

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Lynn E. Noel © [QLF/Atlantic Centre](http://QLFAtlanticCentre.com) COMPASS Fall 1992

*Ah, for just one time, I would take the Northwest Passage
To find the hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea
Tracing one warm line through a land so wild and savage
And make a Northwest Passage to the sea.*

--Stan Rogers, Northwest Passage

In search of the spirit of the Northwest Passage this summer, I crossed Canada from coast to coast to coast, in the spirit of so many QLF "explorers" who have set out each spring over the last twenty-five years in search of the connections between community and conservation that bind people to place. My work traced the paths of Canada's explorers across eight of the Heritage Rivers to be celebrated in our upcoming tenth anniversary book on the Canadian Heritage Rivers System, but the "one warm line" of the river, or the highway, or the sunset's track across a wilderness lake, was never the lifeline out of a "wild and savage" unfamiliar continent that it was to Franklin and the others whose journaled journeys I was following.

Rather, it was a homing beacon, a confluence of the river's heritage with the caring and commitment of those who sought to conserve and promote that heritage. From Jasper to St. John's, the audiences who threw themselves into that chorus reaffirmed a conviction that we share as QLF colleagues: that environmental and social change is most profound and most effective at the community level.

Driving that change must be a shared vision, and Stan Rogers' eloquent vision of the Northwest Passage is a powerful evocation of the quest for Canadian identity that ran as an undercurrent to my journeys, giving meaning to both the rivers I visited and the people who shared them with me.

ROCKIES AND PACIFIC

*And through the night, behind the wheel, the mileage clicking west
I think upon Mackenzie, David Thompson and the rest
Who cracked the mountain ramparts, and did show a path for me
To race the roaring Fraser to the sea.*

The David Thompson Highway sped me into the heart of the mountains as I headed upriver toward the source of the North Saskatchewan in the Columbia Icefields. Thompson might lose his landmarks here today where the Big Horn Dam is the first to harness the river on its way across the prairies to Edmonton and Prince Albert, but his cartographer's eye would still recognize the headwaters he mapped in 1811 for the Northwest Company. I would be

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Lynn E. Noel © [QLF/Atlantic Centre](#) COMPASS Fall 1992

paddling this section in a few days, but right now I had a campfire program in Jasper at 10 pm and still had two hours of the Icefields Parkway ahead.

I was still more than half in 1811 myself, still buzzing with the magic of a three-hour living history workshop at Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site. Park staff and I had sung and told stories of the fur trade in a tepee on the riverbank where my fur trade *alter ego* Lisette Duval, "country wife" of Daniel Harmon and a contemporary of Thompson and his wife Charlotte, had spent most of Harmon's "sixteen years in the Indian Country." I could still smell the campfire smoke in my braid as I wondered where David and Charlotte had camped along this river and where in these mountains Lisette's mother, a Snake Indian from the Kootenai, had been born. How much had her people known of these perpendicular places where the rivers ran with ice and mountain flour? What would I see if Lisette were here to show me?

The sign said "Athabasca Falls," and I hit the brakes. I had a fifteen-minute margin, and I had to see the most famous -- at least, the most accessible -- waterfall in the Rockies. I stood on the walkway bridge and positioned my camera until it exactly framed the shot I have had in my slide show for three years, where the wall of white water drops squarely below the pyramidal block of the mountain. Then I closed my eyes and felt what no camera can show you - the roar, the raw energy, and the empty space under my feet. That space was solid rock once, drilled into thin air by the diamond tongue of the river. Thompson and his party had hauled their boats up to the foot of falls like these, where hollow canyons overhung a hundred feet of concave walls with dripping moss. How had they believed these mountains could be crossed?

I knew they had been, because Thompson's journal crossed the Rockies. Someday I would go back to the journals, Thompson's and Harmon's, and see if I could make them talk to each other, to imagine what Charlotte might have told Lisette when they had recrossed the Fraser canyons to the safety of Rocky Mountain House. Perhaps when I arrived in Victoria, and looked out across the Straits of Juan de Fuca to the gleaming city of Vancouver at the mouth of Thompson's destination, I would imagine how Charlotte Thompson had "raced the roaring Fraser to the sea."

CANADIAN SHIELD

*Three centuries thereafter I take passage overland
In the footsteps of brave Kelso, where his sea of flowers began
Watching cities rise before me, and behind me sink again
This tardiest explorer driving hard across the plain.*

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Lynn E. Noel © [QLF/Atlantic Centre](http://QLF/AtlanticCentre) COMPASS Fall 1992

My hand was on the shutter, ready for the red canoe to surf into my viewfinder. Suddenly, a head bobbed down the rapids, followed by a canoe, followed by another head. "Stephen!" Brenda shouted, Carol grabbed a throw rope, and Eric calmly filmed Max paddling resignedly to the rocky ledge in midstream. I dropped the camera and heaved myself and the rescue canoe into the river just as Eric leaped on board, and we hauled a grinning if abashed Stephen to shore, eddied over to a patient Max, and dumped a bathtubful of Bloodvein-brown water out of the hapless canoe that had drifted fortunately into a nearby backwater.

Back at camp, everybody was laughing. It was warm and sunny, Stephen had dry clothes, there were eight of us and four canoes, and we were running empty boats around our campsite on this sunset-striped granite ledge at the most runnable rapids of the trip so far.

It wouldn't have been so hilarious two days ago, when we'd spent sixteen hours lining nine slithery rapids in a blinding downpour, nor would it have been any picnic three centuries ago when "the boy explorer" Henry Kelsey, three years younger than Stephen at sixteen, had headed upstream alone, leaving York Factory on Shield rivers like this one in his explorations for the Hudson's Bay Company. Here in Manitoba we were at the southern edge of the Shield, and another Hudson's Bay explorer, Samuel Hearne, had made history for himself and his company exploring Manitoba's other Heritage River, the Seal, at the northern edge of the province en route to the Kazan, Thelon, and ultimately the Coppermine.

Fortunately for him -- and for us -- the glaciers have beveled the ancient rock of the Shield into a smooth, gargantuan boss of granite, where "pool-and-drop" rivers slide from one placid lake to the next in sudden, abrupt fractures where the granite ledges tumble into rapids. Since you portage the rapids anyway, it makes less difference whether you travel upriver or downstream, a fact exploited by Shield travelers like the Ojibwa, the Chipwyan, the Cree, and "tardy explorers" like Kelsey and Hearne. We were filming these Shield landscapes for a Heritage Rivers television video on the Bloodvein, so that a next generation of "boy (and girl) explorers" would follow Stephen, Carol, Kelsey and the Ojibwa people whose pictographs in the ochre cliffs were showing us the way.

BAFFIN ISLAND

Westward from the Davis Strait, 'twas there 'twas said to lie

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Lynn E. Noel © [QLF/Atlantic Centre](http://qlf.atlanticcentre.com) COMPASS Fall 1992

*The sea route to the Orient for which so many died.
Seeking gold and glory, leaving weathered broken bones
And a long forgotten lonely cairn of stones.*

The Inuit call it an "*inukshuk*," a way marker. A reminder that you are on the right path. A cairn of stones neither long forgotten nor lonely, but carefully tended and visited by all who pass. I let my breathing slow from the last scramble to the top and find I have a stone in my hand, a carrot-orange crystal that crumbled away from the weathering ledge at the edge of this landmark hill. I remember what my friend Keith Sharp taught me in his slide presentation on the Arctic, "stones and bones," at the All-Canada Show last winter--that everyone who comes to his lodge on the Kazan River at Ferguson Lake leaves a stone at his *inukshuk* as a token. Of its own accord, my hand finds a shadowed hollow between the stones at the top of the cairn. I hear the rattle of the falling stones hollow and loud in this wide silence.

I turn my gaze outward across the broad Soper Valley, down the three pitches of Flemming Hill to my tent down on the sandbar at the cutbank. I nod my head as I feel the sense of arrival at my inner *inukshuk*--the knowledge that yet again, here on a northern mountaintop overlooking a river, I am on my path. This trip, I can greet the way markers within, as I learn to recognize their shapes and spot them at a greater distance.

Vision is one of the gifts of the tundra, and it is in the spirit of a vision quest that I have come to the Soper. This is my first Arctic river, first trip to Baffin, first time in the Northwest Territories, first stay in an Inuit community. After the sound and fury of the Soper River designation ceremonies, I have come to the river itself to seek out its spirit. But the object of my quest is even greater than this one river--this trip marks the halfway point of my fieldwork, the cross-quarter between the solstice and the equinox, and the furthest north that I will go this summer.

I want to look down not only on the Soper as the newest Heritage River, but southward from the apex to all the rivers in the System, to gain some view-from-a-point vision of the shape of this book and of the CHRS. Here on Flemming Hill at noonday I am at the height of land, the height of latitude, the height of the sun and the summer within the framework I have defined for my journeys. Looking out across the tundra where the last snows pick out white hollows in the seamed and undulating straw-green, moss-brown hills, I seek the birds-eye view.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Lynn E. Noel © [QLF/Atlantic Centre](#) COMPASS Fall 1992

As if in confirmation, a black wing rises on the updraft below the ridgeline to my left. Each raven feather silhouettes against the blue space of sky at the wingtip, as the Wise One, Raven, sideslips soundlessly across the rocks ten feet away, in a low arc against the curve of the sun. Sunwise she sets into the valley behind my eastern shoulder. I face the south wind to see what Raven sees.

The river winds through bare bones of rock in a scoured, serpentine search for the sea. Behind me there are waterfalls white and silent in the distance where the glacier's teeth could not break the bones of the earth, but below where I have camped, ice and water have milled these mountains down to floury silts and gravel chaff. I realize, as my eye traces the Soper's meanders, that the rivers one sees, all across Canada, follow only in the traces of their great, invisible ancestors.

I imagine the glaciers tracking the land like ghostly polar bears, giant spirit rivers of ice who sniffed and scoured and surged across the surfaces where the crust had cracked and cooled to channel their mindless, inexorable response to the pressure of billions of blizzard molecules. All across the continent, rivers still respond to that same flow. But here in the Soper valley, even in the summer sun, the glacier's spirit is a suffusing presence in wind and cloud and snowmelt patches on frost-crumbled scree.

Protection from those elements is part of the Soper's power, and the reason for this *inukshuk* is that the Soper Valley is the most direct and sheltered route to Iqaluit, especially in winter. Any *qaluunaat* -- white people, in Inuktitut -- visions of empty and unused wilderness are dispelled by signs all around me. There are ATV type tracks up the slope to my right, a spent Winchester shell in my pocket from the hike up the hill, waffle-prints in the sand of the riverbank at my campsite and a muddied plastic bag that I fished out of the stream to pack out with me tomorrow. Yesterday in the boat we passed a group of men at the head of Soper Lake with little white flags stuck at intervals on the tide flats. "Look," said Suzanne, the Inuit reporter from CBC in Iqaluit. "They're playing golf."

Yet I can stand at the top of this hill and turn 360 degrees, and still be the only person in this valley for as far as I can see in any direction, for twenty-four hours so far. The signs I see in no way impair my "wilderness experience;" on the contrary, I enjoy knowing that this valley is home to the people who have chosen to designate and protect it. I enjoy the demise of the "wilderness ideal" with which I grew up, and the recognition that in order to provide "outstanding

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Lynn E. Noel © [QLF/Atlantic Centre](http://QLFAtlanticCentre.com) COMPASS Fall 1992

opportunities for solitude" it need not be necessary that "man is a stranger who does not remain."

It is only necessary that we learn to relinquish the *qalunaat* compulsion to dominate, control and change the land, to assert power over it or harness it to southern purposes. Baffin Island is no colony, it is *Nunavut* : the Inuit word for "homeland." To acknowledge that emerging vision in the southern culture, the Soper must not be simply seen as a "resource" to be "preserved/locked up," or "developed/exploited," depending on your place in the dichotomous hierarchy. Even as a *qaluunaat*, I can come to the river to listen and to watch, and to learn to be at home.

ATLANTIC REGION

Faces shine in the firelight as the voices of the Canadian Heritage Rivers planners ring out in the chorus of "Northwest Passage" at their annual planning workshop at Loon Bay Lodge on the St. Croix River in New Brunswick. The harmonies they are finding reflect their confluence of ideas for co-operative river management. Elliott Gimble and I have been nodding to each other, answering questions, smiling across the room for two days as talk turns again and again to public participation, citizen involvement, community outreach, local action. "They're speaking our language." No matter how far I may travel from Ipswich, I return to QLF, as we all do, to add new evidence, experience and expertise to a growing movement for "global social change" in both our countries that speaks of landscape as home and of communities and citizens as stewards. Whether you spent your internship teaching swimming on the Lower North Shore, doing resource inventories on the St. John, running Living Rivers in New Brunswick or collecting oral histories in Forteau or Peggy's Cove, you have -- we have -- learned a valuable and very personal lesson in how to know and love a place, and how to work for it. "The object of all our wanderings / is to return to the place from which we began / and to know that place for the first time." Our QLF experience teaches us to ask a question whose answer lies in the heart of every explorer. As usual, Stan Rogers says it best.

*How then am I so different from the first ones through this way?
Like them I left a settled life, I threw it all away
To seek a Northwest Passage at the call of many men
To find there but the road back home again.*