given a presence in these chapters. Opportunities for the casual tourist, the hiker/backpacker, the birder, the canoeist, the skier, the photographer, even the meditator - to touch that “life-giving association” with the mountains are scattered evenly through the chapters. Appropriate maps, historical references, period photos and succinct information (e.g. “Lake Louise: Twenty Questions”, or “The Un-Common Raven”) are in each. For a reader, each chapter is an easily digestible unit; each reflects the unique characteristics of the area being examined. Information is both segmented and flowing.

Graeme Pole’s artistry of organization is sustained through all the ‘place’ chapters and that reflects his experience as a writer. But there is another artistry present – his superb photography. Mountain peaks, lakes, rivers, geological features, birds, animals, flowers, trees mentioned in the chapters are likely to have an illustrative photo or even several. They vary in size, but virtually every page has one or more of his hundreds. So the reader, immersed in information about the Rockies, is also treated to a corresponding parade of images. Voices of explorers, mountaineers, artists, entrepreneurs and administrators are heard. And Pole, in an understated way, accompanies the reader, occasionally recalling a hike here, a morning photograph of caribou there, or a threatening avalanche situation.

The passion and the knowledge of Graeme Pole are central to *Canadian Rockies Explorer*. Whether readers have a high degree of familiarity with the Canadian Rockies or are barely aware of their existence, it will be a delight to let him be their guide. Gently, but firmly too, he impresses upon us the fragility of these landscapes and their ecology. As lovers of mountains and all the life forms they sustain, but also as citizens and human beings, we are responsible for them. Climate change, commercial forces, natural areas policies, human impacts on

wildlife, watercourses and vegetation: Pole calls on us to be informed and be involved. He is grateful, he writes in the Acknowledgements, to those with a “consistent commitment to honouring what is sacred about the Canadian Rockies.” Readers will be grateful to Graeme Pole.