

BOOK REVIEWS

The Survival of the Bark Canoe. By John McPhee. Pp. 145, illustrations.
New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975. \$7.95 Cloth

Reviewed by Jack Thompson

If you would like to build a bark canoe as the Indians built them, drop a line to the Government Printing Office and ask for The Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America, by Edwin T. Adney and Howard Chapelle (1964). If you would like to understand the spirit of a bark canoe, read McPhee. The book may be read as an allegory reflecting on the means whereby Europeans coming to settle on this continent used the bark canoe as one way of pushing back the frontier, while subjugating the Native Americans who gave them the craft.

It is also a historical retrospective, reflecting on the nature and deeds of fur trappers. It is a technical treatise explaining how the environment determines the size and form of the bark canoe, as well as the part played by the need to carry a given load.

The book is also the story of Henri Vaillancourt of Greenville, New Hampshire, who builds bark canoes, and four men, including McPhee, who went with him on a canoe trip.

If you are familiar with Thoreau's The Maine Woods, you will recognize the scenery along the way. If you're not acquainted with that book, McPhee will tell you about it, for Thoreau permeates the atmosphere of the journey.

John McPhee humanizes technology and objectifies people in such a way as to demonstrate, implicitly, that people and technology are synonymous terms. The sum of technology in this instance is the bark canoe, not unlike a man with its ribs and keel. The bark canoe was an extension of the Native Americans who greeted the European settlers, and as such, commanded their best efforts toward making it permanent and durable. Before contact, the canoe was formed of natural products, bark wrapped around wood and held in place with split roots. When a piece needed trimming or shaping, stone and shell tools came into play. After contact, iron nails supplanted the split roots, and steel knives replaced the stone and the shell.

Vaillancourt is a self-styled purist. He builds bark canoes the way they were built a long time back. Mostly. He will use steel to shape his canoes, but not to bind them together as the Native Americans readily did when metal became available. Where the Native American tapped the white or black spruce for pitch to render down into gum for sealing the seams of a bark canoe, Vaillancourt uses asphalt roofing compound because there is less tedium involved. He has made and used spruce gum and knows that it works well, but it's boring to tap and boil and strain, and it must be mixed with animal fat in winter to keep it from cracking. If you don't buy the book, but see a copy

on the stand, read page 53 to know Vaillancourt's philosophy of authenticity. It's a book to read again.

The Eskimo Storyteller: Folktales from Noatak, Alaska. By Edwin S. Hall, Jr. Pp. 491, illustrations by Claire Fejes. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975. \$18.50 Cloth

Reviewed by Peggy Martin

The Eskimo Storyteller is one of the largest collections of Northwest Alaskan folktales yet published, containing 190 stories. The folktales were related by two Noatak Eskimo storytellers in the village of Noatak, Alaska. Edwin S. Hall, Jr. collected the tales in 1965 while conducting anthropological fieldwork. His original intention was to survey all older tale-tellers in the community, thereby gaining access to the total store of tales. But when he discovered that the storytelling function was concentrated in two persons, he chose to study the extent of individual repertory instead. Although Hall does not claim to be a folklorist, he presents his work as data for trained analysis; he is aware of folklore methods and previous theoretical interpretations of Eskimo lore. Eskimo Storyteller is a preliminary investigation into the content and function of oral narrative.

Hall gives brief data on the Eskimo peoples of Northwest Alaska, the environment, subsistence and socio-cultural patterns, including descriptions of the aboriginal-historic-modern cultural progression. This provides a framework of cultural change for interpretation of the storytelling role and juxtaposition of past and present cultural and natural elements in the tales. Hall candidly discusses his own relationships with the tellers, whose roles as elderly members of the community, living off the support of relatives and friends, are those of entertainers and tradition-bearers. He details the circumstances of narration (performance), the personalities of his informants, the values presented to him, and his obligation to them. The tales themselves are divided into two sections, one for each teller, and each is preceded by an autobiographical sketch of the narrator. These show remarkable similarity to the form and interests of the folktales; emphases are on kinship inter-relationships, food gathering and loss, murder and accidental death, and numerous related and unrelated incidents.

No distinction is made between genres, on the basis that the Eskimos distinguish only "old," "old true," and "young" narratives, and these categories are variable according to teller and context. The folktales are presented in the form and style in which they were translated by native interpreters, with no significant changes made by the author. Each is followed by at least a partial listing of motifs as classified by Thompson (Motif-Index of Folk-Literature), reference(s) to other studies in which variants of the tale are found, and a brief explication of some aspects of the content. An "Index of Motifs" and a "General Index" at the end of the book aid in locating a particular folklore item or theme in the stories, but for most readers a consecutive reading of 330 pages of